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FROM IMAGINARIES TO REALITIES: RETURNEES' PREPAREDNESS FOR REINTEGRATION

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GLOSSARY

Diaspora	Migrants or descendants of migrants whose identity and sense of belonging, either real or symbolic, have been shaped by their migration experience and background. They maintain links with their homelands, and to each other, based on a shared nationality, sense of history, identity, or mutual experiences in the destination country.[1]
Discourse	The process of social signification that involves the use of various semiotic modes such as language, image, and sound within a specific sociocultural context. Discourse is considered as one element of social life that is dialectically related to other non-discursive elements, such as time, space, place, and social power.[2]
Enforced / Forced Return	Forced return is a broader term which includes any action having the effect of returning the individual to a State, including deportation, removal, extradition, rejection at the frontier, extra-territorial interception, and physical return.[3]
EU+ Countries	Member states of the European Union plus associated countries, including Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein.
Imaginaries	A collective wealth of images and options an individual can tap into when computing pros and cons about a decision".[4]
Migrant	An umbrella term, not defined under international law, reflecting the common lay understanding of a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons.[5] In this paper, we speak exclusively of international migrants.
Migration Narratives	Migration narratives are 'stories' that aim to make sense of the migration experience. They are told by a wide variety of groups, including migrants, host communities, local, national, EU and global policy makers, non-governmental organisations, law enforcement authorities and other first-line practitioners, media, and academics.
Non-EU+ Countries	The countries that are not member states of the European Union nor associated countries (Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein).
Voluntary Return	The process by which someone that is not allowed to legally stay in a country leaves that country's territory freely and moves to a country where he has the legal permission to stay.[6]

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

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

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

4 Bolognani, M. "From Myth of Return to Return Fantasy: A Psychosocial Interpretation of Migration Imaginaries." Identities 23, no. 2 (2016): 193–209.

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

6 Torres Chedraui, Ana Maria, Arjen Leerkes, Michael Sinnige, and Laura Cleton (2025), Factors Explaining the Outcomes of Enforced Return and Post-Return, FAiR: Finding Agreement in Return Project.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

EU	European Union
EUR	Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam
FAiR	Finding Agreement in Return
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
KII	Key Informant Interview
KU	Koç University
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
SH	Samuel Hall
SSI	Semi-Structured Interview
WP	Work Package

INTRODUCTION

Everything is predictable in Europe but not upon return.

Returnees described a striking asymmetry: migration and return in Europe are governed through increasingly structured procedures, categories and timelines, while life after return is far less predictable. Returnees may encounter structural barriers to housing, employment and public services alongside stigma, family expectations and community pressure. These conditions shape not only what happens after return, but also what people imagine will happen: what they fear, hope for and expect; whether and how they prepare; and what futures they believe will be possible once they arrive.

This paper argues that **return imaginaries shape how returnees anticipate and prepare for reintegration, but whether imagined futures become viable depends on their agency, resources and the social and institutional conditions to which they return.** Return may be imagined as failure or homecoming, contribution or loss, a new beginning or a temporary interruption before moving again. These imaginaries influence what returnees expect, what they prepare for and what futures they consider possible. Yet preparedness is uneven: it depends on the degree of control people have over the timing and conditions of return, the information and resources available to them, and the institutional environments into which they return.[7] Understanding these imaginaries can therefore help policymakers design return and reintegration pathways that are more realistic, fair, inclusive, and sustainable.

Drawing on research in Georgia, Iraq, Nigeria and Türkiye, the paper examines the movement from imagined return to lived reality. It asks **what return means to returnees, what shapes these meanings, and what happens when expectations encounter the realities of reintegration**. In doing so, it treats preparedness as something produced through the interaction between expectations, agency, resources, relationships and institutions.

We use the concept of imaginaries to understand return not only as a movement across borders, or an administrative and legal process, but as a socially mediated process of expectation, judgement, and meaning-making.

Conceptual Framework: Imaginary, Collective Meanings and Return

We understand return imaginaries as socially shared images, meanings and possibilities through which people interpret return and imagine what futures may be possible after it. They are interpretive frames through which people evaluate possibilities, constraints and desired futures. Bolognani defines imaginary as a "collective wealth of images and options an individual can tap into when computing pros and cons about a decision".[8] Drawing on Bolognani, imaginaries can be understood as a collectively produced repertoire of images and options that individuals draw on when making sense of decisions and possible futures.

Although imaginaries are experienced individually, they are socially produced. Ideas about successful migration, family obligation, home, contribution and belonging circulate through families, communities,

7 Cassarino, Jean-Pierre. "Theorising Return Migration : A Conceptual Approach to Returnees Revisited." International Journal on Multicultural Societies (JMS) 6, no. 2 (2004): 253–79.

8 Bolognani, Marta. "From Myth of Return to Return Fantasy: A Psychosocial Interpretation of Migration Imaginaries." Identities 23, no. 2 (2016): 193–209.

institutions, media and public discourse. In this paper, **narratives and discourses refer to these socially circulating stories and representations, while imaginaries refer to the meanings and possible futures that individuals draw from, reproduce or contest through them**. For example, narratives that associate migration to Europe with success may contribute to an imaginary in which return without visible economic achievement is interpreted as failure. Yet individuals experience and interpret such narratives differently according to their social position, migration trajectory and circumstances of return.

They can expand or narrow what appears desirable, realistic, or possible. Scholars argue that they do not "postulate impossible realities or unattainable futures"[9] and are instead "enabling, liberating, and future-oriented".[10] Imaginaries can also create restraints, informed by threats, worries, or perceived undesirability of outcomes.

These dynamics are important in return migration because return is rarely imagined as simply moving back to a place of origin. It carries meanings around success and failure, home and belonging, obligation and contribution. It also carries different imagined futures. Return may represent an ending, a new beginning, a temporary interruption or one stage within continued mobility. Return imaginaries are not singular or fixed: they vary according to gender, generation, social position, country context, migration trajectory[11], and the conditions under which return takes place. They may change as people reinterpret their experiences and confront the post-return realities of reintegration.[12] These imaginaries operate within what Bolognani conceptualises as "transitional spaces"—virtual, narrative domains where individuals blend fantasy and lived experience to construct meaningful projections of return.

A central tension arises when imagined return encounters lived return. Expectations about family, belonging, employment, status or opportunity may not correspond to the social, economic and institutional conditions returnees encounter. These gaps can shape reintegration outcomes[13]. Cassarino's work is particularly useful for understanding return preparedness as more than a decision to return: it depends on migrants' willingness and readiness to return and on their capacity to mobilise resources.[14]

This is where **preparedness** becomes important. This paper treats preparedness not simply as an individual attribute but as relational and structurally conditioned. It depends on the time and agency people have to prepare, the information available to them, their social and transnational networks, psychosocial and livelihood resources, and the institutional pathways available before and after return.

Imaginaries and preparedness therefore interact. **Imaginaries shape what people anticipate and prepare for; preparedness affects what they are able to do; and the social and institutional conditions of return shape which imagined futures can ultimately be pursued.** This relationship provides the analytical framework for the paper.

9 Serrano, Javier. The Imagined Return: Hope and Imagination among International Migrants from Rural Mexico. October 18, 2017.

10 Feng, Dan, and Werner Breitung. "What Makes You Feel at Home? Constructing Senses of Home in Two Border Cities." Population, Space and Place 24, no. 3 (2018): 3..

11 Bolognani, Marta. Ibid.

12 Erdal, Marta Bivand. Chapter 8: Timespaces of Return Migration: The Interplay of Everyday Practices and Imaginaries of Return in Transnational Social Fields. 2017.

13 Baser, Bahar, and Mari Toivanen. "Diasporic Homecomings to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Pre- and Post-Return Experiences Shaping Motivations to Re-Return." Ethnicities 19, no. 5 (2019): 901–24.

14 Cassarino, Jean-Pierre. Ibid.

Methodology And Outline

This working paper draws on qualitative research conducted by Samuel Hall and Koç University under Work Package 4 (WP4) of the FAiR initiative. WP4 examined non-EU and diasporic discourses and counter-discourses on return, readmission and reintegration. **This paper draws on that broader dataset but undertakes a secondary qualitative analysis focused specifically on return imaginaries and their relationship to expectations, agency, preparedness and reintegration.** Research was conducted in 2024 across Georgia, Iraq, Nigeria and Türkiye. In Iraq, fieldwork focused on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, while the corpus analysis included documents from across the country.

The WP4 research combined desk review and policy mapping with key informant interviews, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and validation workshops. In total, more than 325 individuals participated in the research. These qualitative data were complemented by a corpus of 150 documents — 43 in Nigeria, 43 in Iraq, 31 in Georgia and 33 in Türkiye — including policy and legal documents, media and social media content, public statements and selected social interactions. Contextual text coding and semantic analysis were used to examine both the narratives contained in these sources and the contexts in which they were produced.

For this paper, the qualitative material was re-analysed with particular attention to **how participants imagined and anticipated return**: the meanings and values attached to it; emotions and expectations surrounding return; perceptions of home, success, failure and belonging; and the futures participants imagined after return. The analysis also examined how these imaginaries varied according to individual trajectories and conditions of return, and how they interacted with agency, preparedness and post-return experience. **Interviews and focus groups were used primarily to analyse lived and anticipated imaginaries, while the corpus analysis was used to examine the wider narratives and representations through which return is socially framed.**

The comparative approach is analytical rather than representative. The four cases differ in migration histories, return regimes, participant profiles and the public visibility of return. The findings are used to identify recurring patterns and contrasts rather than to make direct country comparisons. Türkiye presents an additional limitation: public and policy discourse on migration primarily concerns third-country nationals residing in Türkiye rather than Turkish citizens returning from abroad. Turkish returnees — particularly those who experienced forced or constrained return — were less visible and harder to reach. The Türkiye findings should be interpreted in light of the urban and highly educated profiles represented in the research.

Rather than approaching imaginaries as abstract concepts, the paper adopts a grounded, narrative-oriented approach to examine how returnees and communities describe and negotiate return through stories, emotions, expectations and social judgements. The analysis proceeds in three steps. First, it examines **what return is imagined to mean**, including failure, homecoming and contribution, and how return is situated within wider life and migration trajectories. Second, it considers **what shapes these imaginaries**, from collective narratives and social expectations to individual characteristics, migration experiences and degree of agency. Third, it examines **what happens when imagined return encounters lived reality**, focusing on expectations, preparedness and the social and institutional conditions of reintegration. The paper concludes by considering the implications for return and reintegration policy.

RETURN AND REINTEGRATION, IMAGINED

Return is not only a movement back to a country of origin. It is also a process through which identity, belonging, status, and future possibilities are renegotiated. Across Georgia, Iraq, Nigeria, and Türkiye, return emerged as emotionally layered, socially judged, deeply relational, and open-ended. Return could evoke relief and shame, belonging and alienation, hope and uncertainty — often at the same time.

The findings point to two intersecting dimensions of return imaginaries. The first concerns the **social meaning attributed to return**: return may be interpreted as failure, homecoming or contribution. The second concerns its **place within a wider life and migration trajectory**: return may represent a new beginning, a temporary interruption, one stage within continued mobility, or a final destination. These imaginaries are neither mutually exclusive nor fixed. They can coexist around the same return and change over time as expectations encounter lived realities.

Return imaginaries also vary according to **who returns and under what circumstances**, including the degree of agency people have over the decision and conditions of return. Forced return is frequently narrated through humiliation, loss of control, shame or suspicion. Spontaneous return is more often associated with pride, relief, moral choice or reconnection, although it can itself follow exhaustion, violence or exclusion abroad. Returns described as voluntary may sit between these poles, involving some degree of choice alongside considerable constraint. **Return imaginaries shape how return is anticipated, what people prepare for, how they expect to be received, and what futures they believe remain possible.**

Imagining Return: Failure, Homecoming and Contribution

Return is not socially neutral. What returnees say about return — and what families and communities say about returnees — reveals competing ideas about success, failure, belonging, obligation and contribution. These meanings shape not only how returnees are received, but also how they understand their own trajectories, anticipate return and imagine what may be possible afterwards. Across the four contexts, three recurring imaginaries were particularly visible: return as failure, return as homecoming and return as contribution. These imaginaries can coexist and shift over time rather than representing fixed categories of return.

Return as a failure: “Why did you come back?”

The imaginary of return as failure is closely tied to an imaginary of migration — and particularly migration to Europe — as success. Where migration is associated with economic opportunity, social mobility or a better future, return can become difficult to explain: if Europe represents success, why would someone come back? Across the four contexts, returnees described being questioned, judged or expected to justify their return, particularly following forced or constrained return or when they came back without visible signs of economic achievement. The question “Why did you come back?” carries more than curiosity: it can imply that something has gone wrong.

Anticipating such judgement can in turn affect how migrants imagine return, making it less desirable and shaping whether and how openly they prepare for it. Return from Europe is often treated as evidence that

something went wrong. It impacts the way returnees imagine their return: expectation of social exclusion or feeling of failure can lead to an unwillingness to return, and to stay.

In Georgia, returnees described a strong expectation that return should be justified. Deportation is heavily stigmatised, while even returnees whose migration is regarded positively can encounter surprise at the decision to come back. Judgements are also gendered. Men's return may be evaluated primarily through economic achievement, while women can additionally be judged in relation to their family roles and the expectations attached to labour migration and remittances.

In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the imaginary of Europe as wealthy, orderly and full of opportunity makes return from highly valued destination countries particularly difficult to understand. Return can therefore be interpreted as defeat and can affect the returnee's social status. As one key informant put it, failure abroad could even be read as evidence that a man would not be "a good husband."

In Nigeria, this relationship between return, economic success and social recognition was especially pronounced. Forced return could carry the humiliation of deportation, while assisted return could itself be stigmatised when associated with dependency. Respondents repeatedly emphasised the importance of what someone visibly "came back with": money, goods or a successful business could transform a returnee into a respected figure or mentor, while debt or returning with little could reinforce perceptions that the migration project had failed. Gendered stereotypes intensified these judgements, including associations between female returnees and sex work and between male returnees and drugs or criminality.

In Türkiye, the evidence points to a somewhat different clash of imaginaries. Some research participants describe social hierarchies that privilege remaining in Europe and interpret return as a loss of status or "added value." Yet returnees themselves do not necessarily share this assessment. Returns that make sense to them personally — because of family, belonging or career choices — can therefore be socially interpreted through a different hierarchy of success. One participant described reactions such as "did you fail?" as a form of "self-orientalism."

Across the four contexts, failure was not an objective characteristic of return but a social judgement, produced through expectations about where a successful migrant should live, what they should accumulate and what migration should achieve. These expectations matter before as well as after return: anticipated judgement may delay return or discourage preparation, while experienced stigma can affect dignity, willingness to seek support and the ability to imagine a viable future after return.

A return to the roots: homecoming and alienation

A second imaginary frames return as homecoming: reconnection with family, familiar places, language, memory and belonging. Yet homecoming is rarely a simple restoration of what existed before migration. The returnee has changed, but so have families, relationships, workplaces and places. Return can therefore produce reconnection and estrangement at the same time.

The literature highlights the "myth of return," whereby migrants sustain dreams of homecoming that are tied to aspirations for socioeconomic status, recognition, or personal fulfilment.[15] In our research,

15 Serrano, Javier. Ibid

homecoming narratives appeared more readily among participants who experienced greater agency over return, although positive imaginaries of home could still coexist with constrained circumstances. Importantly, anticipated belonging did not always survive the encounter with post-return reality: people could experience themselves as both "coming home" and becoming strangers to a place they knew.

In Georgia, family reunification is an important positive meaning of return. Participants described parents and relatives longing for migrants to come back, sometimes placing considerable emotional pressure on them to do so. Yet the joy of reunion can coexist with difficult social readjustment. Returnees described feeling that family relationships, social practices or working environments had changed in their absence, producing the unsettling experience of feeling like "a stranger" in a place understood as home. Older returnees who come back to be closer to children may similarly discover that proximity does not automatically produce belonging.

In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, experiences ranged from return as healing and catharsis to return as profound psychological strain. For some, alienation abroad strengthened attachment to home, and return offered a sense of grounding or rebirth. For others, unrealised migration aspirations and difficult reintegration contributed to low self-esteem and feelings of failure. Family configurations complicate homecoming further when some members return while others remain abroad, turning return into another form of separation.

In Türkiye, homecoming was especially visible among the predominantly urban and highly educated returnees reached by the research, as well as among returnees later in the life course. Participants referred to language, family, friends, environment, climate and food as part of the pull of belonging. But this does not necessarily erase attachments developed abroad. Returnees can feel rooted in Türkiye while also experiencing themselves as different from people who never migrated. Homecoming therefore often involves a dual or transnational sense of belonging rather than a simple recovery of a former identity.

In Nigeria, the imaginary of homecoming was less prominent. This needs to be interpreted in light of the research sample, which included many people who had experienced forced or assisted return and difficult irregular migration journeys. Here, debt, stigma and disappointment could overshadow the idea of a celebratory return to one's roots. Yet return could still be imagined as relief and survival after a dangerous journey: as one participant put it, "Coming back home safely is something to be celebrated."

These experiences complicate the idea that return is simply a restoration of belonging. **Home is relational rather than fixed.** Returnees may rediscover attachment while simultaneously discovering distance. Reintegration cannot assume that legal nationality or physical return automatically restores belonging. Preparedness may also involve anticipating changed relationships, social roles and forms of belonging — dimensions that cannot be addressed through livelihood assistance alone.

Return as Contribution: Skills and Blocked Potential

A third imaginary frames return as contribution. Returnees may be imagined — and may imagine themselves — as bringing back skills, ideas, resources and transnational connections that can benefit families, communities or the country more broadly. This developmental imaginary can give return positive purpose: migration becomes valuable because the experience, knowledge or capital acquired abroad can be

brought “home”. Yet it also creates expectations. Returnees may be expected not only to reintegrate, but to demonstrate that migration produced something of value.

Across contexts, returnees are seen as carriers of skills, ideas, and resources that can strengthen the economy, support families, and contribute to social change. In places like Georgia, they are sometimes framed as heroes or symbols of hope, expected to help “build a better country”, while in Türkiye, they can be perceived as part of a “reverse brain-drain” valued by research participants. In Iraq and Nigeria, returnees are viewed as drivers of development, from entrepreneurship to knowledge transfer. These images, which emerge from social discourses, are sometimes integrated by returnees and can inform their self-perception and decision making. However, they coexist with high expectations and uneven recognition.

In Georgia, returnees frequently described migration as personally enriching. Skills, exposure and new ways of working were understood as resources that could contribute to the country after return. Labour migrants may also be valued for supporting households and the wider economy through remittances. Yet this positive imaginary can clash with institutional and workplace realities. Younger returnees in particular described frustration when new practices or ideas were dismissed with the response that they were “not in Europe now.” Some hoped to establish businesses or apply what they had learned abroad but encountered conditions that made these aspirations difficult to realise. Return as contribution can therefore become an imaginary of **blocked potential.**

In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the contribution imaginary is especially visible in narratives about entrepreneurship, investment and knowledge transfer. Returnees were described as contributing to sectors ranging from tourism and training to technology and agriculture, and as creating connections with Europe. Return can also carry expectations of social change: female returnees, for example, may introduce different practices around economic independence and gender roles. Yet this contribution remains dependent on the political, economic and security environment in which returnees are expected to put their skills to use.

In Nigeria, contribution provides an important counterpoint to the imaginary of failure. Returnees may be described as hardworking, innovative, courageous and able to apply knowledge acquired through migration. Entrepreneurial success in particular can transform social perceptions, recasting someone previously understood as a failed migrant as a contributor or mentor. Return may also be framed as a **second chance**, especially where people return after exploitation or dangerous journeys and begin rebuilding their lives.

In Türkiye, the value assigned to contribution varies strongly according to the profile of the returnee. The return of highly qualified migrants can be understood through concerns about brain drain and the perceived loss of expertise from the country. Some spontaneous returnees themselves describe bringing back not only professional skills but also different approaches to dialogue, compromise and ways of working. At the same time, participants questioned whether the institutional and political environment allows these contributions to take root.

The contribution imaginary is both enabling and demanding. It can give return positive purpose and allow returnees to situate migration within a coherent life trajectory. But it can also impose another standard of success: **returnees are expected to prove the value of having migrated.** Where labour markets, institutions or social environments prevent them from putting acquired skills and resources to use, the distance between anticipated contribution and lived opportunity can become another source of disappointment. This

highlights again that preparedness is not simply about what returnees bring back, but whether the environment of return enables them to use it.

These three imaginaries show that return is evaluated through social recognition as much as through material outcomes. Returnees may simultaneously seek belonging, fear judgement and hope to contribute. The same return can therefore be understood as homecoming by the returnee, failure by others and contribution through the skills or resources they bring back. What matters for reintegration is not which single imaginary applies, but how these competing meanings shape expectations, agency and the ability to imagine a viable future after return.

But return is imagined not only in terms of what it means. It is also imagined in terms of what comes next.

Return as a new life or as a new chapter?

Return was rarely imagined as a simple endpoint to migration. Across the four contexts, three temporal imaginaries emerged: return as part of continued or circular mobility; return as an involuntary pause before leaving again; and return as a final destination. These imagined futures can overlap and change as returnees encounter the realities of reintegration. Together, they suggest that return is often better understood as a reconfiguration of mobility than as its endpoint.

Return as part of circular migration

For some returnees, particularly those able to maintain legal, financial or family ties across countries, return did not represent a rupture with migration. Continued mobility provided access to relationships, skills, opportunities and forms of security across places. In these cases, the possibility of moving again could itself make return easier to contemplate: return felt less risky when it did not require permanently closing the door on elsewhere.

This was particularly visible in Türkiye. Return was not a rupture with migration, but a way of sustaining ties across places. Circularity allowed some participants to maintain family connections, mobilise skills acquired abroad, initiate projects in Türkiye and continue to draw on opportunities elsewhere. The possibility of moving again could itself operate as a form of security: return felt less risky when it did not require closing the door on future mobility. Similar dynamics emerged in Georgia, where one returnee described the ambivalence of wanting simultaneously to be “there” and “here.”

At the same time, circularity was not always fully chosen. For some returnees, moving between countries reflected difficulty feeling at home in either place. Dual belonging could provide resources, but it could also produce uncertainty, cultural tension, and a sense of being suspended between social worlds. Similar dynamics appeared in Georgia, where one returnee described being caught between two places: “You want to be there and you want to be here, too.”

Circularity can reflect unresolved difficulties, but it can also be a deliberate strategy for sustaining belonging, livelihoods and opportunity across places. This complicates a policy understanding in which reintegration is assumed to culminate in permanent settlement. For some returnees, the capacity to maintain mobility and relationships across borders may itself make return more viable.

"I find it very useful for people who have gained experience abroad and developed themselves there to return to Turkey with their knowledge. I think this will strengthen the institutions and atmosphere in Türkiye and I attach importance to this.''

''Of course, I do not have a great hope for how long this positive effect will continue and how much they will be able to be included in the system when these people return.''

''[But] since a bond has already developed due to the comings and goings, I honestly look at it as if they don't stick here, they might come back again.''

''So, I think this return has a positive effect. And even if there are negative effects on people, they can compensate by going abroad again."

(FGD, Türkiye)

Return as an involuntary step before leaving again

For forced and highly constrained returnees, **return could be imagined not as a new beginning but as an interruption in a migration project that remained unfinished**. This was particularly visible where people had little control over return and where the conditions that contributed to migration — limited livelihoods, political or economic uncertainty, weak social acceptance or insufficient reintegration support — remained largely unchanged. In Nigeria and Iraq, some participants framed return positively as an opportunity to rebuild or reconnect, while difficult reintegration kept re-migration aspirations alive. In such cases, return remained provisional: it did not resolve the migration project; it suspended it.

Among younger respondents in Türkiye, return following visa expiry, work-permit difficulties or other administrative constraints was likewise often imagined as reversible. One participant explained that they had had no intention of returning and continued to look for opportunities to leave again.

This imaginary makes the importance of **agency and preparedness** particularly visible. When people have limited control over when and how they return, they may arrive without a clear plan, adequate information or the resources needed to establish a future after return. In such circumstances, re-migration should not automatically be read as evidence of an individual failure to reintegrate. **Re-migration may reveal that the conditions which made migration desirable or necessary have not substantially changed[16].**

[16] Schuster, L. & Majidi, N. (2015), "Deportation Stigma and Re-migration," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 41(4).

"I had no intention of ever returning, in fact I still want to go and I am still looking for opportunities. The reason for my return was the problems I had with the work permit. If you had asked me 8 months ago, 'Do you ever plan to return?' I would have said 'No'."

(FGD, Türkiye)

"I had to leave an existing order, a job I wanted to do, a nice social circle [...] Why would someone return from a comfortable life abroad, where they probably have no financial problems, where they have lived for a short or long period of time, to the political, economic and social tensions in Türkiye?"

(FGD, Türkiye)

Return as a final destination

Other returnees imagine return as an endpoint: the completion of a migration trajectory, a reunion with family, a return to roots, or the place in which they want to build the next stage of their lives.

Yet even when return was imagined as permanent, it rarely meant a complete break with life abroad. Emotional, financial and family ties often remained transnational. Return could therefore be final in aspiration while still transnational in practice. Returnees continue to maintain emotional, financial, and family ties across borders. Some have partners, children or close relatives who remained abroad; others continued to travel back and forth. Return was therefore final in aspiration, but transnational in practice.

The testimony of one Turkish returnee illustrates this tension clearly. After decades abroad following political conflict, he described return as the end of a marathon: a long-awaited completion and a form of compensation for forced departure. Yet this return also involved separation from his wife and daughter, who remained abroad.

"Since emigration was a forced exit for me, I always had a desire to return. This desire grew every year. In recent years, as I had reached the level I wanted professionally, [...] I decided and left my wife and daughter behind and returned to Datça. [...] When I made the decision to come back - you know when you go to a marathon and you are at the finish line? That's how I felt, to finish after a long marathon."

(FGD, Türkiye)

The image of return as a final destination is expressed by younger individuals at different stages of their lives, who long for their loved ones, intend to build a family or develop their career in their country of origin, or experienced hardship during migration and hope to find a better situation back home.

Across these temporal imaginaries, return appears less as a fixed endpoint than as an open-ended reorganisation of mobility, belonging and future plans. It can close one chapter while opening another; restore forms of belonging while creating new distances; and be imagined as permanent before becoming temporary. This complicates policy frameworks that equate sustainable reintegration with permanent immobility. For some returnees, the ability to maintain transnational ties or future mobility may itself provide the security, resources and sense of possibility that make return sustainable. The policy question is not simply whether someone moves again, but whether they have been able to build a viable life and exercise meaningful choices after return.

WHAT SHAPES RETURN IMAGINARIES?

Return imaginaries do not emerge in isolation. They draw on meanings circulating through families, communities, institutions, media and social media, but those meanings are interpreted differently depending on people's social position, migration trajectory and degree of agency over return. **Return imaginaries are collectively produced but unevenly experienced**. The same narrative — for example, that migration should lead to economic success — can make return a source of pride for one person and shame for another.

This section examines first the collective narratives through which return becomes imaginable, desirable or stigmatised, and second the factors that shape how those narratives are experienced by different returnees.

Collective Narratives And Meanings Shaping Return Imaginaries

The corpus analysis of policy documents, laws, treaties, media outputs, public statements, and social interactions shows that return is publicly discussed through competing emotional, moral and political narratives. Across the four country contexts, return is associated with hardship and vulnerability, desirability and contribution, disappointment and constrained agency, and — in some contexts — transnational identity and belonging. These narratives shape how returnees are perceived by others, and how they understand and anticipate reintegration.

Among the 14 narratives identified in the corpus, six were especially important for understanding return imaginaries. Two narratives — *return is difficult* and *migration is dangerous* — emphasise hardship and vulnerability. Two others — *return is desirable for migrants* and *return is beneficial for the country* — frame return positively through belonging, development, or opportunity. A fifth narrative — *return is undesirable* — associates return with failure, disappointment, or coercion. Finally, a less represented narrative centred on *transnational identity* frames return as part of ongoing cross-border belonging rather than a definitive movement back.

The corpus shows that public narratives provide competing interpretive frames for return: as hardship, as desirable homecoming or contribution, as disappointment or constraint, and as part of continued transnational mobility. These narratives matter because they provide the social vocabulary through which returnees and others interpret individual return experiences.

Return as hardship and vulnerability

Narratives centred on **hardship** were particularly visible in Nigeria, Iraq and Georgia and tended to bring returnees' lived experiences into view. In Nigeria, hardship was closely associated with trafficking, violence and dangerous migration journeys, producing representations of returnees as people who had survived difficult experiences and required support. In Georgia, hardship narratives focused more strongly on the economic and social difficulties encountered after return, including unemployment and pressure to migrate again. In Iraq, accounts of disappointment and difficult reintegration were especially visible in multimedia sources. In these narratives, return is neither simply success nor failure: attention shifts instead towards the structural and emotional conditions that shape what returnees can do after arrival.

Return as desirable and productive

Other narratives construct return more positively through **desirability, belonging and contribution**. Across the four contexts, return could be linked to attachment to home and family as well as to skills transfer, entrepreneurship, development and national improvement. Return was particularly likely to be valued positively when it appeared purposeful and connected to agency: when someone had chosen to come back, had something they wanted to accomplish, or was seen as able to contribute. In Georgia and Nigeria, the idea that return could benefit the country appeared across different types of sources, while in Iraq it was particularly visible in accounts of spontaneous return among first-, second- and third-generation migrants.

Return as disappointment, constraint or unfinished mobility

Conversely, narratives around **disappointment, failure and constrained return** associate return with loss of status, unrealised aspirations and social judgement. In Georgia and Iraq, these meanings were closely related to economic insecurity, unemployment and gaps between what people had imagined and what they encountered after return. In Nigeria, they were strongly tied to collective judgement, family expectations and the stigma attached to unsuccessful migration. In Türkiye, the corpus was less focused on returnees' lived experiences and more on the governance of return, including contested distinctions between voluntary and forced return.

Return associated with transnational relations

A smaller but important set of narratives framed return through transnational identity and belonging. This was especially visible in Kurdish sources from Iraq, where return was associated less with migration management and more with diaspora identity, homeland, and collective memory, with an overrepresentation of affective words and identity markers. These narratives relied heavily on emotional language and identity markers, often referring to "Kurds" or "diaspora" rather than "migrants" or "returnees." Interestingly, returnees' own voices were less visible in these narratives, suggesting that they may reflect broader collective imaginaries more than lived reintegration experiences.

Zoom on: Media, social media, and the production of return imaginaries

Media and social media help produce the comparative frames through which migration and return are evaluated.

In Georgia, representations of return varied according to political positioning, with different media offering competing interpretations of migration and return. In Iraq and Nigeria, social media frequently reinforced aspirational images of migration, sometimes making returnees' warnings about difficult journeys or reintegration less influential. In Türkiye, the relative absence of Turkish returnees from public debate was itself significant, contributing to the invisibilisation of returnees' experiences.

Media are only part of this process. Social and institutional actors — including families, religious leaders, community organisations, returnee associations, and educational institutions — also produce and reproduce meanings around migration and return. They can reinforce stigma and idealised images of migration, but they can also open space for more supportive understandings of return and reintegration.

Return imaginaries are shaped by position and experience

Shared narratives acquire different meanings depending on who returns, with what resources, at what stage of life, after what migration experience and under what conditions. Return imaginaries are therefore shaped not only by discourse but by people's position within social and migration structures.

Imaginaries influenced by who returnees are

Returnees' sociodemographic characteristics such as socioeconomic status, gender, and relationships, influence the images associated with return. We draw three lessons from this:

1) Socioeconomic status, skills and migration destination

Socioeconomic position strongly shaped how return was imagined and how returnees expected to be received. Across the four contexts, return was often evaluated through visible signs of success: savings, property, qualifications, professional experience or the ability to establish a business after return. Returnees who had acquired education, skills, financial resources or international networks were more likely to imagine return as an opportunity to contribute or advance professionally. By contrast, those returning without recognised qualifications, stable livelihoods or visible economic gains were more exposed to uncertainty and to narratives of failed migration.

These dynamics can reproduce inequalities that pre-date migration. Migrants who leave with greater resources may have better access to education, employment and legal mobility abroad and therefore be better positioned to return with the forms of capital that families and communities recognise as success. Those who leave with fewer resources may experience more precarious migration trajectories and return with fewer opportunities to demonstrate that migration has produced a material benefit. Return imaginaries are therefore shaped not only by what happens during migration, but also by the unequal resources with which migrants begin and end their journeys.

The symbolic value attached to the country of migration further shapes these expectations. Across several contexts, migration to Europe or other high-income destinations carried strong associations with opportunity and upward mobility. The higher the perceived value of the destination, the greater the expectation that migrants should return with tangible evidence of success. In Georgia, for example, participants described strong pressure to return with accumulated wealth, while remittance expectations could themselves prolong migration even when migrants wished to come home. In Nigeria, visible economic achievement could transform the social reception of a returnee, while debt or returning with little intensified stigma. In Iraq, return from highly valued destinations could lower social status when it was interpreted as evidence of unrealised aspirations. In Türkiye, highly skilled returnees were more readily associated with positive narratives of "reverse brain drain" and contribution.

The relationship between socioeconomic status and return imaginaries is therefore not simply about whether a returnee has money or skills. It concerns **whose migration is recognised as successful, which forms of capital are valued on return, and whether returnees have an environment in which they can use what they acquired abroad**. Skills and experience only become resources for reintegration when they are recognised by labour markets, institutions and communities. Where they are not, an anticipated return as contribution can instead become an experience of blocked potential.

"If you don't come back rich and get two or three houses in Tbilisi, then you are seen as a loser, nothing more. This is why many people don't even think about going back to Georgia from their host countries."

(KII participant, Georgia)

2) Gender and life stage

Return imaginaries are gendered because migration and return can alter — or reactivate — expectations about work, care, independence, respectability and family roles. Migration may alter gender roles and expectations, while return can reopen or intensify the norms from which migrants had become distanced. At the same time, some women described return as offering renewed proximity to family support networks or greater personal stability after difficult experiences abroad.

In Nigeria, gendered stigma is particularly explicit: women returnees can be associated with sex work, while men may be associated with drugs or criminality. In Iraq, women's migration and return can challenge established gender norms, particularly when women return as entrepreneurs or with greater economic independence. Such changes can be celebrated as positive contributions but can also generate social tension and marginalisation.

In Türkiye, the available research suggests different imaginaries among men and women. Men more often narrated return as a way to contribute to the country and reconnect with their identity, while women could associate remaining abroad with greater freedom, autonomy and self-expression. For Turkish women, return can generate "anxiety" around the re-imposition of gendered social expectations and norms. In Georgia, women labour migrants may be celebrated as figures of sacrifice because of their contribution to household livelihoods through remittances, while simultaneously facing difficult reintegration and particularly severe judgement when the economic outcomes expected from migration are not achieved.

''I came back, my wife did not. Why didn't she come? [She told me:] 'In Switzerland, I feel more free as a woman. In Türkiye, I cannot express myself, I have difficulty expressing myself, there are borders, there are walls.''

(FGD participant, Türkiye)

Life stage matters too. In Georgia, older generations tended to value return more positively, and celebrate labour migrants as successful figures, while younger returnees were more likely to see continued mobility as part of achieving independence or creating opportunities for themselves. In Türkiye, retirement was associated more strongly with roots and homecoming, while younger and highly educated returnees described more ambivalent futures, oscillating between renewed belonging and aspirations to re-migrate. In Iraq, children and younger family members returning after time abroad could be marked as culturally different, complicating family imaginaries of return as a straightforward homecoming.

3) Return is relational: relationships and family status as anchor and pressure

Return may involve an individual crossing a border, but it is frequently imagined and negotiated as a **family or household project**.

Families can provide the strongest reason to return. Reunion, care responsibilities, ageing parents, partners and children all shape the desirability and timing of return. At the same time, families may have invested economically and emotionally in migration and develop their own expectations of what a successful return should look like. Returnees can face pressure to justify return economically or morally, particularly where relatives financed migration or depended on remittances.

In Georgia, younger returnees described parental appeals to come home alongside their own anxieties about income and independence. In Iraq, family reunion provides an important moral justification for return, while feelings of guilt or responsibility toward relatives, especially in times of crisis, can also trigger a decision to return. Reintegration is similarly framed as a family matter, with parents bearing responsibility for children's adaptation. In Nigeria, family relations can provide compassion and support, including through narratives of forgiveness and assistance, but they can also reproduce stigma when considerable household resources were invested in an unsuccessful migration journey. In Türkiye, male returnees signalled a distinction between young single men, for whom return is seen as more desirable, and those forming a family abroad, less likely and willing to return.

Family is both an anchor and a source of pressure. It can make return imaginable and provide resources for reintegration, while simultaneously establishing expectations that make return difficult to contemplate or admit. Where return is associated with shame, these relational pressures may also encourage silence, concealment and reluctance to seek assistance.

"I remember, my grandfather told my mother 'Come back, even if I have to sell my shirt, please come back'. [...] And he celebrated when he knew that we were coming back. He was happy. So, then we were forced to just accept it."

(SSI participant, Iraq)

These lessons emphasize that different - at times contradicting - return imaginaries coexist: despite being collective constructs, they are tied to individual characteristics and circumstances, creating nuances in the way people talk about return. This was clearly visible in focus group discussions, where participants showed a nuanced image of return, depending on which returnees are talked about. They also pointed out variations depending on the experience of migration, reasons for return, and economic, political and social conditions in the homeland, developed in the following paragraphs.

This helps explain why reintegration policies based on standardised assumptions often fail to respond to returnees' lived realities. Imaginaries reveal that preparedness for reintegration depends not only on material assistance, but also on whether returnees are able to construct a socially and personally meaningful future after return.

Migration experiences change what return can mean

Imaginaries are not fixed before migration; migration itself transforms them. Return imaginaries are shaped by what happens while people are away.

The structural conditions that shaped migration remain important. Economic hardship, unemployment and instability can make a return without visible achievement difficult to explain in Nigeria, Iraq and Georgia. Pre-departure social position also matters: poorer migrants can face harsher judgements and have fewer resources with which to establish themselves after return. Legal status and migration channels further influence the meanings associated with return, particularly where irregular migration is strongly stigmatised.

Experiences of work, insecurity, discrimination, freedom, violence, social integration or administrative pressure abroad reshape both expectations of home and people's sense of what a viable future should look like. Across the four contexts, perceived success and social integration in the destination country affected whether return was considered desirable. Time abroad matters because migrants change while the places and relationships to which they return also change. The perceived status of the destination influences how

others subsequently evaluate them. Experiences of exhaustion, insecurity or administrative pressure may make return more attractive, as seen among some participants in Türkiye. By contrast, violence, trafficking and exploitation — particularly visible in the Nigerian material — can produce both stigma and an alternative imaginary of returnees as survivors. Migration experience therefore does not simply precede an imaginary of return; it actively transforms it.

AGENCY : THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN RETURNING AND BEING RETURNED

Across the four contexts, one factor consistently shaped how return was imagined: the degree of control people had over whether, when and under what conditions they returned. The distinction was not simply between "voluntary" and "forced" return. Participants described a continuum ranging from planned and self-directed return to decisions made under strong administrative, economic or personal constraint and to enforced return. Greater agency tended to make return easier to integrate into a coherent life narrative; diminished agency was more often associated with rupture, humiliation, shame or an unfinished migration project.

- In Georgia, return is positively valued when framed as a conscious decision to contribute to the homeland or reunite with family, whereas forced return is strongly associated with failure and moral judgement. Forced returnees are seen as an additional burden on their already vulnerable families and friends because they often return bare-handed and need support.
- In Iraq, agency is central: return is experienced as dignified when internally owned, but as humiliating when imposed, with many returns occurring under structural constraints such as asylum rejection or exhaustion, blurring the boundary between choice and coercion.
- In Nigeria, return may be framed both as a protective second chance and as a shameful outcome when forced, with debt or unmet expectations intensifying internalised stigma. Internalised stigma is further intensified when elements of the community or family express dissatisfaction towards the returnee, especially when trauma is not explicit.
- In Türkiye, return imaginaries distinguish between voluntary, career-driven return and constrained return due to administrative barriers, while forced return remains socially muted yet negatively perceived. Constrained return generally leads to a negative image of return and desire of re-migration. For forced returnees whose initial departure from Türkiye was politically motivated, return can also be associated with fear. While not directly represented in the research - partly due to their effort to remain invisible, a KII pointed to concerns around surveillance and stigma, suggesting that for them, return may entail additional layers of complexity and risk.

"About return by force... You will feel shame, you will feel inferior. But if you reach that [decision] by yourself, and you want to go [back], you will be proud of yourself" (FGD participant, Iraq)

These findings show that return imaginaries emerge through the interaction between collective narratives and people's social position, family relationships, migration experiences, transnational ties, the conditions they expect to encounter after return and, crucially, their degree of agency over the return process. The same narrative can generate very different expectations and imagined futures for different returnees.

This matters for preparedness. What people imagine shapes what they prepare for, but their capacity to prepare depends on the agency, resources, relationships and institutional support available to them. The next section turns to this point directly, examining what happens when imagined return encounters lived reality.

WHEN IMAGINARIES MEET REALITY: EXPECTATIONS AND PREPAREDNESS

Preparedness is the point at which imaginaries become consequential. What people imagine shapes what they prepare for: whether they expect family support, employment, social recognition, economic opportunity or a familiar sense of home. Yet imagining a future is not the same as being able to prepare for it. Moving from imagined return to an actionable plan depends on having sufficient time, information, resources and agency.

The findings suggest that preparedness for return is not only material or logistical. It is also emotional, social, informational, and institutional. A returnee may have savings but lack family support; strong social networks but no access to housing or work; information about services but little control over when return takes place. Conversely, people can prepare extensively and still encounter structural conditions that they cannot overcome individually.

The findings point to preparedness as unevenly distributed. Those with greater control over return, stronger networks, better information and more resources are generally better placed to navigate reintegration. Forced and highly constrained returnees, by contrast, often have far less time and space to prepare.

Return imaginaries influencing preparedness

How imaginaries shape preparedness

Return can be imagined long before it becomes actionable. The qualitative data suggests that return anticipation can emerge at different moments along the migration journey and depend on the degree of agency returnees have over their decision. It is most visible in contexts of spontaneous return, where individuals can anticipate and plan their return, whereas constrained returns limit this process. In this sense, return anticipation and preparedness are closely tied to decision-making and perceived control over return.

The point at which this happens varies considerably. For some migrants, return is built into the migration project from the beginning. In Georgia, participants pointed out that migrants who leave with a defined plan eventually return: migration is framed as a goal-oriented project, where return is anticipated from the outset.

Anticipation and planning can also be triggered by emotional or social factors. In Georgia, some said that returnees start thinking of returning when they want to build a family or need to take care of their parents. The desire to (re)connect with the homeland can also start this process, especially when changing conditions

in the country of origin open new possibilities. In Iraq, decisions to return are influenced by perceptions of stability and opportunity, which increase the feasibility of return but also its desirability.

"I said, why not? I could come back and save my own community, and contribute to the society and also be able to be fruitful and productive."

(KII participant, Iraq)

Return assistance may itself trigger planning. In Nigeria, access to assisted return mechanisms can provide a route through which migrants begin to contemplate return and organise their next steps. Yet assistance can also generate expectations that are not subsequently met, especially where information about the scale or duration of support is incomplete.

The possibility of moving from imagination to planning is therefore closely related to agency.

Imaginaries can also **delay return rather than facilitate it**. In Türkiye and Nigeria, anticipated stigma and fear of being perceived as unsuccessful discouraged some migrants from returning even when they wished to do so. One participant in Türkiye described remaining abroad for longer because of the expectation that others would see the return as evidence of failure. Imaginaries of return therefore influence not only how return is experienced after arrival, but whether and when people feel able to undertake it at all.

"[I thought] everyone will think of me as a failure [...], and that's why I think I forced myself [to stay] a little bit. I kept scratching things there while I wanted to come back here."

(FGD participant, Türkiye)

When expectations encounter reality

Across contexts, returnees frequently described post-return life as more difficult and unpredictable than expected. Some had imagined reunion, familiarity, stability or a fresh beginning but encountered unemployment, reduced living standards, weak services, stigma, altered family relationships or difficulties navigating institutions. Others had maintained contact with home throughout migration yet still found that knowing what was happening was not the same as knowing what it would feel like to live there again

The gap between imagined and lived return should not be treated as a problem of unrealistic expectations. Some mismatches are informational and may be narrowed through better information. Others are structural: returnees may understand the challenges awaiting them but have little ability to overcome them. In these cases, the issue is not that returnees failed to prepare adequately, but that the environment of return does not provide viable opportunities.

The first is **informational**. Returnees may have incomplete or inaccurate knowledge of employment opportunities, assistance, administrative processes or living conditions. Families and communities may themselves hold inaccurate expectations about what migrants experienced abroad, what resources they accumulated or what support they will receive after return. Better information can help narrow these gaps.

The second is **structural**. Returnees may have a reasonable understanding of the challenges awaiting them but lack the ability to change them. Low salaries, inaccessible housing, weak public services, unemployment, discrimination or social stigma cannot be overcome simply through better expectation management. In these cases, the gap between an imagined future and lived reality reveals constraints in the environment of return rather than a failure on the part of returnees to prepare adequately.

The balance between these two forms of mismatch varies across contexts.

In **Georgia**, participants described gaps around employment, housing, healthcare and everyday social life. The young returnees often mentioned that their experience abroad is not embraced in the professional sphere in Georgia. While some anticipate professional challenges, others experience a stark decline in living standards, particularly in housing and healthcare. Reintegration also requires rebuilding social ties that may have weakened during migration, sometimes taking up years.

In **the Kurdistan region of Iraq**, idealised views of Europe, particularly around the sense of freedom and rule of law, reinforce disappointment upon return. Idealised images operated in more than one direction: Europe could be imagined as offering order and opportunity, while home could be imagined as restoring belonging and a less alienating way of life. Reintegration required negotiating between these comparative imaginaries rather than simply discovering that one of them had been "wrong."

In **Nigeria**, research participants demonstrate an acute awareness that alignment between expectations and reality is linked to information available to both returnees and to communications. Inaccurate understandings of return assistance, migration experiences and economic outcomes can reinforce unrealistic expectations and social stigma. Participants therefore emphasised awareness and first-hand information not only as tools for preparing returnees, but also for preparing the communities to which they return.

In **Türkiye**, anticipatory preparation appeared more limited and informal. Alignment is constrained by structural factors, as limited institutional mechanisms reduce opportunities for anticipatory planning, leaving returnees to adjust expectations only after return has occurred. Participants described readaptation as difficult and slow, but does not prevent eventual reintegration.

"When I came back here, I was like a fish out of water, I couldn't do many things on my own. This process took me about 2 years, but now I have adapted here and I am very happy."

(FGD participant, Türkiye)

Preparedness is Unequal: Agency and Access to Resources

The research points particularly strongly to agency over return as a determinant of preparedness. Returnees who experienced return as planned, chosen, or negotiated generally had more time and capacity to organise housing, employment, finances, family arrangements, and emotional adjustment before return. Return was also easier to integrate into a coherent personal trajectory when individuals could explain why they were returning — to reunite with family, contribute, pursue a new professional opportunity, retire or begin another stage in their lives.

By contrast, people returning through forced or highly constrained processes described having far less control over timing or conditions of return. Several respondents described return as abrupt, emotionally destabilising, or imposed by legal and administrative pressures. In these situations, preparedness was weakened not only by lack of resources, but also by uncertainty and diminished agency. **The return process itself reduced their opportunity to mobilise resources**.

A further concern is that reintegration systems may reproduce the very inequalities in preparedness created by return processes. Where access to support depends partly on return category or cooperation

with return procedures, people who had the least opportunity to prepare may also receive the least assistance.

This creates a tension between migration-management logic and reintegration need: support may be organised around how someone returned rather than how prepared they are for what comes next.

Social Reception, Stigma and Emotional Reintegration

Preparedness is, finally, relational. Returnees do not prepare only for jobs, housing or services; they also prepare for how they expect to be received by families and communities. Across contexts, returnees described anxiety about disappointment, stigma and perceived failure, particularly where families had made financial sacrifices or migration carried high expectations of success.

In some cases, returnees concealed difficulties experienced abroad or avoided discussing the conditions of their return in order to preserve dignity and social standing. Others described pressure to demonstrate economic success, despite limited opportunities after return. These dynamics could intensify feelings of shame, isolation, or emotional exhaustion during reintegration.

At the same time, supportive family networks and community acceptance could significantly strengthen preparedness and resilience. Returnees who felt welcomed and socially recognised were often better able to rebuild routines, seek support, and imagine longer-term futures after return.

These findings suggest that reintegration cannot be understood only through livelihoods or service delivery. Emotional wellbeing, social recognition, and belonging are also central dimensions of preparedness. Social reception can become a resource or a constraint. Supportive families, peer relationships and community acceptance can help returnees rebuild routines, seek assistance and imagine a longer-term future after return. Stigma, by contrast, can encourage isolation, concealment and reluctance to access support associated with a “returnee” identity.

This makes **relational and psychosocial preparedness** as important as material preparation. Returnees may need to adapt to changed family relationships, renegotiate identity and belonging, process difficult migration or return experiences, and manage the social expectations surrounding their return. Reintegration cannot therefore be assessed solely through whether someone has obtained employment or received material assistance.

Preparedness requires continuity: Information, institutions and local support

The research demonstrates that preparedness depends on the systems and relationships surrounding them.

Across contexts, returnees described uncertainty about assistance, administrative procedures, employment, housing and public services. Information was sometimes fragmented between actors or available only at particular stages of the return process. Support could similarly be concentrated around departure or immediate arrival, even though the most difficult challenges became visible later.

The administrative process of return may be highly organised across borders while the process of rebuilding life after return remains fragmented across institutions, programmes and communities. Preparedness therefore depends on continuity: whether returnees can access credible information before

departure, understand where to seek assistance after arrival, move through referral pathways, and receive support as needs change over time.

People who have already returned can offer forms of practical knowledge that institutions may struggle to provide: what administrative processes actually involve, how employment markets operate in practice, how communities may respond, and what reintegration feels like over time. Local organisations and municipalities likewise occupy an important position because many post-return needs — housing, healthcare, work, documentation, social support — are ultimately encountered locally rather than at the level at which return decisions are made.

Preparedness is relational and institutional as well as individual. Its effectiveness depends on whether support systems provide continuity across different stages of return. **Returnees who can access credible information, referral pathways, psychosocial support and livelihood assistance before and after arrival are better positioned to adapt when expectations and circumstances change.**

This helps explain why returnees exposed to similar programmes or formal return procedures can nevertheless experience very different trajectories. Some are able to adapt imagined futures as circumstances change; others encounter a gap they cannot bridge through individual effort. Preparedness therefore means more than preparing people for reality. It also requires asking **whether the realities to which they return provide viable possibilities for the futures they are trying to build.**

This has important implications for policy. Reintegration support is frequently organised around short-term projects and administrative categories, while returnees experience reintegration as a long-term and non-linear process. Supporting preparedness therefore requires not only material assistance, but also stronger continuity of support, locally grounded systems, realistic information, and mechanisms through which returnees can participate in shaping reintegration pathways.

Returnees themselves are sources of practical knowledge about what post-return systems actually involve, while municipalities and local organisations are often the actors best positioned to translate formal support into everyday access.

Across the four contexts, preparedness emerges at the intersection of imaginaries, agency, resources, relationships and institutional support. Returnees do not prepare for or reintegrate into neutral environments: they return into socially constructed expectations, unequal opportunities and systems that may or may not enable them to act on the futures they imagined. This helps explain why returnees exposed to similar formal procedures or assistance can experience very different trajectories. Taking imaginaries seriously therefore does not mean simply helping people form more accurate expectations. It means recognising that sustainable reintegration depends both on people's capacity to prepare and on the capacity of post-return environments to make viable futures possible.

CONCLUSION: TURNING IMAGINARIES INTO VIABLE FUTURES

This paper has shown that return is imagined before it is lived. Returnees anticipate not only where they will go, but what return will mean: whether it will represent failure, homecoming or contribution; whether it will offer a new beginning, a temporary pause or a future shaped by continued mobility. These imaginaries matter because they shape what people expect, what they prepare for and what futures they believe remain possible after return.

But imaginaries do not determine reintegration outcomes. The research shows that their relationship with reintegration depends on the time and agency people have to prepare, the information and resources available to them, the reception they encounter from families and communities, and the social, economic and institutional conditions to which they return.

As return governance becomes increasingly coordinated, digitalised, and results-oriented, the findings of this paper suggest that administrative coherence alone is insufficient. Reintegration policies that overlook returnees' lived realities, social expectations, and unequal preparedness risk deepening the gap between institutional assumptions and post-return experiences.

Supporting sustainable reintegration requires moving beyond short-term and standardised assistance models toward making information widely available, with locally grounded systems that recognise differentiated needs, strengthen continuity of support, and create meaningful mechanisms for returnee participation and feedback.

Taking return imaginaries seriously is not only a matter of representation. It is central to understanding how return is anticipated, negotiated, experienced, and governed.

From findings to policy: three priorities for supporting preparedness

How, then, can policy makers improve return preparedness? Rather than treating return only as a logistical or economic process, policies should consider the ways in which return is imagined, anticipated, and prepared for - to build public narratives and policies that can contribute to more realistic return imaginaries, and more dreamy return possibilities. This points to three policy priorities:

1. **Support *informed* return, and make viable futures possible.** Returnees need credible, transparent and locally grounded information about the social, economic and institutional conditions they are likely to encounter after return. Returnee testimonies, peer exchange and first-hand information can help people prepare beyond generic assumptions about "home" or reintegration. But information alone cannot resolve structural mismatch. Employment constraints, housing, weak services, psychosocial needs or limited recognition of skills cannot be overcome through expectation management. Policy should therefore aim not only to make expectations more realistic, but also to make viable post-return futures more achievable.
2. **Design support around preparedness, agency and need, not administrative categories:** Returnees have unequal opportunities to prepare. People who can anticipate and influence the timing of return generally have more space to organise housing, livelihoods, family arrangements and emotional adjustment. Forced and highly constrained return substantially narrow this space, while many

formally “voluntary” returns also take place under limited alternatives. Support should therefore respond to actual levels of preparedness and need rather than assuming that administrative categories accurately reflect agency. Where returnees have had little time or control to prepare, reintegration systems should compensate for that deficit through earlier information where possible, stronger reception and referral arrangements, and longer-term post-return support. Those with the least opportunity to prepare should not consequently receive the least support.

3. **Build continuity around return – locally and across borders:** Reintegration should not be organised as a moment of arrival followed by a short assistance package. It unfolds through relationships and over time. Family ties, peer networks, local communities, municipalities and service providers can provide information, emotional support, practical guidance and access to opportunities. Policy should therefore strengthen continuity between pre-return and post-return services, invest in locally grounded referral and support systems, and create space for returnees themselves to contribute knowledge through peer exchange, mentorship and feedback. Continuity also means recognising that sustainable reintegration is not necessarily synonymous with permanent immobility. Transnational relationships and the possibility of future mobility can provide resources, security and a sense of choice that make return more viable. Subsequent movement should therefore not automatically be interpreted as evidence that reintegration has failed.

FAiR research began from a recurring asymmetry: returnees encounter increasingly structured procedures governing whether, when and how they leave Europe, but much less predictable systems for rebuilding life after arrival. Taking imaginaries seriously makes visible what that asymmetry means in people's lives. Sustainable reintegration cannot be produced through return procedures alone. It depends on whether returnees have the agency, information, relationships, resources and locally grounded institutional support needed to turn an imagined future into a viable one.

Return policy cannot organise the journey back while leaving returnees largely to navigate what comes next. The task is therefore not simply to make expectations about return more realistic, but to make viable futures after return more possible.

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