

Abstract

Assisted voluntary return

Assisted voluntary return is an established measure through which persons who have sought international protection can return to their country of origin. The purpose of the review was to assess the measures taken by the Government and how those measures have affected the use of the system by asylum seekers. Based on the review, in principle, the programme functions effectively and the costs involved are relatively low. It also provides a good basis for returnees to re-integrate into their home country. Although the Government has enhanced the measures supporting voluntary return, the programme has not become the primary option among asylum seekers, as was originally intended.

Due to the high number of persons seeking international protection in 2015, the Government has implemented new measures to increase the numbers of voluntary returnees. However, since 2016, the programme has attracted significantly less interest among those whose asylum application has been rejected, since many of them opt for appealing the rejection decision or they file a subsequent application. The longer processing times increase the government expenditure arising from the processing of applications and appeals and from the prolonged housing of asylum seekers at reception centres. The Government issued its proposal on the amendment of the Aliens Act to Parliament on 5 December 2018 (HE 273/2018). The proposal clarifies the conditions of admissibility of subsequent applications by asylum seekers. However, the proposed amendment does not seek to prevent the filing of subsequent asylum applications. According to the review, the proposed measure to prevent the abuse of the subsequent application process could be effective.

The direct costs of the voluntary return programme are relatively low, but the indirect benefits to state finances are considerably more extensive, provided that the programme is actively used. The programme is both cost-efficient and, from the returnee's perspective, also a flexible and humane method of return. It reduces the number of escorted returns and related costs, as well as the time asylum seekers spend at reception centres, and thus reduces the costs of reception. The voluntary return programme also prevents and reduces potential costs associated with illegal residence in Finland.

One measure implemented to promote the use of the voluntary return option was to increase the amount of cash assistance paid out to voluntary returns. However, this measure has failed to increase the use of the system. Instead of cash assistance, in-kind assistance could be more effective in encouraging asylum seekers to return home voluntarily, as it would provide returnees with a better and more solid foundation to re-integrate into their home country. The amount of in-kind assistance should be based on an established need and on the situation in the country of return and its impacts should be monitored.

In its recent decree (1278/2018), the Ministry of the Interior raised the maximum amount of in-kind assistance for the year 2019.

The ongoing development project aiming to enhance the conditions for voluntary return also aims to create new cross-administrative collaboration practices. The project has also received funding from the EU. However, based on the review, it is not sustainable to base any permanent measures on project work alone. Instead, good practices should be dispersed and established as part of regular activities. The effectiveness of the programme could be ensured by assessing the measures implemented and by monitoring the benefits and impacts of the two assistance types, also in situations where the number of people seeking international protection varies.