

A new Horizon Europe project on return migration policies

GAPs: De-centring the Study of Migrant Returns and Readmission Policies in Europe and Beyond

EU and its Member States face political, normative, and operational challenges regarding returning rejected asylum seekers and 'irregular' migrants to their origin or third countries. The 'efficiency' of returns is under scrutiny because of 'low' return rates. Only about one-third of rejected asylum seekers in the EU return to their country of origin – of which fewer than 30 per cent do so voluntarily (Atlas of Migration, EU, 2020). In several reports published by various EU institutions, the shortcomings in return policies are attributed to a set of internal and external factors, including inconsistent interpretation of EU rules, absence of proper links between return and asylum policies; lack of policy harmonisation among MSs; and problems in implementation, coordination, and cooperation (ECA 2021; EC 2020; EC COM 2018). To address these problems, the European Commission (EC) with the New Pact on Migration and Asylum (EC 2020: 2) has called for responsibility-sharing for 'swift and effective returns' promoting an 'EU-coordinated approach to returns'. However, the problem is what precisely comprises effective returns and coordinated approach, for whom, and how effectiveness and efficiency will (or can) be measured. Policy work and scholarly research show that the EU needs to cooperate with transit and origin countries as well as migrants to fulfil its return and readmission policy objectives. However, third countries often show unwillingness to cooperate with the EU and its Member States, notably in signing readmission agreements. From the migrants' perspective, too often policies do not focus on their concerns, experiences, and dynamics of migration journey. So, there exist gaps between the dynamics of migration processes, return policies' priorities, and the interests of parties that are expected to cooperate.

We thus dubbed this project 'GAPs' because its overarching objective is to examine the disconnect between expectations of EU return policies and their actual outcomes. GAPs aims to decentre the dominant and policy-driven understanding of return migration governance by bringing multiple perspectives into play and by studying complex interactions between the actors involved. GAPs scrutinizes the shortcomings of the EU's governance of returns with both its internal and external dimensions; analyses enablers and barriers of international cooperation, sheds light on the perspectives of migrants themselves to understand their knowledge of return policies, aspirations and experiences. By taking a close look at governance, cooperation and the agency of various actors, the project is able to suggest new avenues for international cooperation, develop recommendations for stakeholders and explore alternative pathways to returning migrants.

GAPs aims to achieve its goals via a multi-disciplinary, qualitative and quantitative comparative research in 12 countries in Europe (Germany, Sweden, Poland, Greece), Africa (Nigeria, Tunisia, Morocco) and the broader Middle East (Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, Afghanistan). The particular data collection involves desk research as well as ethnographic work, survey studies in the selected case countries.

Given the extensive nature of the GAPs consortium with 17 partners, Uppsala University and Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies (BICC) will share the coordination. The project will officially start in March 2023, and continue until March 2026.

GAPs consortium

- 1 Uppsala University (UU, co-coordinator)
- 2 Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies (BICC, co-coordinator)
- 3 Radboud University (RU)
- 4 İstanbul Özyegin University (OzU)
- 5 Hammurabi Human Rights Organisation (HHRO)
- 6 Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul (SRII)
- 7 The Hashemite University (HU)
- 8 National Center for Social Research (EKKE)
- 9 Association Migration Internationale (AMI)
- 10 Ryerson University (Ryerson)
- 11 The University of Glasgow (UG)
- 12 University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN)
- 13 Bilim Research and Social Studies (BRC)
- 14 Migration Matters (MM)
- 15 University of Warsaw (UW)
- 16 Science-Policy Interface Agency (SPIA)
- 17 University of Sousse (US)