Budapest Process
Joint meeting of the Silk Routes and Black Sea Working Groups
Thematic Focus on Return and Reintegration
Sofia, 14 -15 December 2017

Summary/conclusions

1. On 14-15 December 2017, a joint meeting of the Silk Routes and Black Sea Working Groups was held in Sofia, Bulgaria.

2. The meeting focused on the fourth priority area of the Istanbul Ministerial Declaration on a Silk Routes Partnership for Migration, namely ‘Prevent and counteract irregular migration, facilitate return and readmission of irregular migrants, and combat criminal networks involved in smuggling of migrants’. Following the Senior Officials Meeting in December 2016 in Antalya, it was decided that the Budapest Process would have an annual thematic focus on return and reintegration. The first working group meeting with this thematic focus concentrated on challenges in the return and admission process. The purpose of the meeting was to further a common understanding among Budapest Process countries of concepts and approaches in the field of return and reintegration; further technical dialogue among the Budapest Process countries and the development of working level networks in this field; and identify, from the regional perspective, challenges and possible mitigation measures in the field of return and reintegration.

3. The meeting gathered 60 participants from 22 countries – Afghanistan, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Georgia, Germany, Iraq, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Moldova, the Netherlands, Norway, Pakistan, Poland, Romania, Russian Federation, Turkey, Switzerland and Ukraine – as well as the European Commission, the European External Action Service (EEAS), the European Return and Reintegration Network (ERRIN), European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX), Hanns Seidel Foundation, International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), International Organization for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), International Organization for Migration (IOM) and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

4. The meeting was opened by Bulgaria (Chair of the Black Sea Working Group and host), followed by welcoming remarks from Turkey (Chair of the Budapest Process and the Silk Routes Working Group), Afghanistan (Co-Chair of the Silk Routes Working Group), the European Commission and the Budapest Process Secretariat. In the introduction, the Budapest Process Secretariat reminded the participants of the linkages between the Dialogue and Silk Routes project activities on the ground. The theme of return and readmission is to be approached from both sides. In order to set the scene for the meeting, Turkey shared examples of their national legal framework with regard to voluntary return, assisted voluntary return mechanisms and reintegration projects. The European Commission put forward that effective return is a critical component in reducing irregular migration and pointed out that readmission is key for EU migration partnership
frameworks, mentioning that seventeen such partnerships are already in place and more are to be negotiated.

5. In Session 1 on the **return process**, Germany presented their main statistics on asylum claims (167,573 first asylum applications from Jan-Oct 2017) with high numbers from Syria and Iraq as well as data on voluntary return with 54,006 returns in 2016 under the REAG/GARP programme. Germany furthermore presented its’ return process and the stakeholders involved including the participation of NGOs and local communities. Return counselling is an option for federal states to include in the process. Several pre-departure and post-departure programmes are currently run by various implementers and are an integral part of the return process in Germany. Return information is key for communication and to give all asylum seekers the same chance.

6. The **European Return and Reintegration Network** (ERRIN) presented their project where 15 member states work together on voluntary return and reintegration assistance, also in partnership with IOM and Caritas. Communicating effectively, especially through case workers, was mentioned as a priority alongside engaging migrants in a dialogue on return from the beginning of the process. Return counselling was presented as an opportunity to see the specificity of each individual case, including through keeping social services informed while also assisting with reintegration.

7. In **plenary discussions** on the return process, Iraq shared its’ positive collaboration with Belgium on AVR as well as their openness to collaborate and have similar agreements with other countries. Norway shared its’ positive collaboration with Iraq since 2009 as well as a positive initiative working on an information campaign ‘telling the real story’. Switzerland, Austria and Norway mentioned the importance of cooperation and good communication, even in cases of forced returns. Bangladesh shared their request for assistance in dealing with refugees from Myanmar and Turkey confirmed its support to Bangladesh and reiterated the Budapest Process’ commitment to issues of countries in need. IOM mentioned that AVRR should be seen as a continuum and that its effectiveness is directly linked to the understanding migrants have of it. Afghanistan explained that “re-return” is a problem as returnees tend to re-migrate when they find no perspective in Afghanistan. Afghanistan underlined the importance of linking return to reintegration and reminded the participants of the current situation in the country. Finally, the European Commission mentioned that there seems to be a link between forced and voluntary return – when numbers of forced returns increase, also voluntary returns increase.

8. In the second panel on **identification with a view of readmission**, Bulgaria shared expertise from their National Centre for Combating Forgery and Falsified Documents as well as their sources of information such as FRONTEX, FADO and the Working Party on Frontiers and Falsified Documents in Brussels. Georgia shared how the collaboration between the Ministries of Internal Affairs, Justice and Foreign Affairs on 12 readmission agreements functions and presented the Readmission Case Management Electronic System (RCMS) as a best practice example. Pakistan shared its’ experience with implementing readmission agreements and highlighted the importance of opening up legal channels of migration to counter irregular migration. Pakistan faces challenges with identifying returnees, but is developing a Readmission Case Management Electronic System similar to Georgia to facilitate the process. Pakistan also explained existing challenges related to reintegration including financial rehabilitation, culture shock and problems with differing educational systems. Frontex presented an integrated return management system and the main tools for identification, made more efficient through
pooling of resources. IOM explained the functioning of the EURCAP project aiming at building capacity for return management with Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan through workshops, awareness raising campaigns and testing of the online case management system.

9. The use of online systems was positively assessed in the plenary discussions. The European Commission raised the importance of issuing travel documents in a timely manner. Armenia shared experience relating to the implementation of the readmission with the EU since 2014 and explained the difficulties relating to receiving documents in another language.

10. In the following session on addressing mass movements, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Iraq shared experiences regarding large-scale returns. Afghanistan highlighted the challenges related to dealing with IDPs as well as undocumented migrants. There is a registration system in place at border checkpoints supported by UNHCR, linked with a financial incentive to be registered. Authorities assists Afghans to receive documentation, also with the help of IOM. Bangladesh expressed the need to create a database profiling returnees and to monitor reintegration of returnees in order to ensure sustainability. The need to develop skills and provide alternative livelihoods to returning migrants was highlighted including through projects providing small loans for returnees to be able to start businesses. Finally, Iraq presented efforts by the government to engage with the diaspora and encourage migrants to come back as well as increase provision of livelihood options for returnees. Also efforts directed to strengthening capacities in the government for data collection were presented.

11. On the second day and in the final session on establishing reintegration strategies, a presentation by Afghanistan was held on issues related to reintegration which are often connected to property disputes as well as social and psychological barriers of third generation returnees. ERRIN presented their solutions for difficult returns through building on the common knowledge of the consortium and access to practices and expertise to develop sustainable practices. Finally, IOM presented the Reintegration and Development Project in Afghanistan (RADA) as well as the Sustainable Reintegration and Improved Migration Governance project in Bangladesh, both working at the local level to support sustainable reintegration.

12. In closing, the participants and the Chairs summarised the following points:
   - As long as push and pull-factors such as the security situation in countries of origin and the possibility to get (illicit) work in other countries remain, there is a constant risk of illegal migration and consequently multiple returns;
   - Cooperation on return and options for regular migration should be strengthened between all countries in order to foster trust on behalf of migrants and potential migrants in national and international authorities in order to prevent that they put more trust in smugglers;
   - International consultations and a multilateral dialogue on reintegration need to happen already in the pre-return phase to ensure sustainability and that the relevant stakeholders are involved;
   - It was emphasised that voluntary return is the priority and that all return should be dignified and humane. Return procedures should be comprehensively regulated in the law;
Communication on the return process is essential and should be integrated from the start in generic information distributed to asylum seekers to be followed by more individualised counselling. This would include giving potential returnees information on the option for voluntary return and what it entails. This practice has demonstrated improved chances for a dignified return and smooth reintegration;

Voluntary return can be further improved through continuity of procedures and strengthening credibility of social workers;

Monitoring the reintegration process on the ground in their country of origin is essential to ensure that returnees have the power to be agents for development;

Successful reintegration after forced return, which is a smaller proportion of return, seems more challenging to achieve. This is an area for possible increased research and collection of good practices;

Effective readmission is not possible without proper identification. Here, several technologies are available such as interviews, language recognition and video-conferencing; the access to and use of such techniques can be facilitated through digitalised case management systems;

Technologies cannot replace the human element regarding correct identification;

International cooperation is crucial for effective identification as well as for rapid issuance of travel documents and is in the interest of all parties, including the returnee. Proper identification is beneficial is also beneficial for the reintegration process;

The challenges the Silk Routes countries are facing, namely large scale returns, requires stronger support of the international community also in order to assist with sustainable reintegration;

Infrastructure, such as a database, is needed for monitoring, information and knowledge sharing on returnees and their reintegration.

Furthermore, infrastructure and programmes for returnees are needed, such as skills development, jobs and accommodation to ensure a satisfactory reintegration process;

Governments need to build capacities of their officials to manage returns. One step in this direction would be to collect data, monitor and evaluate the situation on the ground in order to analyse and understand trends as well as successful and unsuccessful practices and also follow-up more closely on special cases such as unaccompanied minors;

When aiming to establish sustainable reintegration strategies, it is important to involve all stakeholders, including local communities as well as international organisations and non-governmental organisations. Reintegration should be conceptualised in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the New York Declaration;

In order to make return successful and for migration in general to be a choice rather than a necessity – especially in the light of the mass returns in/to the region, root causes in countries of origin have to be addressed. This includes the security situation, livelihood opportunities as well as health care and infrastructure - to
ensure that the returnee not only has economic self-sufficiency but also a level of social stability and psychological wellbeing.

13. The Chair confirmed that the second Working Group on return and reintegration will take place in the first half of 2018 with the South East Europe and Silk Routes Region Working Groups and will be forward looking and focus on good practices and solution strategies.

14. The Chair, Co-Chairs, Secretariat and Host thanked all participating countries and organisations for the engaged discussions during the meeting. The Secretariat was tasked to summarise the discussions and to circulate results within the Budapest Process network.