

Assisted Voluntary Return

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When I spoke with Sara about what happens after an asylum claim is rejected, as hers was, we discussed return and deportations. After an asylum request is denied, people receive a decision that stipulates they have to leave the country, which is “just a piece of paper,” she explained. “There’s no real deportation,” I remarked. “No, no, no, here [in Serbia] there’s nothing for deportation, only IOM, if someone applies for return,” she said. IOM stands for the International Organization for Migration. This organization implements Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programs along the **Balkan route** and globally. While IOM is the main actor implementing these programs on a global level, the programs are also organized under different names in various countries, particularly when carried out by other governmental or non-governmental organizations.

In assisted voluntary return programs, people on the move are provided with financial support to return to the countries they left. This typically includes one-way plane tickets and some cash intended to help people get by. These programs are primarily offered to people whose asylum claims have been rejected. However, campaigns have also targeted those still in the asylum process, as well as individuals outside the asylum system—those whose stay has been irregularized and who originate from non-European countries. Posters with information in multiple languages on how to contact IOM for financial assistance to return to the countries they fled—and from where they embarked on a difficult journey toward Europe—are often seen in asylum centers, camps, and **detention** facilities along the Balkan route. Sponsored ads promoting voluntary return programs also appear on social media feeds of people on the move. For these campaigns, IOM uses the testimonies of migrants themselves, who explain how these programs “helped” them. The question *Want to go home?*, one of the campaign’s main slogans, suggests that home cannot be where the person currently is. AVRR posters prominently feature racialized subjects—women wearing hijabs, people with darker skin, even smiling children.

Although physical force is not used in assisted voluntary returns, they often represent the final step before **forced** deportation—in countries where deportations are actually carried out. In some countries deportations are not carried out, such as Serbia, as Sara’s account illustrates. Precisely because it is the last available option, Martin Sökefeld (2020) notes that the “voluntariness” of voluntary return is highly questionable.

Voluntary return is presented as an alternative to classic, essentially forced, deportations. The term “voluntary” is built into the very name of such programs to construct them as the opposite of forced return. The emphasis on “voluntariness” masks the structural violence of the European **migration regime** and the fact that options for remaining are extremely limited. The migrants’ “free choice” is placed at the forefront—in the sense that they are supposedly deciding on their own whether to return or not (Cleton & Chauvin 2020). In other words, when people whose presence on European soil has been systematically irregularized sign up for voluntary return, they are not doing so out of genuine “free choice,” but because they are running out of options. A reading of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum makes it clear that the EU has no intention of easing the stay or integration of migrants—instead, it will increasingly invest in so-called “voluntary” return programs. Assisted voluntary return programs are a paradigmatic example of liberal violence (cf. Isakjee et al. 2020). So-called voluntary returns cannot officially be interpreted as forced movement “backward,” but they serve as evidence that current asylum, border, and migration policies rely on insidious tactics to prevent human mobility toward Europe—all under the frameworks of liberal-democratic governance.

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Literature

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