



Research and Documentation Centre

Intergovernmental relations and return

Overarching summary and main conclusions

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Overarching summary and main conclusions

Background

Each year, the authorities of the EU+ countries – the EU Member States plus Norway, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom – issue around 500,000 return decisions to nationals of non-EU+ countries who do not, or no longer, have a legal stay in these territories (European Court of Auditors, 2021). A return decision orders the person to leave the territory and go to a country where he/she does have legal stay, usually his/her country of citizenship. If persons do not organise their own 'voluntary' departure – possibly after having received assistance from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) or from an NGO – they risk being returned by force.

EU+ states, including the Netherlands, attach importance to but are only partially successful in the enforcement of return decisions. For example, it has been estimated that, according to registrations, about one third of the return decisions in 2019 demonstrably resulted in return (European Court of Auditors, 2021). If only returns to non-European countries are counted, the registered return rate drops below 20%. There are indications that the return rate from the Netherlands is higher than from most other EU+ countries, but there is still a significant group that is not demonstrably returned according to the registrations (Leerkes & Van Houte, 2020).¹

The return of irregular migrants to their country of citizenship often requires the collaboration of non-EU+ countries' authorities. This is especially true if potential returnees do not possess valid travel documents or manage to conceal such documents from EU+ countries' authorities, who then need to apply for a *laissez passer* (a travel document that is valid for a single entry into the non-EU+ country). Limited enforcement of return decisions partly arises from hesitation on the part of authorities of non-EU+ countries to issue such travel documents. For example, there have been repeated tensions in recent years between the State of the Netherlands and State of Morocco regarding forced return.² This exemplifies the difficulties that EU+ states may experience to achieve collaboration on enforced return with non-EU+ states. The Directorate-General Migration of the Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security therefore wanted to learn more about the effectiveness of Dutch and European enforced return policies, especially in the sphere of international relations. How effective are the existing intergovernmental return policies, including different bilateral and EU-wide return frameworks, such as 'readmission agreements', 'Mobility Partnerships', and 'Memoranda of Understanding', in which EU+ and non-EU+ countries stipulate how they will collaborate on enforced return? What are the more unwritten intergovernmental return strategies of the Netherlands and other EU+ countries?

¹ These indications are based on research that focused on countries where most assisted and forced returnees are rejected asylum seekers. It calculated indicators of rate of return for several EU+ countries (to the same non-EU+ countries) by dividing the number of returns to the selected non-EU+ countries in a period of five years (2013-2017) by the number of rejected asylum seekers from these countries in the same period. This is one of the options that we also recommend in study 1 in order to compare the return rates of different EU+ countries (see Mailiepaard et al., 2022)

² In 2021 the *Raad van State* (Dutch Council of State) ruled that the Netherlands had to end the immigration detention of a Moroccan national because Morocco did not collaborate on forced return. See: <https://www.raadvanstate.nl/@124967/202006914-1-v3/>

Against this background, the Research and Documentation Centre (WODC) conducted three interrelated studies on the topic of enforced return. The term enforced return is used throughout the reports as an umbrella term for all returns that fall under the scope of the EU Return Directive (2008/115/EC), including 'voluntary return' (both assisted and unassisted) and 'forced return'. For the third study, the WODC collaborated with the Norwegian Institute for Social Research (ISF). The three studies address the following overarching research question: *How do intergovernmental relations and intergovernmental return policies influence rates of enforced return from the Netherlands and other EU+ countries to non-EU+ countries?*

The project resulted in the three reports, which can be read independent of each other. What follows is a more elaborate discussion of the three separate parts, their implications for policy making in the field of enforced return, and implications for research in this field. Box 1 summarises the project's main findings.

Box 1 Main findings of the overall project

- On the basis of the available European data and statistics, it is difficult to gain a solid understanding of patterns of enforced return and impossible to directly compare EU+ countries (Part 1).
- The quantitative analyses (Part 2) show that intergovernmental return frameworks have a limited effect on rates of enforced return. Only legally-binding bilateral readmission agreements show a small effect. European return frameworks do not have an effect on rates of enforced return. Indeed, in reality, many more factors influence enforced return.
- The qualitative pilot study (Part 3) offers more insight into the context of intergovernmental relations and enforced return. It indicates that while return frameworks can help to enforce return, they are not a prerequisite to enforce return, and are usually also not sufficient. The authorities of EU+ countries like the Netherlands and Norway use several other strategies, such as producing goodwill and offering re-integration assistance, to obtain collaboration with non-European EU+ countries on return. EU+ countries seem to have limited leverage over such non-EU+ countries, and may also choose not to fully use their potential sources of power because they have other interests than enforcing return (e.g., trade interests, or collaborating with non-EU+ countries on jihadism). Rates of enforced return to the selected non-EU+ countries are generally limited. The study suggests that no 'one size fits all' approach exists, also because relationships with non-EU+ countries vary.
- Better quality data and statistics and more elaborate studies that combine quantitative and qualitative methods are needed to gain deeper insight into intergovernmental relations and enforced return.

Part 1: An assessment of the validity and reliability of EU data on orders to leave and return of third country nationals

To obtain more scientific insight into the influence of bilateral and EU-wide intergovernmental return policies and other factors on the rates of enforced return more generally, it is crucial that researchers can accurately measure such rates, which should be comparable across EU+ countries. Part 1 of the project was a preparatory study to assess the validity and reliability of the Eurostat return data, focusing on data on 'orders to leave' and data on 'returns to a third country following an order to leave'

(Maliepaard, Van der Meer, Leerkes, & Ramdin, 2022). The study was based on a review of the relevant academic literature and policy reports, four expert interviews, and an explorative quantitative assessment of the Eurostat return data.

What can be said about the validity and reliability of the EU data on returns and return decisions?

We found that the current Eurostat data – which include data on return decisions and enforced returns to a third country – has considerable methodological limitations with regards to the measurement of enforced return. A significant part of the methodological problems arise because of differences between EU+ countries in the implementation of the Return Directive (e.g., issuing return decisions in different situations) and because of differences between EU+ countries in the definition and registration of return decisions and enforced returns. Because of these inconsistencies, differences between EU+ countries in measured return rates are clouded by international differences in the use and registration of return decisions and returns, making a comparison in return rates across countries a hazardous exercise. Furthermore, existing EU data lack information on unassisted voluntary return and the precise destination of the return (transit or origin country), threatening the validity of the return rate. A final threat to the validity of the data is the fact that the data are not cohort data. This means that interpreting a country's return rate and comparing return rates for different years should be done with caution.

What methodologies are suitable to research the effects of return arrangements on return outcomes and/or to identify differences between comparable corridors in the level and/or type (e.g., forced vs. voluntary) of return?

There are serious threats to the validity and reliability of the data, which should not be overlooked. At the same time, the Eurostat return data form the most detailed source of information currently available on return across Europe. We therefore identified several approaches to overcome some of the threats to the validity and reliability of measured rates of enforced return. When comparing countries, we propose using the deviation method, or focusing on the subgroup of rejected asylum seekers. When the goal is to assess trends, smoothing or aggregation is a potential solution, as is data selection. Depending on the question at hand, different (combinations of) strategies may be employed. Unfortunately, the data issues we uncovered cannot be completely overcome by these strategies, and particularly descriptive analyses should be executed with caution. Explanatory studies – in which the effects of certain origin-country, destination-country, and corridor-specific characteristics on the return rate are studied – may make use of Fixed-Effects models. We developed an analytical approach for Part 2 of the project based on the findings of this preparatory study.

Part 2: From paper to practice? EU-wide and bilateral return frameworks between EU+ and non-EU+ countries and their effects on enforced return

Having developed a fitting analytical strategy, and with awareness of the data's limitations, Part 2 (Leerkes, Maliepaard and Van der Meer, 2022) set about answering the main research questions of the project. We employed advanced quantitative analysis to estimate the effects of different intergovernmental return frameworks on the rate of enforced return from EU+ countries to non-EU+ countries. The term intergovernmental return framework pertains to all texts in which states describe how

they will cooperate on enforced return (examples are 'Readmission Agreement', 'Memorandum of Understanding', 'Mobility Partnership', 'Exchange of letters', and so forth). We classified intergovernmental return frameworks into subtypes based on the *level*, *legal binding*, and *issue linkage* of the frameworks. *Level* relates to whether or not the framework is concluded directly between one EU+ country and one non-EU+ country (called 'bilateral intergovernmental return frameworks' in the three studies) or has been concluded at the initiative of the European Commission between one non-EU+ country and various EU+ countries ('EU-wide intergovernmental return frameworks'). *Legal binding* refers to whether or not the framework is considered legally binding as an official treaty between sovereign nations (such as in the case the bilateral and EU-wide readmission agreements) or includes non-binding statements (such as in the case of a bilateral Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) or the EU-wide Mobility Partnership). Non-binding frameworks do not have to be approved by national parliaments. *Issue linkage* refers to the extent to which the framework has been linked to a promise to facilitate legal migration and/or international mobility (e.g., through the facilitation of Schengen visa), or a promise on the part of the EU+ country or countries to promote the economic development and/or institutional capacities of the non-EU+ country (cf. Jurje & Lavenex, 2014). For example, the EU has concluded various readmission agreements with Eastern European countries. These include stipulations about the issuance of Schengen visas enabling nationals of these countries to legally visit the Schengen countries for business, tourism, and/or family matters. Other frameworks – especially the Mobility Partnerships – are mostly linked to capacity-building and development aid. There is currently no systematic information about issue linkage in bilateral frameworks, but some frameworks have created links between cooperation on enforced return and opportunities for legal migration (also see EMN, 2022).

Our analyses are based on Eurostat data from 32 EU+ countries to 174 non-EU+ countries for the 2008-2019 period. Increasingly restrictive statistical models (fixed effects regression models) were used to control other influences on the rate of enforced return apart from bilateral or EU-wide intergovernmental return frameworks. These other influences include stable differences between EU+ countries (for example differences in the registration of enforced return), stable differences between non-EU+ countries (each country has specific economic and political conditions that are relatively favourable, or unfavourable, to return), stable differences between dyads³ (for example because of stronger bilateral ties, such as a shared colonial history), and time trends for each EU+ and non-EU+ country (for example an increased prioritisation of returns by the EU+ country of changing economic or political conditions in the non-EU+ country). For methodological reasons, the estimates of the effects of intergovernmental return frameworks on enforced return had to be limited to the effects of relatively new frameworks that were implemented in the 2008-2019 period.

To what extent do bilateral and/or EU-wide return frameworks lead to higher rates of enforced return from the EU+ country, or EU+ countries, to the non-EU+ countries that have agreed on these frameworks?

There are differences in return rates between dyads (combination of EU+ and non-EU+ country) that have a return framework in place, and dyads that do not. However, our analyses indicate that these differences are not the *consequence* of the frameworks.

³ Dyads are unique pairs of EU+ and non-EU+ countries (such as Netherlands-Afghanistan or France-Turkey).

Implementing a return framework at the EU-level does not lead to higher return rates; implementing a return framework at the bilateral level does lead to slightly higher enforced return rates, but only for one specific type of framework (namely the legally binding bilateral readmission frameworks).

Is there any evidence that the effect of return frameworks on the rate of enforced return depends on the type of framework in terms of level (bilateral versus EU-wide), legal binding, and/or degree and type of issue linkage (focusing on Schengen visa facilitation and development aid)?

There is some evidence that the effects of return frameworks depend on the type of framework. Results indicate that having a legally binding bilateral readmission agreement increases the rate of enforced return by between 5-10 percent point on average. Non-binding bilateral frameworks (e.g., the MoUs) do not show significant effects on the rate of return. At the EU-level, we do not find any significant effects on enforced return for any of the EU-wide frameworks – neither for the legally binding EU-wide readmission agreements with and without visa facilitation, nor for the non-binding frameworks including the Mobility Partnerships. There is also no evidence that EU Member States that invested the most in the EU-wide frameworks (e.g., that signed implementation protocols under the EU-wide readmission agreements and/or participated explicitly in the Mobility Partnerships) consequently experienced increased rates of enforced return. Thus, it seems that the level at which the frameworks are concluded particularly matters, and that at the bilateral level, the (lack of) legal binding plays an important role. According to EMN (2022), explicit issue linkage is rare in the bilateral frameworks (e.g., linkages with opportunities for legal migration), but additional research on explicit and more implicit bilateral issue linkage is desirable.

Given the finding that return frameworks have a very limited effect on enforced return rates, Part 3 moves us beyond these frameworks to explore other intergovernmental strategies to implement enforced return.

Part 3: Beyond return frameworks. A first exploration of Dutch and Norwegian intergovernmental strategies to implement enforced return to Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq

The third and final part of the project entailed an explorative qualitative pilot on the (inter)governmental return policies of the Netherlands and Norway in relation to Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq (Leerkes, Van der Meer, Paasche & Brekke, 2022). It was conducted to illustrate and give more context to the findings of Part 2, and to obtain a more complete overview of relevant intergovernmental return policies in addition to the written intergovernmental return frameworks. We included two EU+ countries (the Netherlands and Norway) and three non-EU+ countries (Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq) in order to explore whether such a comparative approach can help EU+ countries – and potentially also non-EU+ countries – to learn from each other. The pilot is based on expert interviews with, in total, 14 respondents (seven for the Netherlands and seven for Norway). They were from (a) Dutch and Norwegian state organisations responsible for the implementation of enforced return, (b) IOM Netherlands and Norway, and (c) a Norwegian migrant advocacy organisation. Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq were selected because they are important countries from which a notable number of rejected asylum seekers in both the Netherlands and Norway originate. Norway was selected because it resembles the Netherlands in two ways: both countries assign considerable importance

to the enforcement of return decisions, and both countries have developed relatively strong institutional capacities to do so.

What are the experiences of the Netherlands and Norway with regards to forced and assisted return to Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq?

Both the Netherlands and Norway experience considerable difficulties in returning Afghan⁴, Iranian, and Iraqi nationals who receive return decisions. Difficulties especially occur if irregular migrants do not want to return themselves, which is common. For both EU+ countries, implementing forced returns is especially difficult. For both Norway and the Netherlands, Afghanistan was the most common destination for forced return until the Taliban took power in 2021. Forced returns to Iraq occur only occasionally, whereas almost no forced returns to Iran take place.

The Dutch interviews indicate that the low return rates are not only a consequence of low willingness on the part of rejected asylum seekers and (other) irregular migrants to return to these countries, but also a lack of interest on the part of the receiving states to readmit forced deportees in particular. According to the respondents from the Dutch Repatriation and Departure Service (DT&V) a combination of factors explains the low interest in receiving forced returnees, including economic factors (e.g., loss of remittances, unemployment issues) and other legal, social, and political factors (cooperation on forced return is politically sensitive, and there are formal and more informal norms in these countries that forbid (Iran), or at least disapprove of the readmission of nationals who do not want to return). Non-EU+ countries, including Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq, generally cooperate on the more voluntary types of return, i.e., when nationals initiate the return themselves or, after having received a return decision, collaborate with the authorities and contact their embassies, possibly via IOM.

What (inter)governmental strategies have the Netherlands and Norway developed with Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq with a view to promoting enforced return to these countries?

For the Netherlands, four partially overlapping intergovernmental return strategies were identified: (1) rule creation; (2) the offering of reintegration assistance (including discretionary assistance for forced return); (3) goodwill production; and (4) institutional pragmatism. Rule-creation refers to concluding bilateral or EU-wide return frameworks with non-EU+ countries as a basis for collaboration. With regards to rule-creation, return frameworks are mostly used to remind the authorities of non-EU+ states about the general framework in which the request occurs, and to open the discussions on the specific case. Re-integration assistance, which is also given for forced return on a discretionary basis, promotes the willingness to collaborate on enforced return by decreasing the costs of return. Additionally, it helps create goodwill, which is something that the Dutch return officers also try to obtain by investing in good personal relationships with relevant authorities of non-EU+ countries, and by framing the returns in ways that are more acceptable for the non-EU+ state. Institutional pragmatism pertains to the willingness on the part of Dutch civil servants to be flexible in how forced return is organised (such as by dealing directly with authorities in the origin country instead of the embassies and consulates to obtain *laissez passers*). The way these strategies are used is reported to differ per non-EU+

⁴ The respondents described the situation before the Taliban regained power in 2021.

country, depending on the specific context and nature of the intergovernmental relationship.

The dependence on goodwill and the relative lack of intergovernmental leverage shows that 'soft power' (Nye, 1990) is very much a part of implementing both assisted and forced return. At the same time, effective use of soft power also seems to involve 'hard' negotiations on what can be offered, on giving and taking, and on conditionality.

The data collection for Norway focused more on its general return strategy and assisted returns. The Norwegian return strategy mostly consists of: (1) rule creation; (2) making assisted return (financially) more attractive than forced return; (3) using the threat of forced return as an incentive for irregular migrants to return without direct force being applied; (4) the commissioning of policy research on return, which has helped to create more evidence-based policies; and (5) the adoption of a 'whole-of-government-approach' through which Norway aims to make police, (other) civil servants, and civil society work together across multiple ministries and directorates, and tries to speak with one voice in relation to origin states. The Norwegian researchers similarly report that goodwill creation is essential for intergovernmental collaboration on return with countries like Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq, and mostly point at the importance of reintegration support for assisted return in that respect. Rule creation is also reported to be both an indicator of, and contributor to, such goodwill.

Implications for policymaking in the field of enforced return

All-in-all, both the quantitative and qualitative findings show that return – especially forced return – is difficult to implement for European states, and that EU+ countries should not expect too much from the effectiveness of intergovernmental return frameworks. According to our analyses, the implementation of EU-wide and non-binding bilateral frameworks does not notably lead to increased rates of enforced return. The legally binding bilateral readmission agreements do lead to increased return rates, but their effect is limited (return rates go up by 5-10 percentage points). Clearly, more is needed at the intergovernmental level to implement returns beyond the introduction of return frameworks. Here, much seems to depend on personal relations and goodwill, also given limited leverage of EU+ countries over various relevant non-EU+ countries and/or the presence of other interests of EU+ countries that compete with their interests to enforce return (such as trade and security interests).

We do not find significant quantitative effects of the EU-wide frameworks on the return rates. Furthermore, we learned in Part 3 that the Dutch return officers, when dealing with a country for which an older non-binding bilateral framework and a newer non-binding EU-wide return framework exist (this is the case for Afghanistan), only refer to the bilateral agreement during concrete *laissez passer* requests. This finding seems to indicate that the Netherlands and other Member States may have 'backed the wrong horse' by increasingly investing in EU-wide frameworks, at least when it comes to effects on return rates. The choice to increasingly conclude issue-linked and non-binding EU-wide frameworks (Cassarino, 2007, 2017; ACVZ, 2015) does not seem to be supported by any demonstrably stronger effects of such frameworks either. It thus could be useful for countries like the Netherlands to learn more about what EU+ countries do bilaterally, especially with regards to readmission agreements, and try to

(also) develop similar frameworks of their own or with a few other European partners (as the Benelux countries did in the past). Moreover, as Part 3 indicates, rule-creation is not the only intergovernmental strategy to pursue, and, depending on the non-EU+ country, learning from other EU-countries when it comes to strategies such as offering re-integration assistance and goodwill production seems to be worthwhile.

When it comes to enforced return, relatively voluntary return is preferable to forced return from a human rights and financial perspective. The European Return Directive therefore stipulates that forced return should only be used as a last resort. The results of Part 3 nonetheless suggest that EU+ countries also have a pragmatic interest to prioritise the more voluntary forms of return. The authorities of non-EU+ countries are hesitant to collaborate on forced return but are generally more cooperative in cases of the more voluntary returns. Investing more in voluntary rather than forced return may thus be beneficial both to individual migrants and to EU+ and non-EU+ countries.

Both the quantitative and qualitative findings indicate that various impediments to assisted and forced return exist, and that it is probably inevitable that not all return decisions will lead to return. The observed limits to promoting enforced return imply that EU+ countries will also need to consider different 'non-return' policies to accommodate the presence of non-returned migrants. In Germany, for example, some non-returned rejected asylum seekers receive vocational training and labour migration residence permits (Jonitz & Leerkes, 2021)⁵. In the Netherlands and Norway – two countries with relatively strict policies for irregular migrants – non-returned migrants still receive basic shelter (Johansen, 2013; Leerkes, 2016b; Mack, Verbeek & Klaver 2020). In Amsterdam, the municipality and various institutes for higher education now allow certain categories of irregular youth to enter tertiary education, possibly after having returned temporarily with a view to arranging a study visa with the help of the institutions involved in the initiative.⁶

A final policy implication concerns evidence-informed policy making. In Part 1, we identified various methodological limitations of the Eurostat return data, which hampered both Part 2 (for example, the limitations did not allow us to estimate the effects of intergovernmental return frameworks that already existed in 2008) and Part 3 (the limitations made it hard for us to identify non-EU+ countries with different rates of return from the Netherlands and Norway, which would have led us to learn more about the influence of intergovernmental relations on return, and contribute to mutual learning between EU+ countries on enforced return). If we want to promote evidence-informed policymaking and public discussions on migrant return, it is crucial that EU+ countries continue improving the quality of the Eurostat return data (making them 'FAIR', i.e., Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable). Additionally, it is important for researchers to have access to other data on enforced return, such as cohort data and micro-level data on *laissez passer* requests. Data on enforced return is politically sensitive in both EU+ and non-EU+ countries, but evidence-informed policy making does require that researchers have access to good data; in fact, it could be argued that the politicised nature of the topic of enforced return calls for more and better empirical research.

⁵ On regularization policies in other European countries also see Chauvin, Garcés-Mascreñas and Kraler (2013).

⁶ See <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/ongedocumenteerde-jongeren-krijgen-in-amsterdam-toegang-tot-hoger-onderwijs~ba1c487e/#:~:text=Als%20eerste%20stad%20in%20Nederland,hoger%20onderwijsinstellingen%20in%20de%20stad.>

Theoretical implications and research suggestions

Our findings challenge certain assumptions that underlie predominant academic and policy thinking about the influence of intergovernmental return frameworks. The decision to increasingly try to conclude EU-wide, issue-linked, and non-binding frameworks seems to have been informed by the 'external incentive model', which is informed by rational choice theory. It argues that non-EU+ countries will only readmit nationals to the extent that the externally offered positive or negative incentives outweigh the domestic costs of their return (cf. Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004). Were that assumption valid, we would, in principle, expect that EU-wide frameworks are more effective than bilateral frameworks (as EU Member States can pool their resources) and that EU-wide issue-linked frameworks, which bring material incentives to the negotiation table, are more effective than 'unlinked' EU-wide frameworks. Moreover, following this reasoning, the legal binding of a framework should not matter much for its effectiveness, as actors are assumed to respond to incentives, rather than legal obligations (especially if these obligations are not very 'hard'; there is no court that states can turn to if they believe that other states violate their readmission agreements). The quantitative analyses in Part 2 have not corroborated any of these expectations. It might be the case that bilateral readmission agreements come with stronger incentives than EU-wide agreements (in which case, the external incentive model would still hold). It is possible that bilateral readmission boosts enforced return because at least part of these agreements explicitly or more implicitly links cooperation on forced return to opportunities for legal migration. Currently, only Member States can make intergovernmental arrangements that involve agreements on legal migration (the EU-wide frameworks create links with 'mobility', i.e., with temporary visits to the Schengen area). However, there is also a possibility that the external incentive model overlooks crucial mechanisms of (non)compliance, such as the perceived (il)legitimacy of different frameworks (cf. Leerkes, 2016a; Wolff, 2014). The bilateral frameworks possibly perform better on aspects of procedural legitimacy (this might be because a more equal power balance fosters the perception that a fair process has been used to reach mutual understanding) and distributive justice (due potentially to a greater need to inquire about the needs of the non-EU+ country, resulting in rules that are also genuinely supported by non-EU+ states). It may also be that authorities of states have historically learned not to fully ignore the bilateral legal obligations they have entered into with other 'sovereign states', and that EU-wide frameworks do not trigger the same perceived obligations (yet) (cf. DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Deephouse, 1996). These latter types of reasoning are more in line with sociological institutionalism (cf. Scott, 2013), which includes the 'social learning model' (cf. Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004). Well-designed multi-method studies that combine advanced statistical analysis with qualitative (e.g., historical comparative) research on actors' perspectives, discourses, and formal/informal norms on enforced return, may teach us more about these unresolved theoretical puzzles.

In Parts 2 and 3, we specified various avenues for further research that researchers could pursue, and that EU+ and non-EU+ governments could facilitate. Importantly, our research project has shown that combining quantitative and qualitative methods enhances our understanding of intergovernmental relations and enforced return. The main avenues for future research include: (1) paying more attention to the perceptions and perspectives of non-EU+ actors on enforced return and enforced return policies; (2) obtaining further insight into why the bilateral readmission agreements were found to have a significant effect on enforced return, by collecting more data on the contents of bilateral return frameworks – including type and degree of issue-linkage, and the

negotiation processes that EU+ countries have used to the develop the readmission agreements; (3) conducting more elaborate comparative studies involving more EU+ countries and non-EU+ countries – also including fieldwork among the non-EU+ countries and actors (e.g. authorities and NGOs); and (4) paying more attention to other outcomes of intergovernmental return policies than the rate of enforced return, such as returnee reintegration and other human rights outcomes.

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