



## Press Release

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### Migrant returns and readmission to third countries probed by EU Auditors

**Less than 40 % of the irregular migrants ordered to leave the EU actually return to their home country or a third country. The European Court of Auditors (ECA) has now launched an audit of the EU's cooperation with third countries on the readmission of irregular migrants. The auditors will assess whether the suite of measures the European Commission took after 2015 have improved cooperation with priority third countries.**

Every year since 2008, half a million foreign nationals on average are ordered to leave the EU because they have entered or are staying irregularly. However, only 38 % return to their country of origin or to the country from which they travelled to the EU. This average drops below 30 % for returns outside Europe. One of the reasons for the low returns is the difficulty of cooperating with migrants' countries of origin, say the auditors.

*"How to deal best with migration is a pressing issue for the EU and its Member States", said Leo Brincat, the ECA Member leading the audit. "As the EU's external auditors, we have recently carried out several audits of the arrangements within the EU on asylum and relocation of migrants. We will now take a deeper look at their return and readmission to third countries."*

In 2015, the Commission published an EU action plan on return, in which it recognised that an effective system of return requires the readmission of irregular migrants to be prioritised in dealings with third countries. In 2016, it introduced the migration partnership framework to foster better cooperation with targeted priority countries of origin and transit, including via visa policy, development aid and diplomatic engagement. In 2017, it launched a renewed action plan on return, with recommendations on how to make readmission to third countries more effective.

To make it easier to implement readmission obligations, the EU has concluded 18 legally binding readmission agreements with third countries. However, third countries may be reluctant to engage in negotiations, mainly due to internal political considerations, since these agreements can be a source of public hostility. Since 2016, the Commission has therefore focused on

*The purpose of this press release is to convey the main messages of the European Court of Auditors' audit preview. The full preview is available at [eca.europa.eu](https://eca.europa.eu) in English.*

## ECA Press

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developing practical cooperation arrangements with them and has put in place several legally non-binding arrangements for return and readmission, which have drawn criticism from the point of view of democratic and judicial accountability.

The auditors aim to assess the EU's progress since 2015 in developing the framework for readmission of irregular migrants to third countries and whether it has been put into practice effectively for priority third countries. They will examine the negotiating process of EU readmission agreements and arrangements, how priority countries were identified, the Commission's support and incentives to third countries to improve readmission cooperation, and the sharing of best practices.

Currently there is no clear overview of EU funding for cooperation with third countries on the readmission of migrants. Nevertheless, the auditors have identified around 60 projects linked to the readmission and reintegration of irregular migrants with a total value of €641 million. They will focus on readmission cooperation with the 10 countries of origin with the highest numbers of non-returned irregular migrants (Syria excluded) and also assess the performance of 20 EU projects linked to the readmission and reintegration of irregular migrants in these countries.

### Notes to Editors

“Return” means the process of a non-EU national going back – either in voluntary compliance with the obligation or through enforcement – to their country of origin or transit, or to a non-EU country of their choice that will accept them. Readmission of a country's own nationals is an obligation under international law. Cooperation on readmission is an integral part of the EU's political dialogue with third countries: the Commission, the European External Action Service and the Member States tackle it through specific cooperation frameworks with third countries. The Cotonou agreement between the EU and African, Caribbean and Pacific countries, and other EU agreements with third countries, contain an obligation to accept the return of any of their nationals illegally present on EU territory, at a Member State's request and without further formalities. Both the European Parliament and Council have called for increased efficiency and effectiveness in returns and readmissions of irregular migrants.

Today, the auditors published an audit preview “Migrant return policy – cooperation with third countries on readmission”. Audit previews provide information on an ongoing audit task and are designed as a source of information for those interested in the policy or programmes being audited. The full audit preview is available in English on [eca.europa.eu](https://eca.europa.eu). The report is expected to be published in the summer of 2021.

In recent years, the ECA has published several reports on migration issues, such as [migration management in Greece and Italy](#), [border control](#), the [EU Trust Fund for Africa](#), the [Turkey Refugee Facility](#), [migration hotspots](#) and [external migration](#). Information on the measures the ECA has taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic can be found [here](#).

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