

Read more on AVR in general and in Central Europe in particular

Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) is one of many migration management services IOM offers to migrants and governments. It is a key component of IOM's recommended response to help countries deal with irregular flows of migrants and to assist stranded and destitute migrants. For irregular migrants, AVR avoids the stigma of deportation and legal exclusion from future return to the country of destination (re-entry ban), while assisting countries to manage the presence of irregular migrants in their territory in a humane and cost-effective manner.

Many migrants come to Europe looking for a better life. In most cases, they're hoping to stay, settle down, find a job and overall, integrate in the host society. However, unfortunately only few migrants succeed in getting refugee status or a permission to stay and a majority ends up being in an irregular situation:

Irregular migrants and those waiting for an asylum decision are not allowed to work and therefore, they cannot use their experience and talents to earn their own living. Having waited for a long time, many lose hope, get depressed and their working capacities and skills deteriorate. Irregular migrants may become stranded, homeless or eventually face deportation. Migrants miss their families and their home countries.

The circumstances that motivated their emigration decision might have changed for the better (a conflict or disaster may have ended, the socio-economic conditions in their country may have improved, etc.); they may wish to rejoin relatives and friends back home; or may have the skills and motivation to contribute to their own country's development.

A variety of factors may be involved in determining voluntary return. Some research has been conducted to better understand the range of motivations that trigger the resurgence of an individual's resolve to return. This research was mostly based on quantitative data from sample surveys and attempted to incorporate those variables into the design of case-specific AVR outreach and reintegration services.

It showed push/pull factors such as: the length of absence from the country of origin and of stay in the host country; the degree of integration and eligibility for welfare schemes in the host country; the nature of the individual's "investment" in the migration process, access to information on the return process, as well as the nature and extent of reintegration assistance available.

Economic and social factors may affect the variables that influence voluntary return. In the aftermath of emergency situations, consistent levels of spontaneous as well as assisted voluntary returns may occur even before status determination processes resume and formal assistance mechanisms are put in place. This initial surge in returns is not a characteristic of other return scenarios where the number of individuals returning is more closely related to the lag time required to disseminate information on the availability of return assistance.

AVR helps lessen the burden of discouraging present and future irregular flows to West European countries in both, human and financial terms and is therefore an indispensable component of migration management. Assisted Voluntary Return

- Protects migrants' rights
- Safeguards migrants' dignity
- Respects international principles and standards
- Addresses the root causes underlying irregular migration
- Strengthens cooperation between host countries and countries of origin
- Reinforces the responsibility of countries of origin vis-à-vis their returning nationals
- Ensures migrants have access to refugee and human rights protection mechanisms

- Promotes the sustainability of the return through reintegration measures that support the socio-economic reintegration of returning persons
- Ensures the integrity of regular migration programmes while respecting international principles and standards concerning migrants in irregular situations
- Can be located in the context of international cooperation, where the needs and concerns of countries of origin, transit, and destination are recognized as important considerations.

Since its foundation in 1951, IOM has gained thorough expertise in AVR in dozens of years of assistance to migrants in many countries. With more than 5,000 staff in nearly 300 offices located worldwide, IOM is operating AVR projects by offering all necessary services, from pre-departure counseling, travel bookings to post-arrival and reintegration assistance.

Currently, there are more than one hundred AVR projects running all over the world. An overall of 3.5 million returnees have been assisted. In the year 2005 only, a total of 47,000 migrants have been assisted; fifty percent of them were residing in European countries. Those figures speak for themselves: AVR is a highly relevant migration issue and the management of return migration poses significant challenges and is nowadays a key issue on the agenda of national and international policy makers.

While the importance of AVR in Europe cannot be overstated, its application has been, almost exclusively, a European phenomenon. The first such use of AVR was in Germany in 1979, and it has since been replicated in different forms in more than 18 European countries including the Netherlands, Belgium, the U.K. and Switzerland. Returns to the Balkans have in recent years accounted for some 10 to 20% of overall returns from European States.

The early model of simple return with some financial and travel assistance to the returnees has expanded over the years. After almost thirty years of experience with AVR, IOM learned that best practices of AVR include a full range of services from pre-departure counseling to post-arrival reintegration assistance in various forms.

In its role as mission with regional functions for Central and South-Eastern Europe, IOM's representation in Budapest is coordinating the EC-financed AVR project "*Enhancing Mechanisms and Harmonizing Standards in the Field of Voluntary Return of Irregular Migrants in Central European Member States*". This regional AVR project will be running for 18 months and is targeting two groups: government authorities/officials and practitioners dealing with AVR and third country nationals (i.e. non-EU nationals) who are in irregular situation in the territory of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland or Slovakia.

Consequently, the participating missions to this project are IOM Budapest (as regional coordinating site) and IOM missions in Bratislava, Prague and Warsaw. As for all IOM AVR programmes around the globe, IOM's core principles of AVR are followed: voluntariness, protection of Migrants' rights as well as sovereignty of the states involved in the transactions.

Within the framework of this particular AVR programme, IOM in Central Europe offers the following services:

- Travel and transit arrangements until the final destination including help with travel documents
- Pre-departure counseling with up-to-date information on the country of origin, i.e. relevant information about the political, economic and other circumstances that will allow for informed decisions and better preparation for return and reintegration
- Reintegration support: a financial return grant is provided upon departure to a certain number of returnees to assist them in the first period of reintegration back home

IOM is present in Central Europe since the beginning of the 1990s and started its own AVR activities in 1994. While the level of development of AVR programmes varies among the countries in Central Europe, IOM has run voluntary return operations for quite some time: IOM Hungary started its first AVR project in 1994, IOM in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia followed in the year 1998; Poland initiated first AVR programmes in the year 2004.

AVR services also varied due to factual and legal differences such as the local AVR infrastructure (detention facilities, asylum centers, NGOs as important multipliers) and administrative rules governing the law of aliens. Moreover, not all participating countries disposed of a reintegration component in their AVR prior to this particular project. It is therefore important to synchronize all efforts and work towards enhanced reintegration components in order to ensure long-term results, especially in light of EU return policies:

Various EU legal instruments cover the issue of return, for example the Return Action Programme (November 2002), the Green Paper on a Community Return Policy of Illegal Residents (April 2002) or the EU Return Policy on Illegal Residents (October 2004). Given these regulations, the project components have been built to reflect the

- Prevalence of voluntary return vs. forced return
- Respect for human rights of migrants
- Adoption of common principles, standards and procedures among Member States
- Networking among authorities, adoption of minimum standards and guidelines, exchange of best practice and statistical information, joint return operations

To meet the growing challenge of irregular migration and, as a core element of its regional technical cooperation strategy on migration management, IOM has also begun with the implementation of pilot AVR projects in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia as well as Serbia with initial support from the Government of Switzerland in mid 2001 and with further support from the UK and the EC in 2002.

IOM' field assessments in the region emphasize the need for enhanced structures of AVR: Stranded migrants in South Eastern Europe are often desperate to escape the restrictive conditions they find in transit countries and, although some wish to return home, most lack the means to do so and/or the information to make that decision. IOM works to stress the benefits of voluntary return and build these countries' capacity to set up their own voluntary return programmes.

Moreover, IOM intends to focus on the following niche areas:

- Attracting greater participation by non-governmental organizations in the implementation of migrant counseling and referral systems;
- Continuing training and information exchanges for field practitioners;
- Establishing partnership with the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States (FRONTEX).

In Bulgaria, Kosovo and Macedonia, AVR programmes are still inexistent. There is now an urgent need to set up structures to prepare for voluntary return operations in the near future. IOM intends to develop national procedures for AVRs in compliance with EU developments in return policies and practices, with the intention of being ready to start active implementation of returns. Bulgaria's recent accession and Macedonia's prospects of EU accession are of particular relevance in this regard.