

## Berlin Perspectives

Analysing German-European Policy

# Germany and the Return Hubs Debate Clearing the Fog

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**Germany's debate on return hubs suffers from vague definitions of the concept. Clarifying its purpose, target groups, stay conditions, responsibilities and potential host countries is essential for coherent policy-making and sound cost-benefit analysis assessment.**

The European Union (EU) and its member states are dissatisfied with their low return rates for migrants with return orders. This has given rise to the concept of *return hubs*; relocating migrants who have been ordered to leave – but who cannot be immediately returned to their countries of origin – to facilities outside of EU borders.

Wanting to return migrants to third countries is not a new idea; EU member states have long tried to include readmission of non-nationals into bilateral agreements with third countries. The novelty lies in the term 'return hub' – and the European Commission's March 2025 proposal for a [return regulation](#), which introduces the possibility for member states to "return third-country nationals who have been issued a return decision to a third country with which there is an agreement or arrangement for return". The concept remains vague in the Commission proposal, leaving many operational, legal and financial questions open to member states. When the Council finalised its [position](#) in December 2025, it failed to address these questions. The European Parliament is now debating a [draft report](#) by rapporteur Malik Azmani (Renew); the return hub concept is among the controversial issues.

## Germany's Position on Return Hubs

Germany's stance on externalising returns has evolved over the past year. In May 2024, the former German centre-left government did not sign a [joint letter](#) from 15 member states that called for changes to the EU Return Directive to enable return hubs. The parties in the current government did not include the concept in their political manifestos before the 2025 federal elections, nor did it feature in the [coalition treaty](#). In the election campaign, however, some parties focused on externalising asylum processes, arguably an even further-reaching concept. Debate on return hubs only gained momentum in Germany after the new government took office in May 2025. This can be explained at least in part by the need to adopt a position on the concept in order to negotiate the Return Regulation Proposal in the Council.

As is usually the case, positions on the concept differ within the German government. The German Ministry of the Interior (BMI), led by Alexander Dobrindt (from the conservative CSU), is strongly in favour of return hubs – as shown by the '[Zugspitze summit](#)' in July 2025 and [Munich Migration Meeting](#) in October 2025. The German Chancellor Friedrich Merz (from the conservative CDU) also supports this approach.

Other relevant ministers have remained silent in the debate, at least publicly. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, while also led by the CDU, is likely to take a more cautious approach without open opposition to

the Interior Minister. Any stance taken by the Foreign Office will stress the importance of complying with EU and international human rights obligations while also considering broader diplomatic concerns beyond migration control.

Another German Ministry developing their position on the concept is the Ministry of Development Cooperation (BMZ), under leadership of the Social Democrats (SPD). While the Ministry has taken an active part in Germany's return policy, supporting return and reintegration activities in countries of origin, its support for the concept would depend on identifying development-oriented benefits which remain highly uncertain.

Germany once again lacks *Ressortkohärenz* (departmental coherence) – a unified German government position on the concept. While unity on any migration issue is inherently difficult for German governments, this is exacerbated by the vague nature of the return hubs concept. Discussions often give the impression that opponents and proponents are talking past one another, referring to fundamentally different ideas under the same term.

A clear definition of the concept would help present a more united front for the German government internally, towards the EU and other member states and towards third countries. It would also enable more precise cost-benefit and risk assessments, ensuring policy choices are based on rigorous analysis rather than vague assumptions.

## How to Define Return Hubs

The following four questions should guide the development of a narrower definition:

1. What is the purpose of the hubs and which groups will Germany target?

The German government must clarify the purpose of return hubs and which groups of people they would target.

If the hubs are to serve as a transit point to facilitate return logistics (e.g. because of mobility agreements between the country of transit and the country of origin), then the targeted group should be limited to a few nationalities, likely in the same region as the country of transit (see current Dutch [plans](#) to return migrants via Uganda).

If the goal is to send the political signal of relocating migrants with criminal records outside of the country (similar to Denmark's planned Kosovo [model](#)), the target group would be small (certain migrants

ordered to leave with a criminal record). This would amount to a costly outsourcing of criminal detention, and would likely face legal challenges.

If the plan is to promote deterrence and incentivise returns, then the target group would likely be more general – without specifying a nationality (similar to the Italy-Albania model). This hoped-for deterrence effect is widely debated and lacks empirical support. Whether voluntary departures would increase depends on the probability of transfer, which would be low given the likely small scale of any hub – similar arrangements have ranged in the [low three digits](#).

2. How long and under which conditions will migrants stay?

The German government must clarify whether migrants in hubs would face detention or restrictions on movement, what living conditions would be assured, and how long stays would last in practice. To avoid court injunctions, the German government must consider its [legal obligations](#) under EU law and the European Convention on Human Rights on the prohibition of ill-treatment and restrictions on freedom of movement. Investing in centres susceptible to legal challenges would waste already scarce resources that could be spent on integration, housing or health care. It would damage Germany's reputation internationally and internally, as it would demonstrate the opposite of the political capacity to act (*politische Handlungsfähigkeit*).

3. Who is responsible in the long run?

The German government needs to specify from the onset who will be responsible if migrants cannot or will not return to their country of origin after having reached the maximum length of stay in the return hub. If Germany retains full responsibility (as in the Italy-Albania case), it may have to relocate unreturnable migrants back to Germany.

4. Which country would host migrants?

Experience from externalisation projects suggests that finding a country to host a return hub is far from a given. Countries have agreed to similar arrangements citing special historic or diplomatic ties, or because the head of state sees advantages to being seen as cooperative with European governments. Germany's experience so far is a cautionary tale; [Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama](#) openly stated that Albania would not accept German externalisation centres. As for the UK-Rwanda deal, the UK has also struggled to find a suitable country. The East-African country was not even on the [short list of 30 countries](#) initially considered by the UK Foreign Office.

Answers to these questions would resolve the current ambiguity of the concept, especially its purpose and risks. A more precise definition would improve discussions within Germany and at the EU level, both in the Council and in Parliament. Once there is clarity on the issue being debated, a necessary next step is a cost-benefit analysis to decide whether to continue pursuing the idea. Any calculation must go beyond purely financial costs, also considering that:

- Human costs could include potential detriment to migrants' rights and well-being. [NGOs](#) have criticised Italy's return centre in Albania for its inadequate living conditions, seen as contributing to severe psychological distress among migrants – including multiple reported suicide attempts and other serious health issues.
- Diplomatic costs could involve deprioritizing other issues with host countries (e.g. democratisation and rule of law, regional stability, human rights).
- Geopolitical costs could include unintentionally strengthening opposing political factions in host countries. For instance, sending migrants (who may have a criminal record) to an EU accession candidate country might help pro-Russian forces in the country.
- Domestic costs could occur, such as further loss of trust in the government if the hubs fail despite significant investment.

The debate around return hubs exposes a broader issue in European migration governance – the impulse to act decisively without first defining what action entails and what the costs may be. For Germany, clearing the definitional fog on the concept is a precondition for coherent policy and the prevention of unwanted costs.

### **About the author**

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