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Using or Inducing Return Aspirations?

On the role of return counsellors in the implementation of 'assisted voluntary return' policies in Austria and the Netherlands

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Abstract

In this paper, we investigate how state and non-state providers of return counselling try to influence aspirations for return among (rejected) asylum seekers. Existing literature has highlighted both the importance and malleability of migration aspirations in a wide range of migratory trajectories. Yet, it paid little attention to the situation of people who at some stage of their asylum procedure are confronted with the prospect of eventually having to return to their country of citizenship. This confrontation is institutionalised in the form of state or NGO-led ‘return counselling’, which helps the returning state to uphold the fine line between forced and allegedly ‘voluntary’ returns. Building on Carling’s aspirations/ability model and using qualitative data from Austria and the Netherlands, we identify three ways in which return counsellors try to obtain the departure of (rejected) asylum seekers. Firstly, by *identifying existing aspirations* among potential returnees who for personal reasons decided to return but lack the ability to do so. Secondly, by merely *obtaining informed consent* to return ‘voluntarily’ in the absence of aspirations to return. And thirdly, by *actively inducing the wish to return* with the aim of aligning migrants’ own aspirations with the requirements of restrictive migration law. We argue that this distinction is important to better understand the critical role and everyday workings of ‘migration aspirations management’ (Carling and Collins 2018) within contemporary migration governance in Europe.

Keywords: assisted voluntary return, return counselling, migration aspirations, migration governance, Austria, the Netherlands.

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1 Introduction

So-called ‘assisted voluntary return’ (AVR) programmes have for several decades played a crucial role within member states’ and EU efforts to more effectively ‘manage’ migration, by encouraging the return of unwanted foreigners (EMN 2019). While such schemes are usually open to any foreigner who (on paper) accepts return to his or her country of citizenship but lacks the means to do so, they often explicitly target those not permitted to remain in their country of residence. Particularly in the aftermath of the ‘long summer of migration’, such policies tend to focus on third-country nationals who arrived in Europe as asylum seekers but whose claims for international protection have been rejected. The actual voluntariness of such returns has thus been rightly and extensively questioned (Webber 2011; Lietaert 2016; Dünnwald 2008; Newland and Salant 2018; Leerkes, van Os and Boersema 2017; Vandevooort 2017), and we certainly agree that most of the instances that official statistics count as ‘voluntary departure’ are not voluntary in any substantial sense of the word, but rather constitute ‘involuntary mobility’ (Carling 2014). From a critical perspective, it is argued that one of the functions of AVR policies consists precisely in creating an illusion of voluntariness by producing an atmosphere of free choice to achieve the official policy goal of increasing the rate of effective return (Khosravi 2009; Cleton and Chauvin 2020). The supposed dichotomy between voluntary return on one hand, and deportation on the other, thereby also resembles the more fundamental categorisation of all cross-border mobility as either voluntary or forced migration, which significantly determines the status and corresponding rights afforded to those who (had to) move. Both categorisations are legal-political constructions that do not always fit the social realities they seek to describe but are nonetheless crucial for contemporary migration governance (Crawley and Skleparis 2018).

At the same time, the concrete workings of the underlying policies and the role(s) that different actors play in their implementation has received much less scholarly attention. In a recent review of the existing literature on this topic, Kuschminder (2017, 6) specifically highlighted the lack of research on ‘the role of return counselling’ as one of the ‘variables that can influence uptake in AVR’. Dedicated counselling regarding the possibility of returning to one’s country of citizenship or a third country constitutes a key element in most national AVR frameworks – including those of Austria and the Netherlands – and is provided by either a state agency, non-state actors, or a mix of both (EMN 2019). While it is widely assumed among government actors that return counselling is of vital importance in acquiring the ‘voluntary return’ of rejected asylum seekers, the precise techniques through which return counsellors aim to influence migrants’ decision making largely remain unexplored.

What seems clear, is that returning to one’s country of citizenship – just like any other (forced) migration – usually involves at least some degree of individual agency and decision-making but is also influenced by structural conditions that render returning possible and, in some cases, more attractive than other possibilities, like staying or moving on to another country. Scholars working in the field of migration studies frequently draw on the aspirations/ability model (Carling 2002) in order to explain why in any given context some people move while others in similar situations do not. We take this model as an analytical starting point to conceptualise the relationship between return counselling and return migration decision-making, based on empirical insights into the workings of AVR programmes in Austria and the Netherlands. The name of these programmes already suggests a direct relation to both migrants’ ability to return, which is ought to be fostered through assistance, and their own aspirations, which underpin the alleged voluntary character of this process. This, according to policy makers, marks the contrast to deportation (De Genova and Peutz 2010), which we treat as complementary to AVR in the sense that both are part and parcel of the European return regime and in several ways interact with each other.

In this paper, we use insights from the aforementioned literature to further conceptualise what Carling and Collins (2018) call ‘aspirations management’ and to understand its role in contemporary migration governance. Aspirations management aims at aligning migrants’ hopes and desires for migration with existing legal-political conditions and thereby relies on measures like state-led information campaigns (Meyer 2018; Schans and Optekamp 2016). Here, we will not only highlight the particular importance of aspirations management in the context of AVR, but also point to the role that individual return counsellors ought to play in mediating between their clients’ personal circumstances, hopes and expectations and the structural constraints of national and European immigration law. We do this based on qualitative data – particularly return counsellors’ own accounts and our observations of their work in Austria and the Netherlands. Both countries have a long history of AVR policies and dedicate significant resources to this area, while the institutional arrangements for the provision of return counselling are different.

Analytically, we propose a differentiation between three principle modes of return counselling, each of which implies a different kind of engagement with clients and a distinctive way of managing their aspirations: return counsellors can either a) identify pre-existing return aspirations; b) ignore (the lack of) aspirations and merely obtain informed consent; or c) actively aim at inducing return aspirations. Our analysis shows that depending on their clients’ legal status and individual circumstances but also their own institutional and ideological distance from the immigration authority, counsellors tend to rely on different combinations of these modes.

Our broader theoretical aim is to explore how the decisive role of intermediary actors – like return counsellors – might be integrated into the aspirations/ability model, in order to further increase its explanatory potential (cf. Carling 2014). While the model already pays attention to the interplay between the micro-level of individual decision-making and the macro-level of socio-economic and legal-political contexts, it does not provide extensive room for third-party actors who shape individual migrant decision making by mediating between the two levels. In order to shed light on these dynamics, we will first outline our theoretical and conceptual framework (section 2), then briefly explain the methodological approach (3) and provide the necessary context for our analysis (4), before we present and discuss the data (5) and draw conclusions (6).

2 Theoretical framework

Our analysis is embedded in two strands of literature: first, theoretical studies on the aspirations/ability model (Carling 2002, 2014; Carling and Schewel 2018) and second, literature on migrants’ return decision making in the context of AVR (Leerkes *et al.* 2017; Koser and Kuschminder 2015; Lietaert 2019). The first branch of literature started with Carling’s (2002) proposal of a theoretical model explaining how and when people migrate and when they do not. This aspirations/ability model distinguishes between a wish to migrate (aspiration) and the subsequent realisation (ability) of this wish, taking into account restrictive migration policies and other barriers to migration (*ibid.*). Kuschminder (2017) adds a further distinction between aspirations and intentions, whereby aspirations represent wishes, desires and preferences to migrate, while intentions and plans reflect the realism of migratory projects (cf. Carling 2014; Carling and Schewel 2018).

Carling analyses the formation of migration aspirations at two levels: the macro-level of migration environments or communities and the micro-level, taking into account individual characteristics and family migration histories. He makes a similar distinction in evaluating the ability to migrate, by pointing at the macro-level migration interface that facilitates or restricts the possibilities to migrate, and the individual ability of migrants to overcome these barriers.

In addition to these micro- and macro-level influences on people's mobility, Carling and Collins (2018) also highlight the importance of social networks in which potential migrants are enmeshed. Feminist scholars in particular have shown how migrants' subjectivities cannot be understood as solely calculating, autonomous selves, but are always situated within broader social norms and gendered expectations about who stays and who moves (Silvey 2004, cited in Carling and Collins 2018).

In this paper, we highlight the role of intermediary actors in the management of return aspirations, by specifically focussing on the work of AVR counsellors. We thereby understand NGO and/or state counsellors to be part of a potential returnee's social context, who in a more-or-less coercive fashion (cf. Kalir and Wissink 2016) aim at obtaining their voluntary return. The paper further crystallises how these return counsellors exactly aim to influence, steer and manage the return aspirations and intentions of potential returnees. It outlines their potential impact on various stages of return migration decision-making, including the formation of return aspirations, their transformation into return intentions and ultimately, the 'execution' of return migration (cf. Carling 2002).

Carling's aspirations/ability model distinguishes between three 'types' of migratory subjects: those who migrate (having both aspirations and ability), those who voluntarily do not migrate (no aspirations), and those who involuntarily do not migrate (aspirations but no ability). In a later article, Carling (2014) adds that people who are forcibly removed from a nation states' territory effectively migrate without having any migration aspirations and can hence be seen as 'involuntary mobile'. More than a decade ago and in the now familiar context of neoliberal governments struggling to respond to increasing numbers of asylum seekers, Gibney (2008) identified a 'deportation turn', including both expansion of deportation capacities and states' undermining of legal safeguards. Since then, there have been ample studies highlighting the policies and practices of this 'deportation regime' (De Genova and Peutz 2010) in a variety of geographical and political contexts (Kanstroom 2007; Sutton and Vigneswaran 2011; Collyer 2012; Khosravi 2018; Eule *et al.* 2019; Cleton and Chauvin 2020). Among those targeted by the deportation regime are rejected asylum seekers, who are also a primary target group of AVR programmes. As rejected asylum seekers face an official obligation to leave the member state after a rejection on their claim for protection, the actual voluntariness of these schemes has rightly been questioned (Noll 1999). This leads to new conceptualisations of AVR as 'soft deportations' (Leerkes *et al.* 2017), 'obliged voluntariness' (Dünnwald 2008) or a 'constrained choice' (Lietaert 2016). In practice, the 'choice' that rejected asylum seekers have is not one between staying and returning, but merely regards 'how' they return (*ibid.*). As Leerkes *et al.* (2017, 8) note, AVR programmes rest only to a certain degree on 'voluntariness, facilitation and choice, while deterrence and force operate in the background' (cf. Lietaert, Broekaert and Derluyn 2017). The significant effort and financial resources that many governments – including that of Austria and the Netherlands – put into the provision of return counselling, nonetheless reflects the assumption that this kind of mobility might involve mobility aspirations, and that these can actually be managed by, or on behalf of, the state.

There is a vast body of literature on the determinants of return migration more generally, starting with Massey *et al.*'s (1990) seminal work on Mexicans returning from the United States. They find that property ownership in the country of citizenship, age, marital status, duration of residence and wage levels are important factors shaping return migration decision making. Contemporary studies on return migration intentions are often based on the so-called 'integration-transnationalism nexus' and found mixed results regarding the influence of socio-economic, cultural and structural integration on return intentions (De Haas and Fokkema 2011; De Haas, Fokkema and Fassi Fihri 2015; Carling and Pettersen 2014). Others have highlighted the importance of context in return migration decision-making and found that factors like inclusive policy frameworks and overall life satisfaction in the country of residence

have a negative impact on intentions to return (Ruist 2016). Family support, standard of life assessment and difficulties integrating in the country of residence are also important factors for return migration intentions (Güngör and Tansel 2014). Qualitative research has also shown that adverse economic conditions in the country of residence (Black *et al.* 2004), feeling obliged to follow the outcome of one's asylum application (*ibid.*) and struggling to speak the language and establishing community relations (Carr 2014) can lead to return migration. Of paramount importance for determining return intentions, especially in the context of forced migration, is the perception of security in the country of citizenship: unsurprisingly, migrants are generally reluctant to return to a country they consider unsafe (Black *et al.* 2004).

As Leerkes *et al.* (2017) and Lietaert (2019) note, it is unclear if these findings, which mainly focus on labour migrants, family migrants and recognised refugees, can be 'generalised' to rejected asylum seekers, whose return decisions occur under fundamentally different circumstances. Leerkes *et al.*'s (2017) study suggests that increasing AVR rates in the Netherlands can be explained by the use of native counsellors, the heightened risks of deportation and increased reintegration budgets. According to Lietaert (2019, 9), economic reintegration support was also central to the return decisions of Armenian and Georgian returnees from Belgium, who claimed that it provided them with 'a push in the right direction' (*sic*). While Koser and Kuskminder's (2015) assessment of IOM's Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) program is ambiguous about the role of policy interventions on return decision-making, they do find that, for one-fifth of their respondents, 'the possibility to benefit from voluntary return programmes' but also 'needing to comply with the law' has influenced their decision to return.

Such studies emphasise the importance of (restrictive) migration policies and laws in the migration decision-making processes of rejected asylum seekers. These policies can thus be seen as part of what Carling and Collins (2018) call 'aspirations management': governments deploying a variety of tools for curbing, influencing and steering unwanted migration. This management, according to them, is becoming an increasingly important part of international migration governance and occurs in the form of 'information campaigns' to deter would-be irregular immigrants in countries of origin and transit (Schans and Optekamp 2016). More recently, the same logic has also driven the UK government to deploy what became known as 'Go Home Vans' to neighbourhoods considered particularly affected by unwanted migration (*The Guardian*, 26 April 2018). Both efforts aim at discouraging 'irregular' migration and residence by steering migration aspirations in the state-desired direction. In a similar fashion, albeit with a different target population, Meyer's (2018) study describes how young adults in rural eastern Germany are not only encouraged to develop human capital through mobility, but also to subsequently return and exploit their new capital 'at home'. In this paper, we conceptualise return counselling as yet another form of migration aspirations management, and thereby gain a better understanding of third parties seeking to influence the decision-making process of 'unwanted migrants' on behalf of the state. We also show how the concrete institutional setup affects the way in which this is done.

3 Methods

To explore the role of AVR counsellors in return aspirations management, we collected data among state and NGO return counsellors in two European countries: Austria and the Netherlands. The data on the Austrian case has been collected as part of the ongoing research project *REvolTURN – Managing Migrant Return through 'Voluntariness'*. Fieldwork was carried out in Vienna between April and August 2019 and mainly comprised a total of 28 semi-structured interviews with the various actors involved in the making and implementation of AVR policies in Austria, including senior officials in the responsible ministry and its operative

branch (the Federal Agency for Immigration and Asylum), representatives of IOM Austria and the two major providers of state-funded return counselling, as well as legal advisors, asylum support workers, representatives of local advocacy groups, and potential returnees themselves. The interviewees' original accounts were complemented through non-participant observation of several hours of return counselling sessions at both organisations.

The data on the Dutch case has been collected between January to June 2017, as part of a project that looked at the social construction of 'voluntariness' in assisted voluntary return trajectories in the Netherlands (see Cleton and Chauvin 2020). Fieldwork was carried out with a range of actors along the 'deportation continuum' (Kalir and Wissink 2016), which included AVR counsellors working at various NGOs, as well as state counsellors working at the Repatriation and Departure Service (DT&V). Fieldwork among NGOs consisted of 18 in-depth interviews with 20 return counsellors, working in 11 different municipalities that are geographically dispersed throughout the Netherlands. At the DT&V, data was collected through informally interviewing more than 30 government workers, observing them during counselling sessions with potential returnees and 'shadowing' them during their daily activities. Material was gathered during eleven working days at ten different DT&V locations.

In both projects, all formal interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and anonymised to maintain confidentiality. Observation material was processed into field reports. All material received the respondents' consent and approval for usage. In both cases, the material has been supplemented by a critical review of relevant legislation, policy documents, parliamentary inquiries, press statements and other official proclamations by political actors with regard to return. In order to analyse the data, the authors drew on an iterative, thematic comparison between the materials. First, the authors independently analysed their material for strategies to achieve 'voluntary' return decisions in their respective country cases. This was followed by a discussion around apparent similarities across the two countries. Indeed, following Eule et al. (2019, 10) our research aims at highlighting 'similarities and commonalities in the dynamics, struggles and contestations over control and facilitation of mobility that take place across these different national contexts'. While being aware of the institutional, historical, geographical and cultural differences between the two cases, we specifically look at practices that remain 'stable' despite these differences. Based on these discussions, we established a preliminary framework and coding scheme to analyse how return aspiration management within AVR counselling sessions takes place. Then, we further selected and compared strategies and techniques across the two countries, until we reached saturation and were able to describe the workings of our modes.

The choices we have taken regarding our methodological and analytical approach also imply limitations. Most importantly, our focus on how return counsellors manage the return aspirations of their clients means that our analysis is primarily based on their narratives, practices and strategies. The available data did not allow for systematic 'triangulation' of these findings with the experiences of potential returnees themselves. Instead, it sheds light on how intermediary actors such as return counsellors understand and negotiate their influence on return decision-making. We therefore refrain from making claims on the *actual impact* of return counselling on return decisions but believe that our findings are useful for further research on how individual migrants perceive return counselling. We also acknowledge that our research design does not allow us to fully account for differences between individual counsellors, who – like all street-level bureaucrats – not only follow their organisations' official rules and strategies but also their own moral standards and preferences (Lipsky 1980; cf. Eule et al. 2019).

4 Context

The EU Return Directive requires all member states to systematically issue return decisions to rejected asylum seekers, and to implement the official preference for voluntary return over forced removal by offering dedicated return counselling. Return decisions are in most cases accompanied by a period of seven to 30 days during which potential returnees should return ‘voluntarily’ to their country of citizenship before enforcement action is taken (EMN 2019). Those who do not comply with this obligation will in most cases face an entry ban that prevents re-entry to the EU for up to ten years. If potential returnees mention to comply, they avoid being issued this entry ban and are directed to one of the various AVR programmes that are (co-)funded by the European Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). Once counselling sessions have resulted in a return plan, complementary in-kind and/or in-cash reintegration assistance and practical arrangements for return are negotiated. In most cases, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) provides support as part of their AVRR programme. IOM collaborates with governments and NGOs in more than 170 countries worldwide and provides return counselling and information, travel documentation and reintegration assistance after return (IOM 2016). The official aim of this programme is to enable the migrant to make an ‘informed decision and take ownership of the voluntary return process’ (ibid.) as well as to make return ‘sustainable’ (Kuschminder 2017). What ‘sustainability’ in this context entails is not clear-cut. Among policymakers, it is often equated with a returnee not re-migrating (ibid.), while academics and NGOs highlight the importance of economic, social and cultural reintegration in the country of citizenship (Koser and Kuschminder 2015). In many member states, including Austria and the Netherlands, NGOs provide for return counselling and operational support.

4.1 Austria

The Austrian experience with so-called ‘(assisted) voluntary return’ programmes goes back to the 1990, when they played an important role in the aftermath of the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo (Bader 2002). Caritas set up the first major AVR-Programme (*Rückkehrhilfe*) in December 1998 in cooperation with the European Commission, the Ministry of the Interior (BM.I) and IOM Austria. The latter has since then continued to play a central role in the operationalisation of voluntary returns from Austria (e.g. booking flights, assistance at the airport), as well as a number of country-specific reintegration programmes. Since 2003, there is a second provider of return counselling, called *Verein Menschenrechte Österreich* (VMÖ), which has frequently been criticised for its close relationship with the BM.I. In addition to these major players, a number of smaller NGOs also provide return counselling, funded by the BM.I, to more specific target groups (like victims of human trafficking) or as part of their broader advice work called *Perspektivenabklärung* (clarification of prospects).

A number of recent developments – largely triggered by the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015 – further increased the centrality of return counselling in Austria and legislative changes in 2017 integrated it into the asylum procedure itself. This broader trend is most apparent in the introduction of obligatory counselling for all asylum seekers being issued a negative first-instance decision on their claim. The explanatory note accompanying the initial proposal of the new law also explicitly stated that:

return advice organisations can also repeatedly offer the foreigner a return counselling interview. This takes account of the fact that foreigners who have already clearly stated that they are unwilling to leave [...] have an increased need for return counselling and

pursues the purpose of increasing the willingness to leave the country also among these foreigners by means of intensified return counselling.

In addition to this, two dedicated ‘Return Counselling Centres’ have been set up in remote locations for potential returnees whose deportation is hampered because of lacking documentation, non-cooperation on the part of their government or other practical barriers. Finally, it is important to note that a new law (passed in May 2019) foresees the establishment of a new federal agency that will be responsible for providing all state-funded support, legal advice and return counselling (starting from 2021). This will effectively exclude civil society from providing AVR counselling in Austria. change is promoted as a way to increase the overall efficiency of the voluntary return regime, and in turn excludes the current NGOs from providing AVR counselling in Austria.

4.2 The Netherlands

In the Netherlands, assisted voluntary return has been used as a migration management tool since the late 1990s and gained more prominence since the start of the government funded *Herintegratie Regeling Terugkeer* program in 2001 and the 2003 IOM Netherlands’ Randstad Return Programme. Voluntary return counselling is provided by the DT&V, IOM, and various (state sponsored or more independent) NGOs. Convergence between the ways these actors try to obtain the ‘voluntary return’ of rejected asylum seekers have led Kalir and Wissink (2016, 10) to characterise the ‘return field’ in the Netherlands as a ‘deportation continuum’, where most parties have a similar ‘dominant logic, common categories, shared political subjectivities and pre-agreed lines of political action’. DT&V counsellors work on the basis of case management and apply motivational interviewing in their counselling sessions, through which they hope to change the potential returnee’s mind about returning ‘voluntarily’ (Cleton and Chauvin 2020). The DT&V directs those who agree on returning voluntarily to IOM or state-sponsored NGOs to arrange for the practicalities of return and reintegration, while state-led return counselling continues in so-called limited-movement facilities. If approved by a judge, potential returnees who refuse to cooperate are detained and undergo further return counselling in detention.

NGO-led counselling takes place at a variety of organisations, which range from ‘state subcontractors’ to organisations questioning the goal of returning rejected asylum seekers but nevertheless work within this dominant narrative (cf. Kalir and Wissink 2016). Volunteers or salaried workers talk to rejected asylum seekers about their prospects for the future as part of a broader process of *Toekomstoriëntatie* (clarification of future prospects). This entails starting a new juridical procedure for legal stay, onwards migration or return to their countries of citizenship. If a potential returnee mentions to consider returning voluntarily, state sponsored NGOs provide reintegration support via their own programmes or sometimes with the help of IOM. In some instances, undocumented residents who take part in the municipal *bed, bad, brood* schemes are obliged to take part in return counselling sessions with one of the state funded NGOs. In case of non-state sponsored NGOs in the Netherlands, return counselling happens more spontaneously, whereby only people who decide to return are directed to a state-funded NGO or IOM for operational support.

Governments in both countries present return counselling as the centrepiece of AVR policy, and it is available at any point during the asylum procedure and in detention. If a potential returnee decides or agrees to return, the counsellor completes an application for state support, which formalises the intention to return and makes it known to government officials who need to approve any request for cash or in-kind assistance.

5 Three modes of return counsellor's migration aspirations management

5.1 Mode 1: Identifying pre-existing return aspirations

In both national contexts, some return counsellors first of all portrayed their role as rather passive and their work as being primarily about *reacting* to a client's wish to return. In Austria, this was true for NGO counsellors working for either of the two main providers, as the following statement exemplifies:

We are not here to change someone's mind, but the person has to know what s/he wants. If s/he wants [to return] and really has made this decision for herself or for the family, then they go. So, we cannot change anyone's mind nor force anyone, right? We are here to advise. (return counsellor, VMÖ)

DT&V and NGO counsellors in the Netherlands expressed similar views. One DT&V employee working at a family reception centre gave the example of a woman from Iraq whose asylum application had been rejected but who could not be forcefully deported due to a lack of travel documents. Only when she received the news that her husband, who was still in Iraq, had suddenly fallen severely ill, did she tell her DT&V return counsellor that she wanted to return to Iraq immediately and asked him to arrange for her return.

Many – though not all – of our respondents also perceived it as part of their duty to sometimes question their clients' apparent wish to return, or even advice against it. This could happen if they either doubted a client's ability to take a rational decision, found that 'the desire to return is actually based on illusions', as one interviewee in Austria put it, or regarded the country of return as particularly unsafe. The latter was often the case with returns to Afghanistan, as a counsellor working for a state-funded NGO in Rotterdam stated:

We are not telling someone from Afghanistan: 'just go back', but they need to convince me twice that they want to return. I had a young guy the other day, and he told me he wants to return, but I say, 'yes, but what's your motivation?' And he says 'well, if I die here or there, that does not matter'. And I told him 'I do not think that that is a motivation if you tell me that you will die within three days of your return, I really do not want that to happen.'

In a similar fashion, the head of return counselling of Caritas in Vienna particularly emphasised the difficult circumstances and potentially serious consequences that returnees might not be fully aware of as reasons for questioning the underlying motivations. Yet another reason for return counsellors to sometimes question a client's return decision was the suspicion – often in regard to specific country of origin groups – that the underlying aspirations were 'fake' or 'strategic'. For example, a DT&V employee working in an asylum reception centre mentioned a case where she wondered whether her client was really going to return or rather disappear into illegality, after an IOM employee had warned her 'those Serbians do not seriously want to return and are only here for the money'. The director of VMÖ expressed similar worries:

It is clear that if the decision to return voluntarily is basically made with a deportation in the neck, then the return counsellor must be more careful not to be deceived by the client [and make sure] that the wish to return is a serious one and not just a fake, tactical one.

Most government representatives and other state actors had a different view on this issue, as the following statement of a senior official at the Austrian Ministry of the Interior suggests:

Personally, I do not think that [return counsellors] can advise against return, because the asylum seeker him/herself knows best what is actually going on in the home country. [...] If the person makes that decision, then it is the return counsellor's job to accept that and to organize all that is necessary, like flights etc. It is not the role of the counsellor to say: 'don't do it'.

His portrayal of returnees as the 'true experts' of their country of citizenship supports the argument that return counsellors should always follow a migrant's desire to return, which of course stands in stark contrast to the asylum procedure itself, where refugees' own assessments of the situation they left behind are assiduously questioned by the receiving state. One way of avoiding too much engagement with clients' decision-making is to focus on providing what is needed to make the return happen, i.e. to realise the identified return aspirations. For example, a DT&V employee at a reporting centre for rejected asylum seekers said that he feels like a 'travel agency' that solely organises the return for people lacking the capability to arrange their return themselves. Other interviewees in both countries also noted, however, that their work involves tasks that go well beyond those of a travel agency, including practical support in obtaining travel documents, arranging necessary medical appointments, or organising specific trainings to enhance their clients' reintegration after return. A focus on 'making return happen' sometimes also works as an excuse for not questioning a client's underlying intentions and motivations, which was particularly evident in the accounts of various VMÖ employees, including the organisations' director:

We obviously speak with the clients, but we are not investigators of [their] conscience, who first have to create a profile of the returnee: 'What exactly are the reasons for your return...?' For us it is basically enough if someone says: 'I want to go back, and I need your assistance to be able to do so'.

In both countries, interviewees also pointed out that a rapid realisation of identified return aspirations can enhance the realisation of return since it significantly reduces the chance of potential returnees changing their mind. Interestingly, this easily becomes an argument against two essential aspects of return counselling: One the one hand, as an NGO counsellor in Rotterdam noted, it could mean that there is no time for extra efforts to ensure the sustainability of return: 'If the decision [to return] has been taken, they sometimes want to go back very fast, and then we do not have time anymore for training. In that case, a training would only have the opposite effect, because then they [might] not return anymore'.

On the other hand, it can undermine return counsellors' efforts to ensure that the underlying decision is well informed and rational, as the head of *Caritas*' return department highlighted:

Some [clients] are really very, very unsure and do not know what to do, but might say: 'yes, ok, I'll go back'. And then [you could] say: 'OK' and already submit an AVR application [...]. That means [...] you could take such people by surprise, and just take advantage of the moment and just say: 'Ok, let's do it immediately', even if the person was completely unsure.

This logic of quick returns is also reflected in DT&V's official methodology for return counselling (cf. Cleton and Chauvin 2020), according to which return counsellors need to act

as fast as possible once a decision is taken, to prevent their clients from ‘falling back’ into not-wanting to return. A concrete example often used in their trainings is when a return flight is booked too long in advance, giving potential returnees time to re-think their decision and potentially allowing others in their environment to make them change their mind towards ‘going underground’. In Austria, where no official guidelines for return counselling exist, the same concern was not only expressed by representatives of the ministry, but also by the director of VMÖ:

We have very much geared our return procedure towards speed, which means we make every effort to ensure that the return actually happens as soon as possible. And that also has to do with the fact that the clients - if it takes too long to prepare their return - may then come up with other options and perhaps go to Germany illegally, which really does not help anyone. A quick return also has the consequence of saving accommodation costs and other costs.

His account highlights the extent to which this organisation has adopted government logics and discourses, as its critics have long argued (e.g. Pferschinger 2011). Nonetheless, one of the return counsellors working for VMÖ also highlighted that for her, ‘good’ return counselling ultimately requires the client him/herself really wanting to return:

In principle, good counselling is when someone who wants to leave voluntarily, leaves, right? Where he is sure that no problems are to be expected, and he is really determined. It is worse when you have to confront someone with a return because that is how the laws are and we cannot do anything about it, but the person is not willing to return. I sometimes think the people do not want to see the truth.

Her statement partly reflects our analytical distinction between the first and the second mode of return counselling: when a potential returnee has no return aspirations, the return counsellor sometimes merely aims at obtaining the client’s consent to something that is presented as unavoidable.

5.2 Mode 2: Obtaining informed consent in the absence of return aspirations

We observed such situations often in relation to clients whose asylum claims had already been rejected or were deemed very likely to be rejected based on ‘safe country of origin’ rules. In both countries, dealing with such cases often involved overt disregard for potential returnees’ apparent lack of return aspirations and their arguments against having to leave, including existing social or economic ties in their country of residence or perceived dangers upon return. Rather than the realisation of a client’s aspirations, return counsellors then merely work towards obtaining their consent, with the ultimate aim of ensuring compliance with a given legal decision and its concrete implications. With respect to the aspirations/ability model, this means that the clients’ consent replaces aspirations as the basis of their intentions to return, which the counsellor eventually officialises by submitting an AVR-application to the responsible authority.

Obtaining consent often includes mentioning the possibility of deportation. The following account of a representative of a small NGO providing return counselling for victims of human trafficking in Austria points at the difficulty of doing this without using deportation as an explicit threat:

If the [client] says she does not want to leave, I will not... convince her of a voluntary return. But if [the procedure] is already at the point where it's clear, and we cannot do anything [...] then I can only say: 'there is a possibility that you will be deported, and that is quite real, and there is the possibility to leave voluntarily', but not in the sense of one being better than the other, but: 'these are your options'.

This reflects a central feature of what we conceptualise as the second mode of return counselling: an explicit focus on providing supposedly neutral and independent information about a client's legal situation and the return procedure itself. Arguably, part of the role that return counselling plays in this context consists precisely in allowing a client's consent to be (portrayed as being) 'well-informed'. As the following quote from an interview with a representative of IOM Austria suggests, this logic helped to justify recent legislative changes that made return counselling a legal obligation following the initial rejection of an asylum claim:

When this was introduced, it was a very difficult construct for us, because something where something is obligatory... is difficult to combine with our notion of 'voluntariness'. But then we looked at it very closely and then said, 'OK: if someone is obliged to get some information then at the end of the day, he simply has more information'.

Some return counsellors described the concept of 'voluntariness' as not only 'too politically loaded', as one interviewee in Austria put it, but also felt it did not do justice to the actual conditions under which many of their clients had to take a return decision. In the Netherlands, these discussions led the DT&V and certain NGOs to talk about *zelfstandige terugkeer* (independent return) rather than voluntary return. For the same reason, other interviewees tended to focus on the safety of return rather than its supposed voluntary nature. Counsellors often refer to official country of origin information and the fact that the asylum claim had been rejected following a correct procedure, in order to reassure the client that return was objectively safe and would not cause any serious harm.

A further element of return counsellors' efforts to obtain their clients' consent to return consists in mitigating any 'unrealistic' hopes or expectations for legal residence. Interviewees in both contexts emphasised that they thereby sometimes had to counter suggestions or advice that their clients had received from other actors, including overly 'benevolent' NGOs and lawyers wanting to 'make money'. For example, a DT&V employee working at Schiphol detention centre remembered a rejected asylum seeker from Lebanon who had already agreed to return, but then came in contact with a return counsellor working for an NGO. According to the DT&V counsellor, the NGO worker changed the potential returnee's aspirations in the 'wrong direction', that is, not towards return but legal stay in the Netherlands.

Precisely because potential returnees are often exposed to a multiplicity of information and contradictory advice from different sources, return counsellors are expected to be clear about often very complex legal cases. This complexity makes it even more difficult to draw a line between counselling and persuasion, as a senior official of the Austrian Interior Ministry tried to do:

If a return counsellor says: '[...] the probability of success is very low; this is not going to work. [...] I would advise you to return because in the end that's what is going to happen either way.' That is probably what I would find OK and appropriate, that the perspectives are made clear. That would not be persuasion for me. [...] As soon as an

element of pressure would occur [during the counselling], that would of course not be okay because it would simply take the element of voluntariness ad absurdum.

His differentiation reflects part of our distinction between the second and third mode of return counselling, whereby what he calls ‘pressure’ can be tactically deployed in a variety of forms to obtain voluntary return decisions.

5.3 Mode 3: Inducing return aspirations through return counselling

Our third mode of return counselling is characterised by the practice of actively trying to induce a desire to return. In the Netherlands, the aforementioned DT&V methodological guidelines are a good example of this. They start from the premise that ‘behaviour can always be influenced’ (DT&V, 27 September 2018) and that the prime goal of DT&V counsellors is to do exactly this. In the situation when potential returnees’ show little motivation to cooperate on return, DT&V counsellors apply a variety of ‘motivational interviewing techniques’ to stimulate return migration aspirations. According to a senior DT&V counsellor, every ‘phase’ in the return process requires the application of different techniques during the counselling sessions, which altogether ensure that ‘a foreigner makes an informed decision about his or her return to their country of origin’. Despite the absence of such a formal methodology in Austria, the government believes that return counselling is of vital importance in acquiring the ‘voluntary return’ of rejected asylum seekers. For example, the initial legislative proposal for the 2017 immigration reform stressed that

return advice organisations can also repeatedly offer the foreigner a return counselling interview. This takes account of the fact that foreigners who have already clearly stated that they are unwilling to leave [...] have an increased need for return counselling and [the proposal] pursues the purpose of increasing the willingness to leave the country also among these foreigners by means of intensified return counselling.

This logic pertains that especially for those who have stated that they are unwilling to leave Austria, intensified return counselling in one of the ‘Return Counselling Centres’ will eventually lead to more willingness to return. During our fieldwork, we identified a variety of ways in which return counsellors tried to induce return migration aspirations. One important prerequisite for these counselling sessions to be ‘effective’ is to gain the trust of potential returnees by establishing a ‘personal relationship’ with them (cf. Khosravi 2009, Cleton and Chauvin 2020). A Caritas counsellor explained that his work benefits from the trust that is established long before a potential returnee starts considering return, as other branches of the organisation help them throughout the asylum procedure. In the Netherlands, a DT&V counsellor working at an asylum reception centre mentions that her first two sessions with clients are always geared at establishing a so-called ‘working alliance’. This working alliance, which is central to the official methodological guidelines, she explains,

is based on a connection, or a bond that I aim to make with the foreigner and is geared towards getting mutual trust, understanding and respect. The benefits of getting this relation very early on in the return process is that my clients will understand that I am here to help them. If they believe that this is the case already in the beginning of our conversations, where return is often not discussed at large, they will also believe that I want what is best for them when the prospect of return becomes more real.

Once mutual trust is established, return counsellors deploy a variety of techniques to induce return aspirations in their clients. One of them is governing through ‘responsibilisation’ (Khosravi 2018): constructing and portraying potential returnees as responsible for their own future and the necessary steps to get there. Despite the limited ‘choice’ that pertains in this situation (Lietaert 2016), return counsellors foreground the decision-making power potential returnees still have. Following this logic, interviewees in both countries portray the work of return counsellors as a matter of coaching, rather than enforcing policy:

Ideally, a return counsellor would be more like a coach [...] who helps you to make a decision within your own reality, which the coach himself does not influence, but he tells you: ‘Did you look at this? Did you look at that? And what happens if you look at the two things?’ That would be my idea of return counselling. (IOM Austria’s head of AVRR program)

A further and often occurring strategy to induce migration aspiration is mentioning the risks and disadvantages of staying in the country of residence without papers. Counsellors thereby hope that potential returnees will come to see returning to their country of citizenship as the only rational option for them. They in some instances make strategic use of the specific situation individual returnees are in. A DT&V return counsellor mentioned to an undocumented family residing the North of the Netherlands that they had to

think about the future of your [their] two daughters. Yes, they are still underage now and can attend school and have a right to reside at the centre [state-led family reception centre] but what will you do after they become 18? Perhaps it is better if you start considering return to Iraq now and build a better future for them there.

Other counsellors refer to more general risks that undocumented migrants face in Europe at large, such as threatening with forced deportation in case of non-compliance: ‘if you do not return within 28 days after the final negative decision on your asylum application you will be put in detention and deported, is that what you want?’ (DT&V counsellor).

Counsellors also try to induce migration aspirations by promoting access to legal migratory routes back to Austria or the Netherlands. In both cases, return counsellors point to the legal channels that are available to potential returnees after they have returned. A DT&V employee for example often mentioned that returning with his assistance would avoid potential returnees’ being issued with a re-entry ban and hence could facilitate easier travel on a tourist or work visa. Especially in case of an existing relationship with an Austrian or Dutch citizen, return counsellors mention the option of acquiring a family reunification permit. Since migrants have to file for a family visa from the embassy in their countries of citizenship, they first have to return voluntarily. In both countries, we saw that return counsellors do not always mention the details of these procedures but do promote it as a better alternative to living irregularly in Europe.

A fourth strategy consists of counsellors trying to change the subjective assessment of safety upon return. Return counsellors do not necessarily rely on ‘objective’ country of origin information but rest their claims in a belief that ‘if someone wants to return voluntarily, this is always possible’ (DT&V counsellor), even to countries that are known to systematically violate human rights. To an Eritrean rejected asylum seekers, a DT&V return counsellor for example mentioned that ‘Eritrea is a safe country. People think that they cannot return to Eritrea all the time, but eventually it always turns out that they actually can’.

A closely connected strategy that counsellors resort to is evoking memories of rejected asylum seekers’ country of citizenship during counselling, to which they would often refer to

as their home country. Only in very rare instances did they question whether potential returnees really belonged there or should rather be helped to return to another country, which in some instances is technically also possible (IOM 2016). Following Malkki (1992), we understand return policy and programmes as mechanisms aimed at restoring a supposed ‘natural order of things’: by relocating rejected asylum seekers back to their countries of citizenship, they return to their roots, the geographical space and political community they belong. We conceive this assumption as part of what Duyvendak (2011) in another context has named the ‘politics of home’: invoking notions of ‘being at home’ for political purposes. Here, the notion of home is often (ab)used to call for a break from ‘uprootedness’ in Europe and a continuation of life in the country where one is ought to be. A Caritas counsellor in Austria mentioned that

[If] we come to the conclusion that it would be better for a client to go home - on the one hand, because he gets rid of the pressure, he no longer needs to be afraid; and on the other hand, he is at home, where his family is and where he is allowed to be [...] - then we assist him.

His statement suggests that returning home (to one’s family) is generally perceived as likely to be in the best interest of potential returnees. DT&V counsellors likewise remind potential returnees of their family and friends, in order to evoke feelings of longing, missing and sometimes even sorrow to make them consider returning. Some counsellors also tried to highlight the positive experiences of potential returnees before migrating to the Netherlands. One counsellor for example reminded an elderly Surinamese migrant about the benefits of returning to the warm Surinamese climate, while another DT&V return counsellor talked to an Iraqi woman about her general life aspirations. When she mentioned her desire to become an engineer, the counsellor started to evaluate her possibilities of attending university upon her return and offered to help her find someone who could prepare an application letter with her.

A final strategy is mentioning the possibility of receiving financial and other assistance, not only to facilitate the return process itself, by paying and/or arranging the flight but also to help reintegration post return through additional assistance in-kind or cash (Noll 1999). Studies have shown that such reintegration assistance is considered by some returnees as vital not only for rebuilding their lives after return (Koser and Kuschminder 2015) but also for choosing AVR in the first place (Lietaert 2019; Leerkes *et al.* 2017), while they are also critically described as pay-to-go-schemes (Koser and Kuschminder 2015). Return counsellors try to offer tailor-made programs consisting of trainings and reimbursing travel costs and other expenditures to persuade potential returnees to return (cf. Cleton and Chauvin 2020). Counsellors highlight that by using such money, their clients gain an actual prospect back in their countries of citizenship and are offered with a ‘choice’. In the Netherlands, two NGO counsellors working in a women’s shelter mentioned, ‘if they hear that they can do a course and get some money... then they have a choice. And that’s the way we do it [...] provide them with the choice to return and continue their lives’. State counsellors follow a similar logic and offer potential returnees to take part in IOM’s AVRR program. However, policy changes in both countries in 2015 prevent return counsellors from directing potential returnees to these programmes, since the overall budget is limited, and certain categories of returnees are excluded. For example, potential returnees originating from ‘safe countries of origin’, including those not in need of a Schengen visa, are only provided with a flight ticket to prevent alleged ‘return shopping’ (European Commission 2017). Several counsellors mentioned that this has made their negotiations with these groups more difficult, as they have almost nothing ‘to offer’ them.

6 Conclusions

In this paper, we have discussed the mechanisms of return aspirations management by analysing the narratives and practices of return counsellors in Austria and the Netherlands. The aim was to direct more attention to the crucial role of institutionalised, intermediary actors in shaping the mobility aspirations of non-citizens who have not (yet) been granted a right to remain. While AVR programmes are highly contested and often produce ‘involuntary mobility’ rather than ‘voluntary mobility’, their functioning relies on different ways of managing migration aspirations. Our cross-country analysis of these practices allows several conclusions.

First, we argue that the conceptual and practical differences that form the basis for our distinction between three principle modes of return counselling have important implications for the kind of ‘voluntariness’ that these practices help to produce, by more or less actively shaping potential returnees’ decision-making. This differentiation helps us to better understand how return counselling works, and why it is central to the broader management of migration aspirations. One fundamental difference between the three modes lies precisely in the way each of them deals with potential returnees’ own aspirations. Whether a counsellor works with existing aspirations, seeks to obtain consent in the absence of aspirations, or actively tries to induce aspirations, not only changes the nature of return counselling, but more specifically influences the way ‘voluntary return decisions’ are produced.

We argue that the existence of aspirations is of vital importance for more ‘genuine’ voluntary return decisions, as reflected in the narratives of counsellors in both countries. Hence, instances where return counsellors merely try to obtain informed consent (mode two) cannot result in voluntary mobility but lead to what Leerkes et al. (2017) call ‘soft deportations’. Moreover, migratory aspirations are also necessary for return trajectories to become ‘sustainable’, whether that is measured by the likelihood of remigration (Galvin 2014; Turnbull 2018) or defined in a more holistic way (Kuschminder 2017). Many scholars researching the experiences of forced returnees after deportation highlight the difficulties of becoming re-embedded in one’s country of citizenship (Ruben, van Houte and Davids. 2009; Khosravi 2018) due to social stigmatisation and isolation (Turnbull 2018), economic hardship (Drotbohm 2015), and what Lecadet (2013) calls ‘double-abandonment’. If this can (at least partly) be explained by the absence of return aspirations, then also ‘voluntary’ returns that merely constitute a returnee’s compliance with a legal obligation can hardly be sustainable. This is in line with Cassarino’s (2004) argument that returnees who lack ‘return preparedness’ will be unable to reintegrate successfully.

Second, apart from differences, our empirical analysis also highlights clear points of convergence between these modes, especially in relation to the concrete strategies that return counsellors resort to, and which sometimes seem to cut across different modes. For example, there is a very fine line between the functions that deportation fulfils within each mode: while it is often absent (or remains unspoken) in the case of mode one, it usually constitutes an important piece of the ‘neutral information’ that – in the case of mode two – can lead a potential returnee to comply with return. Within mode three, the prospect of deportation is actively used as either an outright threat or a tactic of ‘responsibilisation’ to make potential returnees take action. In some instances, however, supposedly neutral information is strategically provided with the aim of activating potential returnees, and threats are deployed as a way of merely obtaining consent. Further research that focusses on these instances of convergence in other geographical and institutional contexts will be necessary to sharpen the boundaries between the three modes.

Third, the paper shows that a cross-country perspective helps to refine our understanding of what Kalir and Wissink (2016) called the ‘deportation continuum’. We find that in both national contexts, the relative weight given to each of the three modes depends

significantly on the counsellors own institutional and ideological distance from the immigration authority. This holds true for NGOs working more or less independently from the government as well as state-employed return counsellors, albeit on a more individual basis, as highlighted below. Hence, while our findings echo the existence of a deportation continuum based on shared norms and agreed principles in the case of the Netherlands and Austria, it also highlights that the concrete institutional setup affects the everyday practice of return counselling. In Austria for example, the practices and rhetoric of VMÖ counsellors tend to be more in line with the expectations of government officials than those within Caritas. It will be interesting to see how the forthcoming reform of return counselling in Austria will alter the mechanisms of the continuum. Presumably, and based on the empirical evidence gathered among state counsellors in the Netherlands, it will lead to a significant shift away from mode one towards modes two and three. In particular the practice of questioning return or even advising against it will appear less frequently, as the ideological positioning of return counsellors willing to work for the new state agency will be more closely aligned with that of the Austrian government.

We also found that return counsellors in both countries tend to adjust their ‘strategies’ according to the personal situation of potential returnees, their expressed motivations and different administrative statuses, which is also influenced by broader political decision making at the EU level (e.g. readmission agreements). This means that return counsellors employ different modes at different stages of the same return trajectory or even at different points in one counselling session. In addition, employment of the modes also differs from counsellor to counsellor. For example, some state counsellors in the Netherlands had a stringent belief that potential returnees should return to their countries of citizenship, regardless of whether they want to or not. For them, obtaining consent (mode two) was their primary mode of working, while others believed in the importance of reaching a ‘well informed decision’ on the part of the returnee (mode three).

Finally, our findings have implications for the aspirations/ability model. First, as argued in the introduction, we think that academics should pay more attention to the role of intermediary actors and the specific legal and institutional settings within which they carry out their work. State- and non-state return counsellors are only one relevant example, but one could further think of local government, legal advisors, welfare workers, social service departments and healthcare providers as relevant institutionalised actors influencing the mobility aspirations of migrants. We thereby do not necessarily want to highlight the importance of these institutions as such (and thereby point to the emigration environment, see Carling 2002), but highlight another layer within these institutions, namely individual agents who are able to speed up, slow down and in a more general way, influence migratory decision-making processes. Our analysis suggests that these intermediary actors can sometimes also ensure a changing of the ‘sequence’ in the aspirations/ability model. Carling (2002) already mentioned the possibility of ability preceding aspirations in the case of an unexpected job offer abroad. Our analysis shows that this changing of sequence might also happen in AVR counselling, as return counsellors can ‘offer’ a substantial amount of money and in-kind assistance in exchange for a return. In such instances, return counsellors do not use the prospect of receiving reintegration assistance as a form of ‘empowerment’ that enhances decision-making but as a way to trigger the formation of aspirations in the first place, by increasing the ability to return. Only ethnographic research with potential returnees can disentangle if this is indeed the case and assess the actual influence of return counsellors’ managing of mobility aspirations in general.

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