



# Policy by percentage: Rethinking the return rate

Policymakers in the EU are quick to assert that migrant return rates are too low, calling for new measures to return those with no right to stay. However, this sole focus on the return rate is counterproductive because it can overlook important operational and procedural realities that shape return outcomes. This calls for a broader set of policy responses, including the better tracking of departures, closer monitoring of post-return outcomes, and greater attention to national practices in issuing return decisions.

In his statement concluding the Justice and Home Affairs Council on 8 December 2025, the Danish Minister for Immigration and Integration, Rasmus Stoklund, noted that “three out of four” migrants ordered to leave the EU do not ultimately do so, describing the situation as “unacceptable”. This framing closely echoes the [European Parliament’s debate](#) on the draft European Return Regulation, during which the return rate was invoked no fewer than twenty times by Members of the European Parliament across the political spectrum.

That MEPs from different parties and EU Member States draw on the same playbook is hardly surprising. Discourse around the return rate and the associated return ‘gap’ has gained traction well beyond the corridors of European institutions. Across the EU, the return rate is used as a proxy for the ‘effectiveness’ of return policy.

Why, then, does the return rate feature so prominently in policy debates? And what are the implications of relying only on this indicator when assessing return policies? This commentary highlights the limitations of grounding policymaking primarily on the return rate, arguing for a shift towards alternative indicators.

## What is the return rate?

National statistical offices calculate the return rate by dividing the number of people who actually return to a third country following an order to leave by the total number of people issued such an order over a given period. The resulting ratio indicates the proportion of return decisions that are followed by actual departure.

Aggregated at the EU level, the ‘EU return rate’ has hovered at around [20-30%](#) since the COVID-19 pandemic. This average, however, masks substantial variation among Member States. Countries with the largest immigrant populations, such as Germany, France, and Italy, often record annual rates below 10-15%.

Return rates also vary markedly by country of origin. Returns to Eastern European and Balkan countries are consistently higher than those to North and West African countries. More broadly, return rates tend to correlate with the intensity of economic and political ties between origin countries and the EU and its Member States. Notably, the mere existence of return or readmission frameworks is not, in itself, [associated](#) with higher return rates.

## How is the return rate used?

Because it is based on hard data, the return rate is often presented as compelling evidence that return policies are poorly enforced or easily circumvented. As illustrated in the European Parliament debate, this diagnosis frequently underpins calls for policy responses aimed at ‘inducing compliance’ with return orders and increasing the overall number of returns. In practice, this has entailed [curbs on procedural guarantees](#) for migrants, the expanded use of administrative [detention](#), the prospect of [removal to third countries other than the country of origin](#), and [restrictions on visa issuance](#) for citizens of countries deemed insufficiently cooperative on readmission.

## Why is the return rate misleading?

First, the data used to determine the return rate are not fully reliable. As highlighted in an EU Joint Research Centre [study](#), national statistics do not necessarily capture all departures from national territory. Returnees who have not been subject to custody measures or who have not benefitted from return assistance are often not recorded, suggesting that actual returns may be higher than reported. The calculation is further distorted by duplication: Member States may initiate multiple return procedures against the same individual, for example, when an initial decision expires or new circumstances arise. In France alone, more than [43,000](#) individuals were subject to multiple return decisions between 2019 and 2022.

Second, interpreting low return rates primarily as a question of compliance may overlook important operational and procedural realities. In practice, a significant share of return decisions are effectively annulled by national jurisdictions, most commonly on grounds related to non-refoulement or family unity. Additionally, authorities may at any stage of the procedure grant residence permits to undocumented migrants, in line with Member States' [prerogatives](#), including to address key labour market shortages.

Furthermore, the return rate disregards the fact that some return orders have no realistic prospect of being carried out, either because they concern stateless persons or because adverse geopolitical conditions, including [closed borders](#), make removal impossible. Though there are some [notable exceptions](#), most of these individuals are not granted residence permits, leaving them exposed to [socio-economic hardship](#) and prolonged precarity, in addition to contributing to a 'gap' in administrative statistics later instrumentalised in political discourse.

Data on revoked return decisions and non-removable cases remain scarce. The European Commission estimates that around [60%](#) of return decisions, or approximately 300,000 per year, simply cannot be enforced. This suggests that non-execution is driven less by migrants' lack of cooperation than by structural factors, such as shortcomings in domestic return procedures or challenges in obtaining travel documents from countries of origin.

Most importantly, countries that use the return rate as the sole benchmark risk engaging in a self-defeating dynamic. To improve return rates and demonstrate effectiveness, frontline agencies in Member States may choose to [prioritise](#) enforcement-oriented practices, including the expanded use of pre-departure detention and deportation. While intended to increase compliance, such measures raise serious concerns in terms of proportionality, fundamental rights, and procedural safeguards. This '[return at all costs](#)' may also

affect the EU's [standing with partners](#), but also undermines prospects for voluntary return – a [key EU priority](#) and a more cost-effective response to irregular migration. Research also shows that reintegration outcomes are significantly poorer following forced return, due to stigma and [marginalisation](#) in countries of origin, which in turn increases the likelihood of renewed and often riskier migration.

## What are the alternatives to a sole focus on the return rate?

The prominence of the return rate in policy discourses can contribute to oversimplified narratives about the functioning of return systems, reinforcing perceptions of systemic dysfunction and potentially jeopardising key national and European objectives related to foreign policy, human rights, and the sustainable reintegration of returnees.

Greater emphasis should be placed on developing complementary indicators that better capture the complexity and varied outcomes of return processes. Systematic [post-return monitoring](#) would offer European stakeholders deeper insight into post-return contexts and improve the responsiveness of reintegration programming to returnees' needs. Likewise, [fundamental rights monitoring](#) mechanisms, including National Ombudspersons or other independent human rights institutions, could be strengthened and more systematically integrated into the evaluation and design of return policies.

Finally, greater attention should be paid to national practices in issuing return decisions. Member States should take steps to avoid issuing return decisions to individuals eligible for protection or regularisation schemes under national rules. This requires reaffirming the primacy of the non-refoulement principle over operational goals while also strengthening counselling and personalised support throughout immigration procedures when legal stay has already been terminated or is about to end. These approaches have, in some contexts, helped enhance [migrants' trust](#) and engagement with migration authorities. While building public support for non-return policies can be politically challenging, existing research indicates that regularisation can generate broader [societal benefits](#), a finding which may help inform future policy debates.

Persistent references to the return rate by policymakers signal an undeniable shift in the orientation of return policy. Yet, when interpreted in isolation, use of this metric risks missing the broader picture, increasing public perceptions that governments are not able to effectively manage migration, and normalising significant human, social, and financial costs. Without a recalibration of how return is assessed and discussed, many of the familiar challenges in this field are likely to endure.

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