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Return Migration Diplomacy

On Return and Readmission Cooperation between Sweden and Diplomatic Missions

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Returning individuals who lack the legal right to remain in Sweden is an ongoing challenge for Swedish authorities, primarily due to varying levels of cooperation from the migrants' countries of origin.

Diplomatic missions often play a crucial role in these processes, acting as both operational and political intermediaries. This policy brief, drawing on the AMIF-funded Delmi report *Return Migration Diplomacy: On Return and Readmission Cooperation between Sweden and Diplomatic Missions* (2024:8), highlights the essential role that embassies play in return and readmission, identifies key challenges, and outlines practical recommendations for improving cooperation between Swedish government agencies and diplomatic missions.

Return and Readmission Cooperation between Sweden and Diplomatic Missions

The return of individuals without a legal right to remain in Sweden has emerged prominently in the national policy and public discourse, especially in the context of the Tidö Agreement of 2022. Although return has been present in the discourse of previous governments, the current coalition has prioritised it, aiming for a more “responsible” and “restrictive” migration policy (Ministry of Justice, 2023). Despite these intentions, Sweden, like many other countries, faces challenges in implementing and enforcing return

policy. These challenges can be further exacerbated when individuals do not return voluntarily. Within this context, the willingness – or rather unwillingness – of certain countries of origin to readmit their nationals becomes another significant challenge.

The successful implementation of return and readmission policies requires well-functioning cooperation between the host country and the countries of origin. Diplomatic missions often play a crucial part in this cooperation by, for example, playing a role in the correct identification of individuals and issuing the necessary travel documents needed to effectuate the return journey. While some embassies are considered by Swedish government agencies as accommodating in this regard, others are perceived as uncooperative, either through delays or outright refusals to issue travel documents. These discrepancies create obstacles for the Swedish Migration Agency (SMA) and the Swedish Police Authority, who are tasked with enforcing return decisions.

Aim of the Study

In the report, we highlight the important function of diplomatic missions in return and readmission processes, emphasizing their dual function as – not only operational – but also political intermediaries within return and readmission processes. **The purpose of the study is twofold: (1) to describe the functions, responsibilities and perceptions of diplomats and embassy staff within return and readmission processes in Sweden; and (2) to explore the challenges and strategies for improving cooperation on return and readmission between Sweden and countries of origin.**

Methods and Data

The analysis is based on data collected through extensive interviews with representatives from diplomatic missions in Stockholm, as well as officials from the SMA, the Swedish Police Authority, and the Swedish Ministry of Justice. In total, 16 diplomatic missions participated in the study. Additionally, statistical data and reports were used to provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of return and readmission processes. The findings reveal critical issues, including diplomatic and operational difficulties, especially with countries that are reluctant or refuse to readmit their nationals, particularly in cases of so called “forced returns”. It also highlights the complexities of verifying identities and securing necessary travel documents,

which are further exacerbated by inconsistent cooperation from diplomatic missions.

By shifting the focus to the often neglected voices of government representatives from countries of origin, the report contributes to a more holistic understanding of return and readmission processes.

The Diplomacy of Return

In a more general perspective, the nature of diplomatic relations between Sweden and the countries of origin can significantly influence the level of cooperation on return and readmission. Strong bilateral relations and pre-existent agreements regulating migratory movements can facilitate a smoother return and reintegration process, positively affecting the willingness and capability of diplomatic missions to engage with these issues.

Recognising both the facilitating and obstructive potential of diplomatic missions is crucial for developing strategies and policies that balance the interests and goals of all parties involved, including the individual migrants at the centre of these processes. Our analysis distinguishes between the operational and political aspects of these efforts. **Operational cooperation** focuses on procedural management to streamline the return and readmission process, i.e., the practical implementation of return and readmission policies. **Political cooperation**, on the other hand, operates at a strategic level aiming to cultivate the necessary "political will" among key decision-makers to facilitate cooperation on return and readmission issues. These levels interact at different stages of the return and readmission process, following different principles and using different tools to enhance cooperation.

Studying what we call the "diplomacy of return" required special methodological and theoretical considerations. Although previous literature in this field is limited, several theoretical concepts proved useful for our analysis, including norm compliance, conditionality and leverage, and extraterritorial migration management. Particularly useful was the concept of migration diplomacy, which involves using diplomatic tools, processes, and procedures to manage migration flows (Adamson & Tsourapas, 2019). Together, these concepts helped frame the interaction between Swedish

government agencies and diplomatic missions within a broader context of international relations and state sovereignty.

Tools in Return Migration Diplomacy

Host countries –like Sweden– typically employ a number of “tools” or “instruments” to promote or facilitate cooperation with countries of origin in the area of return and readmission. These range from traditional tools, such as formal readmission agreements, to more practical and ad hoc instruments, such as identification- and delegation visits as well as the deployment of return liaison officers.

To understand how diplomatic missions perceive cooperation with Swedish government agencies, we first needed to map out the various tools used by Swedish authorities to approach and coordinate this cooperation. Table 1 below summarizes all the identified tools. Using these mechanisms as a starting point, we were able to discuss with our respondents their views on the use of these tools, the advantages and disadvantages, and whether they believe that they actually contribute to better cooperation.

Table 1. A typification of existent tools in return migration cooperation with countries of origin

Type	Tool
Readmission arrangements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bilateral • Multilateral • Non-binding (MoU, verbal)
Incentive-based	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aid to development • Visa/admission • Diplomatic interplay • Access/gains in other political domains
Coordination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embassy Coordinators • Identification Missions • Study/delegation visits
Extraterritorial migration management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Return Liaison Officer (RLO) • Ambulating/Rapid Deployment Officer (ARLO/RDO) • European Union Return Liaison Officer (EURLO)
Last resource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political level dialogue • Sanctions

The identified tools vary in terms of intensity, duration, and the actors that they involve. While some tools may initially be developed at either a political or operational level, they may eventually affect both. Readmission agreements are a case in point. Although these are negotiated at a political level, the content of the agreement could have a direct impact on operational cooperation, for example by defining the conditions and timing of consular matters or whether a diplomatic mission needs to be informed about the forced return of a national. Another example is the deployment of liaison officers, either Swedish representatives (RLO and ARLO/RDO) or EU representatives (EURL0). They are expected to work in the country of origin to identify and facilitate contacts with local authorities responsible for readmission. But they can also pave the way for political cooperation by facilitating contacts, getting to know relevant actors, and carrying out migration diplomacy on a smaller scale.

Main Findings

In analysing our empirical material, we identified several areas for improvement, as well as differences in how cooperation on return and readmission is perceived and planned. Therefore, all findings and subsequent recommendations must be considered in the context of the specific situations and the number of return cases from Sweden.

The report reveals that diplomatic missions have varying perspectives on their roles in the return and readmission process. Some adhere to the traditional diplomatic role, acting as a bridge between their country's administration and Swedish agencies. Others see their primary role as protecting their citizens' rights during the return process, focusing on providing guidance, support, monitoring, and direct assistance to ensure that these rights are upheld. Typically, diplomatic missions are involved once a return decision has been made and finalized, but some missions express a desire to be more informed about the process and explore ways to assist returnees more effectively.

As Abdelaziz Tadjousti, Deputy Head of Mission at the Moroccan Embassy in Stockholm, explained:

We want to support our citizens to make sure that they do not go back to Morocco and find out that more could have been done to stay. We want our fellow citizens to benefit from all their rights

and for their repatriations to be carried out in accordance with international and national laws and bilateral conventions.

Another recurring issue is the lack of information available to diplomatic missions about Sweden's migration rules and the roles and responsibilities of Swedish government agencies in this area. This information gap can lead to bottlenecks and delays in addressing operational issues.

Misunderstandings, difficulties in contacting the appropriate officials, and unclear communication on migration-related matters can undermine trust and reduce the willingness to cooperate on return matters. Establishing a permanent communication programme with diplomatic missions is necessary to provide ongoing updates on Swedish migration regulations and changes. This would include sharing relevant statistics and data (within data protection guidelines) to help embassies better understand and support the return process.

From a political perspective, the concepts of norm compliance, conditionality, and leverage can help explain the use and impact of various positive conditions (e.g., cooperation on trade) and negative conditions (e.g., visa restrictions) aimed at encouraging countries to cooperate on readmission. However, these measures do not produce uniform outcomes across all states, as each region operates according to its own specific context and logic regarding readmission. In some cases, cooperation cannot be prioritized due to other pressing domestic concerns. In others, countries may lack the necessary structures and technical capacity to effectively manage readmission processes. Additionally, in some instances, the country of origin may have other urgent issues that take precedence over the readmission of its nationals. These insights suggest that successful readmission requires not only political will but also adequate technical and economic resources. Regular evaluation of bilateral agreements is crucial to ensure their effectiveness and adaptability, particularly as the capacity of countries of origin to comply may change over time.

Ambassador Mehreteab Mulugueta of the Ethiopian Embassy highlighted these challenges, stating:

We don't have a sustainable organisation for return now. Rejected asylum seekers should have people waiting for them to help them return and reintegrate, and they should be followed up until they have reintegrated into their hometown. They should've been given

support, but that is not working... Cooperation should involve more discussion and collaboration. More discussion would be helpful, and the current work is not sufficient. We must work out a mechanism to return, reintegrate, and live a sustainable life. If it is successful, then more people would have an incentive to return.

This feedback points to the need for clear communication channels and contact points within Swedish government agencies to improve coordination and trust with diplomatic missions. It also indicates a necessity for training Return Coordination Units and relevant officers in diplomacy and intercultural communication.

Various EU and bilateral readmission agreements have shown mixed results. While some are effective initially, they often prove unsustainable over time, mainly due to the instability of the countries of origin, which affects their ability to readmit nationals and provide reintegration opportunities. To address these challenges, return policies should be integrated into broader strategies in bilateral relations with countries of origin, aligning with other policy areas to build long-term, flexible strategies that account for regional instability and the vulnerability of populations.

Sweden has implemented several legislative changes related to migration, which are not always directly related to return. However, some diplomatic missions view these changes as part of the broader migration framework, leading to confusion about Swedish migration policies. Our study found a lack of clarity regarding who is responsible for informing diplomatic missions about legislative changes, key contact points, or the practical aspects of managing migration procedures.

Policy Recommendations

The following recommendations underscore the importance of considering the perspectives of countries of origin when designing and implementing return policies. By fostering stronger diplomatic relations and ensuring the rights and dignity of returnees, return and readmission should be based on realistic and flexible chances of successful reintegration.

Operational Level

Systematic evaluation of tools:

- Conduct regular evaluations of migration diplomacy tools to assess their effectiveness and applicability for each country of origin.
- Make successful tools, like return liaison officers and delegation visits, permanent functions within the SMA and Swedish Police Authority.

Permanent communication programme:

- Establish ongoing communication with diplomatic missions to keep them updated on Swedish migration regulations and changes.
- Share relevant statistics and data (within data protection guidelines) to help embassies allocate resources and assist their nationals effectively.

Support programmes for returnees:

- Develop programmes that provide embassies with information on the status of their nationals, such as detention or scheduled return dates.
- Create support programmes for returnees who are open to assistance from their countries of origin.

Training and resources for Swedish government agencies:

- Provide training in diplomacy and intercultural communication to Return Coordination Units and relevant officers at the SMA and Swedish Police Authority.
- Establish clear communication channels and contact points to improve coordination and trust with diplomatic missions.

Political Level

Redefine effectiveness:

- Focus on the quality of the return process, not just the number of returns, ensuring that it is humane and sustainable.
- Measure success by considering both return rates and how individuals are treated during the process.

Evaluate bilateral agreements:

- Regularly review and evaluate bilateral agreements to ensure that they are effective and consider changes in countries of origin's capacities to comply.
- Look beyond quantitative measures and include qualitative assessments of the agreements' impact.

Integrate return into broader strategies:

- Include return as part of a broader strategy in bilateral relations with countries of origin, aligning it with other policy areas.
- Recognize that countries seeking closer ties with Sweden and the EU may be more willing to cooperate if their concerns are addressed.

Tailor incentives and support:

- Differentiate between general and ad hoc incentives based on the specific needs and capacities of countries of origin.
- Provide technical assistance and resources to countries lacking capacity for effective return and reintegration.

Develop long-term, flexible strategies:

- Create flexible strategies that account for regional instability and the vulnerability of populations.
- Ensure that return policies respect the dignity of returnees and adapt to changing conditions in countries of origin, including potential shifts in their status as "safe countries".

References

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