

**Working Paper**

**No. 26**

Freiburg, Germany

February 2024

**Domestic Interests of African States in EU-  
African “Return” Migration Cooperation:  
A Case Study on the Political Interests of  
State Actors in Ethiopia**

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# **Domestic Interests of African States in EU-African “Return” Migration Cooperation: A Case Study on the Political Interests of State Actors in Ethiopia**

**Fikreab G. Gichamo<sup>1</sup>**

## **Abstract**

Since 2015, the EU has been integrating migration into its overall foreign policy through EU-initiated partnership instruments. In 2016, the EU introduced a new approach using negative incentives for partner countries that fail to cooperate with the EU’s migrant return programme. Such approaches, however, have yet to contribute to an increase in returnees, often due to a lack of cooperation by partner countries. Drawing upon previous research on the domestic interests of West African States, this paper aims to contribute to the further understanding of domestic interests in Africa concerning return migration, using the case study of Ethiopia. Based on original interviews with various Ethiopian stakeholders, the paper shows that the country’s engagement with its diaspora and its interest in seeing increased opportunities for legal migration, coupled with a concern for the socio-economic cost of reintegrating returnees, are among critical policy interests. Ethiopian state actors’ domestic interests, in general, are similar to those identified in the West African region, although they do exhibit particular features. For instance, unlike states in West Africa, such as Senegal and Gambia, the country’s officials are not concerned with domestic public opinion. Return agreements or negotiations with the EU have not been an issue of debate in the country’s public sphere or media. Nonetheless, due to the domestic interests identified in this paper, the country’s officials remain reluctant to cooperate with the EU on migrant return.

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## Introduction

The European Union has been strengthening its external borders by tackling irregular migration and securing arrangements for the return and readmission of rejected asylum seekers and irregular migrants. Since the 2015/16 EU migration “crisis”, the EU has increasingly engaged in fully integrating migration into its overall foreign policy through EU-initiated instruments such as the 2016 Migration Partnership Framework (MPF) and subsequently other informal return and readmission arrangements. The MPF focuses on cooperation with policies of return to the migrants’ countries of origin as the critical test of partnership. Using the Migration Partnership Framework (MPF), the EU identified five priority countries in Africa, including Ethiopia, intending to create more engagement on the return of irregular migrants from the EU. To achieve its objective, the EU has introduced a new approach of using negative incentives, with consequences for those partner countries that refuse to cooperate with EU return interests. This inclusion of negative conditionality and the integration of return migration cooperation into the EU’s overall foreign policy has raised the significance of collaboration for both the EU and its partner countries. However, despite negative incentives, EU-induced agreements such as the MPF and subsequent informal arrangements have yet to contribute to an increase in returnees, often due to a lack of cooperation by partner countries. The limited ability of EU partnership initiatives, such as the MPF, to speak to the domestic interests of partner countries has been pointed out as a source of their failure (Collett and Ahad 2017; Castillejo 2017).

While the EU’s fixed interest in return migration is relatively apparent, the interests of the partner states in Africa still need to be studied. In general, state actors (politicians) in Africa are faced with a complex task of political calculations on migrant return, balancing such aspects as development aid from the EU against numerous domestic interests (Zanker et al. 2019a; Adam et al. 2020; Mouthaan 2019). Drawing upon the few previous studies on the domestic interests of West African states, this paper aims to contribute to the further understanding of domestic interests in Africa in areas of return migration, using the case study of Ethiopia. The main research question of the paper is: *What are the domestic interests of Ethiopia “return” migration cooperation with the EU?*

Three types of return are common in international migration dynamics. The first type of return, voluntary return, is the least controversial type of return, based on the voluntary

decision of the individual returnee (IOM Glossary 2019). The second type of return, known as transit return, involves the assisted return of migrants from transit countries to the country of origin before they reach their target destination, such as the EU (ibid.). The third type of return, which is the main focus of this study, is forced return. Thus, the term “return” in this paper refers to forced return from the EU to states in Africa. Forced return, also known as deportation or removal, is the most politically sensitive form of return.

The findings of this paper show that engagement with the diaspora, an increase in opportunities for legal migration, the socio-economic cost of reintegration and the protection of the country’s emigrants are critical policy interests in Ethiopia. The country’s increased engagement with its diaspora community, for economic and political reasons, has impacted its commitment to admitting returnees from the EU. Through its advocacy and influence, the Ethiopian diaspora has led Ethiopian authorities to abandon the return missions in the EU. The findings also show that better cooperation on the returning of migrants is tied to the EU’s expanding legal migration pathways. Furthermore, despite EU-supported projects for the reintegration of Ethiopian forced returnees, the country’s officials are keen on increasing reintegration assistance for voluntary returnees as well, to encourage the voluntary return of Ethiopian migrants from the EU. Meanwhile, the country is willing to return its citizens who are held in detention in destination countries such as Saudi Arabia or transit countries such as Yemen or Libya. Ethiopian officials perceive the return of citizens facing inhumane detention conditions as a protection measure on humanitarian grounds. However, the country’s officials do not consider rejected asylum seekers in the EU (awaiting deportation) to be held in inhumane conditions, warranting protection measures of return. Furthermore, Ethiopian officials do not perceive that the EU has provided significant additional incentives, such as development funding, as part of the EU return agenda. Consequently, Ethiopian officials remain uninterested in assisting the return of rejected asylum seekers or irregular migrants from the EU.

For these reasons, the country’s officials are oriented towards avoiding the return of Ethiopian citizens, leading to a situation in which the country provides hardly any cooperation with the EU on its return migration interests.

## 1. Methodology

The primary data source for the research is 16 semi-structured qualitative interviews held mainly with Ethiopian officials between May and July 2022, often via telephone and other online apps/devices. These interviews were conducted with the country's main migration governance entities, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Refugees and Returnees Service (formerly Administration for Refugees and Returnees Affairs) and the Ministry of Justice. Interviews with Ethiopian diplomats, leaders and members of Ethiopian diaspora associations in Germany were also held, to investigate the country's interest in engaging with its diaspora and the impact of the diaspora on EU-Ethiopia return migration cooperation. Interviews with migration experts in academia and international organisations and independent experts on migration in Ethiopia and the region are also included. Due to the sensitive nature of the questions and responses, direct references have been avoided when quoting sources.

Most of the officials interviewed shared their knowledge with me based on anonymity. For the most part, they were willing to provide their personal opinion, but that does not speak to their official position. In some instances, officials refused to provide more detailed information, with implications for Ethiopia's overall foreign policy, which they considered to be sensitive. The data obtained was checked with other secondary sources and interviewees whenever possible. In addition to data from interviews, information was also obtained from secondary literature sources, Ethiopian state media magazines, policy documents, reports, official websites of Ethiopian government institutions and unpublished documents.<sup>2</sup>

The interview questions were framed in light of literature on the domestic interests of states in the West African region (Adam et al. 2020; Altrogge and Zanker 2019; Arhin-Sam 2020; Jegen 2020, MOUTHAN 2020; Zanker et al. 2019). Ethiopian policymakers are often unwilling to be interviewed, since they consider details of the country's migration policy and its relation with the EU to be confidential. Despite these challenges, the author having worked on the refugee and migration sectors in the country and consequently the personal connection has helped access to certain officials, adding to the unique contribution of this paper.

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<sup>2</sup> This paper is based on my MA thesis written to acquire the academic degree in Master of Arts at Humboldt University of Berlin. The thesis's title is "Domestic Interests of African States in EU-African 'Return' Migration Cooperation: A Case Study on Political Interests of 'Return' Migration in Ethiopia". It was supervised by Dr. Franzisca Zanker and Prof. Dr. Steffen Mau.

The analysis of the interview, literature and documents looked into the position of the political interests of the Ethiopian government on “return” and its implication on the overall relationship between the country and the EU. Unless otherwise stated, the findings in this paper are based on interviews.

### 1.1 An analytical framework for domestic interests on return migration cooperation

Migration is high on the political agenda of the European Union and multiple member states; recent polls demonstrate that migration is considered one of the most critical issues facing the EU (Medinilla and Teevan 2020). The EU’s success in achieving its migration goals is tied to its legitimacy in managing migration and border security and in managing the public pressure from Eurosceptic movements (Collet and Ahad 2017).

While working on common internal regulations to manage migration, the European Union has been reaching out to strategic partners that can help reduce irregular migration. The EU and its member states have long sought cooperation with the origin countries of migrants for their return and readmission in exchange for concessions on visa liberalisation or financial incentives. Several legal and political instruments, regional and bilateral frameworks, arrangements, dialogues or consultative processes, funding instruments and compacts have been initiated by the European Union and by individual member states to manage migration, including returns. Since 2015, the EU has been noted for expanding previous forms of cooperation through reward and punishment and for tying its migration interests to enforced cooperation on the return of irregular migrants. The EU has also changed its approach from seeking more formal agreements to informal, non-binding arrangements, with the hope for better results (Slagter 2019). The EU’s insistence on controlling irregular migration and on returning rejected asylum-seekers and irregular migrants is echoed in several instruments and statements made by the European Commission. For instance, in the 2016 Migration Partnership Framework (MPF) instrument issued by the EU Commission, the willingness to implement agreements and arrangements to reduce irregular migration and the return and readmission to their home countries of rejected asylum-seekers and irregular migrants are the key components of the overall relationships between the EU and third countries of origin and transit (EU Commission 2016; EU Commission 2017a). Ethiopia was one of the five countries chosen for the MPF.



Nonetheless, the EU has continually faced problems when it comes to identifying partner countries and incorporating their domestic needs and interests into policies. Several investigations on the failures of the Migration Partnership Framework agreements with African partner countries have revealed, among other causes, a mistaken understanding of the domestic interests of partner countries (Castillejo 2017; Crawley and Blitz 2018; Collett and Ahad 2017). Consequently, the EU has been criticised for failing to adequately consider partner countries' domestic political interests (ibid.). Nonetheless, the EU remains focused on strengthening its external borders by tackling irregular migration and securing arrangements for the return and readmission of rejected asylum-seekers and irregular migrants (Crawley and Blitz 2018). The external dimension of the 2020 EU Commission's New Strategy with Africa also aims to promote international partnerships, with the plan to return irregular migrants as its central theme. Given the European Commission's regular reports on the unsatisfactory nature of the return rate in general, the EU is highly likely to continue to pursue its goal of increasing returns through expedited return procedures using the New Migration and Asylum Pact (Bisong 2021).

While the EU's fixed interest in return migration is relatively apparent, the interest in return migration on the part of African countries is less studied. A few studies have highlighted the fact that, despite formal agreements and informal arrangements between the EU and African states, return migration cooperation is subject to the domestic political interests of states in Africa (Adam et al. 2020; Mouthaan 2019; Zanker et al. 2019a).

The somewhat low return rates regardless of a continued push from the EU show the political sensitivity of returns in Africa (Zanker et al. 2019a). Migration cooperation negotiations and agreements between West African states and the European Union or member states on forced return are politically salient, with debates in public and the press (Adam et al. 2020; Zanker et al. 2019a). Domestic political interests are set in a context whereby African states seek to balance opportunities from the EU on the one side vis-à-vis their own domestic interests on the other. By following an optimistic understanding of the migration development nexus approach (De Hass 2018; Zanker 2019b), which views migrants as agents of innovation and development, African state actors' interests are focused on how to better regulate migration and to increase remittances and other development gains (Zanker 2019b; Adam et al. 2020). For instance, African states are concerned about the loss

of remittances in the event of a large number of returns from the EU. In other instances, state actors in countries like Senegal and Gambia are concerned that public opinion against return may influence elections to the advantage of opposition parties (Mouthaan 2019). Therefore, the EU's return migration interests may be opposed to the domestic interests of partner countries in Africa, which explains why African states have only partially implemented return migration agreements with the EU.

This paper has included aggregates of all the domestic interests of states identified by the studies examined (Adam et al. 2020; Mouthaan 2019; Zanker et al. 2019a) in the West African region to determine an analytical framework to assess domestic interests in Ethiopia. Based on these studies, this paper has identified the following cumulative domestic interests of states in the West African region: engaging with the diaspora (for remittance, investment and political support), avoiding forced returns, promoting legal migration, avoiding public contestations when these challenge state legitimacy, avoiding the socio-economic costs of reintegration and protecting migrants en route (ibid.), as shown in Figure 1 below. As an extension to the interest of protecting citizens abroad and en route, an additional domestic interest of states in the Horn of Africa is fighting irregular migration through increased prosecution of traffickers. This will be applied to Ethiopia, since the country has yet to be studied in detail for its domestic policy interest on forced return.

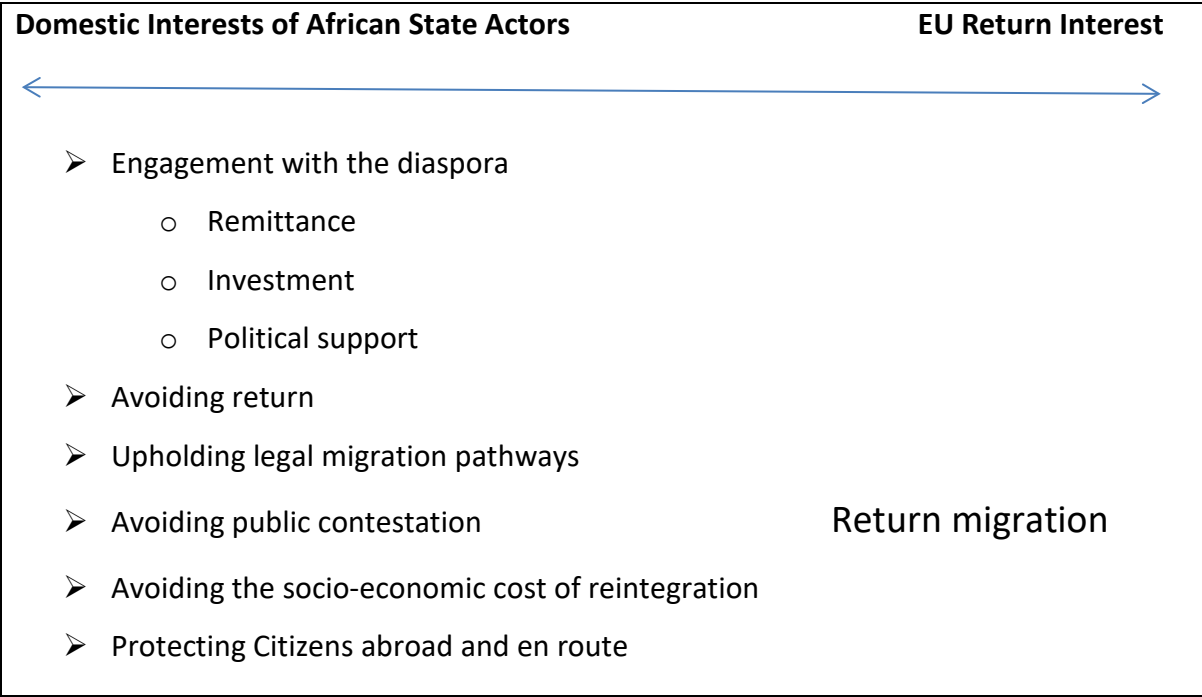


Figure 1 – Aggregates of factors are used as an analytical framework to assess the domestic interests of states. The table is adapted from “West African policymakers migration policy preferences” by Adam et al. 2020.

Among the list of domestic interests identified by the few studies in the West African region is “avoiding return”. However, this paper does not include “avoiding return” as a separate domestic interest to be used as an analytical framework to assess the domestic interests of Ethiopia. “Avoiding return” is not by itself a domestic interest; rather, it is dependent on other grounds such as fear of loss of remittance due to a large number of returnees or fear of public contestation.

**2. Background on Migration Governance in Ethiopia and EU-Ethiopian Cooperation**

Ethiopia is Africa’s second most populous country, with 115 million people in 2020 (World Bank 2022). Creating jobs for the rapidly growing population is one of the main challenges the country is facing. The country’s economic and development plans have focused on industrialisation as a means to transform the economy, reduce poverty and provide jobs to achieve its goal of transitioning to a lower middle-income economy.

Ethiopia estimates that its diaspora consists of nearly three million people (Aduigna 2021; Solomon 2019). This number contrasts with UN estimates of close to one million (UNDP

2020). The country is also one of the major refugee host countries in Africa, hosting mainly refugees from the neighbouring countries of Somalia, Eritrea, South Sudan and Sudan. Following the adoption of the New York Declaration in September 2016, the country has made pledges to improve the situation of refugees, including through local integration and a commitment to operationalise the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF).<sup>3</sup> CRRF implementation in Ethiopia has focused on refugee reintegration programmes by helping refugees achieve self-reliance and by providing support to host communities (ibid.). The CRRF project included the Job Compact agreement with international partners such as the EU, World Bank, the European Investment Bank and the Department for International Development under the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF). In January 2019, to implement the CRRF, the country revised its refugee law. The 2019 Refugee Law in Ethiopia has, for the first time in the country's modern history, granted some form of livelihood rights for refugees. In line with the CRRF, the country created a Job Compact to assign refugees 30% of the jobs created through CRRF funding for its industry expansion.<sup>4</sup> Ethiopian officials understand their commitment as an offer to the right to work proportionate to the level of international support for the country's development and industrialisation strategy (Betts 2021; Binkert et al. 2021).

The National Council, chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister and accountable to the Prime Minister, is the highest level of coordination on migration-related issues. The Prime Minister's Office oversees the political direction of migration issues in close collaboration with various ministries and offices. In September 2018, the country issued a National Reintegration Directive that defined the procedural legal frameworks to be followed in the reintegration of returnees. The country works in coordination with international organisations such as the UNHCR, IOM and ILO.

With various funding instruments, such as the EU Emergency Trust Fund (EUTF), the EU has financially supported Ethiopia in managing migration and refugee situations. The

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<sup>3</sup>The CRRF was rolled out in 2017 and 2018 as a response to the increasing number of refugees living in protracted situations and to traditional short-term humanitarian funding. The CRRF thus led to increased promotion of a sustainable way of managing refugee conditions (Binkert et al. 2021).

<sup>4</sup>The Job Compact is justified in line with the Ethiopian government's plan of industrialisation, employment and refugee policies. The Job Compact has been described as a balance between supporting the Ethiopian development goal and, at the same time, guaranteeing the government's commitment to integrating refugees (Binkert et al., 2021).

changes in migration and refugee policies in the country are also backed by EU financial support (Tadesse 2020; Mengiste 2021). The EU influenced the adoption of the revised refugee law in 2019 and the signing of the return and reintegration agreement. EU-Ethiopia migration cooperation has resulted in enhanced cooperation in some areas, such as tackling trafficking and increasing border security and intra-European cooperation at the country level (Castillejo 2017). The EU and its member states have presented the country as a model of the Khartoum Process, privileged above the other members in funding and support (Reitano 2016). Several years of EU advocacy and funding have led to increased activity in the country to prevent trafficking and smuggling (ibid.). EUTF support in Ethiopia has been notable in socio-economic reintegration support, the self-reliance of refugees and their host community (through the CRRF programme) and Ethiopian migrant return and reintegration programmes (Abebe 2020).

The earliest forms of migration cooperation between the EU and Ethiopia can be traced back to indirect forms of partnership through the AU-EU partnership and the ACP-EU partnership known as the Cotonou Agreement 2000. The Cotonou Agreement contains provisions for the return of irregular migrants from the EU. In 2014 and 2015, EU-Ethiopia migration cooperation increased with the country's engagement in the Khartoum Process.<sup>5</sup> The issue of return was one of the five thematic issues in the Khartoum Process (Abebe 2017). In the Horn of African region, the Khartoum Process was mandated to monitor the implementation of the initiatives and actions under the Valletta Action Plan in the Horn of Africa.<sup>6</sup> The EUTF also supported the 2016 project Facility on Sustainable and Dignified Return and Reintegration in support of the Khartoum Process (FSDRRK) that aims at supporting the development and implementation of return and reintegration policies and processes along the Central Mediterranean Route to the EU Member States (Europa 2022). Ethiopia has been commended as a helpful partner for the EU on migration at the regional level for its

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<sup>5</sup> The Khartoum Process is a joint EU-Horn of Africa Migration Route Initiative, launched at a Ministerial conference held in Rome in November 2014, focusing on preventing human trafficking and smuggling of migrants. Subsequent Khartoum Process consultations held in London in Nov 2015 and Khartoum in June 2016 have been held in secrecy (Reitano 2016).

<sup>6</sup> The Valletta Summit announced the creation of the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) for stability and to address the root causes of irregular migration and displaced persons in Africa (Tsion 2017).

cooperative role in the Khartoum process and at the Valletta summit, including by bringing other African countries on board (Castillejo 2017).

A joint declaration known as a Common Agenda on Migration and Mobility (CAMM) was signed between the EU and Ethiopia at the end of the Valletta Summit in November 2015. The CAMM raises the issue of return only through the soft language of voluntary return schemes and reintegration to prevent and combat irregular migration. Although the agreement avoids making the issue of return a central theme, it refers to Article 13 of the Cotonou Agreement, laying the groundwork for partnership on the return of irregular migrants, including through voluntary return and reintegration programmes. The need for a speedy and efficient procedure for the return of migrants, particularly with the responsibility of identifying nationals and issuing travel documents for returnees, was also explicitly mentioned in the CAMM agreement. The CAMM can be taken as a gesture towards future cooperation on migration in EU-Ethiopia relations. It played a role in further setting the scene for the country to be prioritised for the Migration Partnership Framework (MPF) in 2016.

On 14 June 2016 the (then) Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn and EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker signed the Migration Partnership Framework (MPF). Ethiopia was among five pilot priority African countries identified for the MPF by the EU. The EU identified Ethiopia as a priority country based on the strategic importance of the country as a stable partner in the Horn of Africa (Castillejo 2017; Collet and Ahad 2017). Following the signing of the MPF, the country saw several high-level diplomatic visits from EU representatives and senior officials of EU member states. Through these visits, the European Union and its member states have been delivering a common message on curbing irregular migrants and returning migrants (Castillejo 2017). The Migration Partnership Framework (MPF) has scaled up previous forms of cooperation to further levels between Ethiopia and the EU (Collet and Ahad 2017).

Ethiopian officials view the MPF as the most potent instrument for establishing relations on return cooperation. During the signing of the MPF, Ethiopian officials stressed the firm expectation for assistance from the EU in creating jobs (through industrial parks), addressing root causes of migration and increasing opportunities for legal migration (Castillejo 2017).

The MPF has enhanced cooperation in some areas, such as tackling trafficking, increasing border security and promoting intra-European cooperation at the country level (Castillejo 2017). There has been growth in EU spending on migration in Ethiopia through the EUTF. Reports in 2017 stated that Ethiopia had received more funding than other priority countries of the MPF (ibid.). However, at the same time, the EU has been partly applying leverage through negative incentives by delaying development and trade cooperation incentives under the EUFT, in order to encourage cooperation on migrant return (Castillejo 2017). The EU did not approve funding to Ethiopia from November 2016 until November 2017, possibly due to the EU Commission's MPF Progress report that deemed the country's cooperation on return to be unsatisfactory (Abebe 2020; Castillejo 2017).

After the fifth progress report on the MPF in 2017, the EU appeared to have ceased its follow-up on the MPF or its priority countries in favour of informal procedures and arrangements. The MPF had not been able to incentivise the level of cooperation it aimed to achieve. Instead, it engendered a soured relationship between the EU and the Ethiopian government (Castillejo 2017). The expectations of Ethiopian officials were not matched, as the MPF did not provide enough incentives through aid or legal migration opportunities (ibid.).

While EU institutions and member states showed frustration, blaming the Ethiopian side for failing to deliver on returns; Ethiopian officials also complained for their part that the issue of migrant return has dominated overall cooperation with the EU (Castillejo 2017), raised at every opportunity, including informally.

Several authors have criticised the MPF in many aspects. Many observers have described the overwhelming emphasis on return by the EU as unreasonable and counterproductive in addressing the long-term challenge of migration (ibid.; DIE 2018). Difficulties in signing formal agreements between the EU and partner countries and the aim of easing public pressure on partner countries led the EU to change to informal (non-binding) arrangements (Slagter 2019). In Ethiopia, this led to a special arrangement with the EU through the "Admission Procedure" for the Return of Ethiopians from the EU Member States, signed between the EU and the Ethiopian government in December 2017. After discussions and negotiations in 2017, the European Council endorsed this "informal" return agreement on 29 January 2018. To emphasise its informal nature, a provision in the instrument has made

it explicit that the Admission Procedure is not an international agreement and is not intended to create legal rights or obligations.

The Admission Procedure defined documents considered valid for return to Ethiopia and set procedures for the application, referral and responsibilities of the various parties on both sides of the agreement. An operational guideline for submitting returnee cases was prepared in line with the Procedure. On 27 April 2018, a three-year project, funded by the EU Emergency Trust Fund, was signed between the EU Delegation in Ethiopia and the Ethiopia Refugees and Returnees Services (RRS) to implement the readmission agreement. Following the signing of the implementation agreement, RRS set up a separate office known as the Return Reintegration Project Management Office (RRPMO), mandated to implement the reintegration of migrants returned from the EU. Several Ethiopian institutions along with the EU Delegation for Ethiopia are mandated to implement the project. The project aims to provide comprehensive reintegration support to Ethiopians returning from Europe. One of its primary goals is to increase the number of returning migrants benefiting from reintegration packages and the number of returnees who have achieved self-sufficiency, social stability and psychosocial well-being (Action Document 2018: 25).

Despite the return of a large number of migrants from Saudi Arabia, the political significance of returnees from Europe into the country appears much greater in contrast. In 2020, Ethiopia was informed of 1,100 migrants eligible for return from the European Union, of which only 155 individuals returned (Statewatch 2022). In 2019, out of 1,415 migrants identified for return, 240 individuals returned (ibid.). The establishment of the Return Reintegration Project Management Office (RRPMO) under the RRS did not result in an increased number of returns. The project had anticipated reintegration assistance for up to 2,000 returnees over its three years of implementation. However, due to the small number of returnees during that period (2019–2021), only 154 returnees received reintegration assistance.

EU Commission reports on cooperation with Ethiopia on return continue to complain about the failure of the Ethiopian government to honour the arrangements between the European Commission and its Ethiopian counterparts. The country's cooperation in the return of migrants has been repeatedly claimed to be unsatisfactory by the EU side.



This differs sharply from the levels of return from the Middle East region, such as Saudi Arabia. In the year 2013, the country saw the start of large-scale deportations, with 163,000 migrants forcefully returned from Saudi Arabia (IOM 2013; IOM 2014). The large number of deportations continued, with 370,000 returnees arriving in the country from 2018 to the end of 2021, of which 79,471 returned in 2021 (IOM 2022). This number contrasts with the scant number of returnees from Europe in the same period. How can this be explained? The domestic interests of the Ethiopian government will be outlined in the next section.

### **3. Ethiopia's Domestic Interests in Return Migration Cooperation with the EU**

Based on the literature on the West African region, several factors were chosen to form an analytical framework to assess domestic interests in Ethiopia in relation to return migration cooperation with the EU. These are: engagement with the diaspora (for remittance, investment and political influence), upholding legal migration opportunities, avoiding public contestation against state legitimacy (public opinion), avoiding the socio-economic costs of reintegration and protecting migrants, including those en route. These will be considered in turn.

#### **3.1 Engaging with the Diaspora and the Economic Significance of Remittances**

The Ethiopian government has increasingly engaged with its diaspora in the last two decades. The country has enacted several laws and policies and continues to rearrange institutions to gain economic and political benefits from its diaspora while offering incentives and benefits.

While the analytic framework based on studies of West African states' domestic interests reveals the significance of remittances and state actors' concerns over the loss of these remittances, responses from Ethiopian officials interviewed did not raise the same level of concern regarding return migration cooperation with the EU. Ethiopian state actors do not appear concerned about the immediate effect on remittances when migrants return from Europe. This approach can be explained by the relatively small number of migrants identified for return by the EU member states. Although Ethiopian officials interviewed during this research did not show concern about the impact of migrant return on remittances, the country has previously called for a means to reduce remittance transfer costs from the EU (EEAS 2016).

Ethiopia's policy on engaging with the diaspora extends beyond the traditional significance of remittances to a more comprehensive engagement with the diaspora community. In the last few decades, the country's diaspora has transitioned to a position of significant financial and political power in the country (Adugna 2021). The Ethiopian diaspora played a role in bringing political reform to the country in 2018 (ibid.). The government's development plan underlines the importance of enhancing the diaspora's participation in investment activity in the country. The country is increasingly pursuing a policy that calls on its diaspora for investment and political support. Ethiopian state actors and media follow the diaspora's developmental role, constantly underlining the significant contribution of the diaspora to the economic sector. The country's diaspora policy can thus be explained by the optimistic view of the migration-development nexus theory (De Hass 2018; Zanker 2019b), which focuses on the role of migrants as agents of innovation and development.

Investigating the country's engagement with its diaspora beyond their remittance contribution to the country revealed that Ethiopian diaspora communities play an active role in the dynamics of cooperation with EU return migration policies. Interviews with Ethiopian diaspora communities show that they underline the challenges to entering the EU through legal pathways and the socio-economic challenges in Ethiopia. Lacking legal migration opportunities, Ethiopian diaspora communities rationalise their position against return based on the difficulties that migrants have undergone to enter the EU and the consequences of return on the lives of returnees.

The diaspora leaders and community members believe they must show solidarity toward individuals awaiting deportation, whom they consider to be vulnerable fellow nationals. Leaders and active members of the Ethiopian diaspora community in Germany have advocated against return identification missions conducted by the Ethiopian Embassy, its consulate offices and the Ethiopian National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) office, calling for the cessation of such mission by the country's offices. Thus, through their advocacy, Ethiopian diaspora (at least in Germany) have contributed to the Ethiopian authorities' disruption of return identification missions. They have impacted the implementation of the 2018 "readmission procedure", particularly the identification proceedings by the Ethiopian National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) and similar procedures by Embassies and consulate offices.

Ethiopian officials admit that the country's diaspora communities in Europe have advocated for a cessation of the procedures to return Ethiopians. Some of the interviewed officials, however, question the diaspora's impact. The country's officials hold different opinions among themselves on the influence of diaspora advocacy on the country's policy in general and return migration cooperation with the EU in particular. Most of the officials interviewed believe that the influence of the diaspora does not shift government policy, including cooperation dynamics. However, despite this argument by the country's authorities, it is plausible to argue that the pressure from the several diaspora communities in Germany has, at least in some instances, forced Ethiopian authorities to abandon nationality identification missions through the NISS or similar procedures through consulate offices.

The findings in the country are similar to the literature on West African states' interests (Adam et al. 2020; Mouthaan 2019; Zanker et al. 2019a) that sees the diaspora engage in national development-related contributions of investment, transnational entrepreneurship and skills. However, there are two unique peculiarities in Ethiopia's case. First, the direct advocacy activity by the Ethiopian diaspora has disrupted return identification missions, an impact not observed in studies on the West African region. Second, the action of Ethiopian state actors is not based on concern for the immediate loss of remittances. The country's recent history of increasing engagement with its diaspora community aligns with recent studies' findings that the focus on the diaspora has recently shifted from remittances to a more comprehensive engagement with the diaspora community (Adugna 2021). The country's diaspora has been acting as lobbyists promoting the country's political interests in recent years. This growing increase in the diaspora's voice in state affairs explains the influence they may have over national return cooperation agreements or their implementation.

### 3.2 Upholding Legal Migration

Legal migration pathways for Ethiopian nationals to the EU are limited. Except for existing limited pathways and restricted visa availability, the EU has yet to offer any specific initiative for legal migration in exchange for cooperation on migrant return policies. Ethiopia's diplomatic officials have considered legal migration opportunities at present, through the

country's participation in the EU's higher education programme, known as the Erasmus+ programme, as insignificant and unrelated to the migration dialogue with the EU.

The country is keen to see increased legal migration opportunities. Policymakers and diplomats have been asking for legal migration opportunities to the EU in the various migration dialogues with the EU and its member states. For instance, this interest was signalled in the 2015 Common Agenda on Migration and Mobility, signed between Ethiopia and the European Union, which contains provisions on the country's interest in increasing opportunities for legal migration. However, Ethiopia has yet to secure legal migration opportunities through migration dialogues with the European Union.

Ethiopian state officials remark on the lack of legal migration pathways as a factor in increased irregular migration. The country's officials revealed that the EU's approach to tackling illegal migration without creating means for legal migration would not be considered to represent the interest of the country. Ethiopian officials see increased opportunities for legal migration as a reasonable approach to fighting irregular migration. This approach aligns with research findings in West Africa, such as those of Altrogge and Zanker (2019), that creating more legal migration opportunities could help tackle irregular migration. Furthermore, a few studies on the country have also argued that the 2016 Migration Partnership Framework agreement signed between Ethiopia and the EU had little progress, among other reasons, due to the absence of legal migration possibilities (Castillejo 2017; DIE 2018).

Ethiopia's interest in increasing legal migration pathways to the EU is not hidden from the EU. EU External Action Service documents report that the country is keen on upholding migration to the EU (EEAS 2016). An interview with an EU diplomat involved in migration also affirms the country's interest in increasing legal migration opportunities. The EU's perspective implies that legal migration pathways should be provided on the condition that the country complies with current EU interests by receiving returnees from the EU. The EU's views differ from those of the Ethiopian officials, who are interested in opportunities for legal migration pathways in parallel with such returns.

### 3.3 Public Opinion and Legitimacy

Literature on domestic interests in the West African region shows that state actors are wary of negative public opinion, including accusations by the media and civil societies of siding with the EU rather than local concerns. Moutaah's (2019) analysis of negative public opinion as a factor against the return and readmission of migrants in West Africa using the case study of Senegal and Ghana discovered two causes. The first is media scrutiny of migrant returns, which can deliver an agenda into the hands of rival political parties to gain voters, thereby discouraging cooperation with the EU on returning migrants. The second reason is the growing importance of diaspora voices in the state's political affairs (Moutaah 2019).

In the Ethiopian case, unlike in West African countries such as Gambia and Senegal, the return of irregular migrants from Europe or transit countries is not a significant political issue. Return and readmission agreements or negotiations with the EU are not issues of debate in the Ethiopian media. Migration in general (return migration included) has not been a subject of national election campaigns. Nor has it been an agenda in the hands of rival political parties to gain voters. Interviews with the country's officials/authorities did not flag this concern. Migration experts in the region also do not consider that public opinion in the country shapes policy decisions and strategic choices on return migration. The condition of Ethiopians in the Gulf countries is more salient in the media and public discourse, pressuring the Ethiopian government to ensure that the fundamental rights of citizens in these destination countries are protected.

The second aspect of public opinion, which is the growing development of the diaspora's powerful voice in Ethiopian political affairs and, thus, their influence on migration dynamics, is the more important. Ethiopian diaspora communities in the EU have been advocating against cooperation on returns. Consequently, the country's growing engagement with its diaspora for economic and political reasons has impacted its ability to increase cooperation on returns with the European Union. However, a concern for local public opinion in the country is not a factor affecting Ethiopia's return migration policy and its relations with the EU.

### 3.4 Socio-Economic Cost of Reintegration

Although not presented as a primary issue, the socio-economic cost of reintegrating returnees has been raised as a concern of states in West Africa (Mouthaan 2019; Zanker et al. 2019a). Return and readmission programmes have been reported as more controversial when they exclude projects that create economic opportunities for the returnees (Zanker et al. 2019a; Adam et al. 2020). The finding in Ethiopia shows a similar trend of concern to that of state actors in West African countries. Ethiopian officials have raised the socio-economic cost of reintegration as one of the challenges in receiving returnees from the EU. The 2016 Migration Partnership Framework agreement signed between Ethiopia and the EU was reported to have achieved little progress, among other reasons, due to the country seeking more significant funding for the reintegration of returnees (Castillejo 2017). EU reports during the same period confirm that Ethiopia requested support for the reintegration of returnees (EEAS 2016), which was then granted. In February 2018, the EU and the Ethiopian government signed the Admission Procedure (2018) to return Ethiopians from the EU Member States. This was shortly followed by a project to reintegrate the country's returnees signed between the Ethiopian Refugee and Returnee Service (RRS) and the EU delegation to Ethiopia on 27 April 2018. This project, known as Sustainable Reintegration Support to Ethiopian Returnees from Europe (SRSERE) (ARRA 2022), is aimed at implementing the Admission Procedure (2018).

Although the Admission Procedure and its subsequent tools initially appeared to address the concerns of Ethiopian authorities regarding the cost of reintegration and the need for psychosocial and financial support for the returnees, a different view has developed over time.

The Admission Procedure and its subsequent SRSERE implementation project aimed to address Ethiopian officials' previous concerns regarding the socio-economic cost of reintegration. Since 2019, the project has offered psychosocial and financial reintegration packages for Ethiopian returnees from the EU. Interviews with RRS officers show that the project had resources capable of reintegrating up to 2,000 returnees from the EU within the three-year project plan from 2019 to 2021. However, the SRSERE failed to contribute to any increase in the number of returnees from the EU.

While EU reports show frustration at the Ethiopian officials' failure to take back their nationals, Ethiopian officials, too, appear dissatisfied with the current reintegration

arrangement. This is related to the size of the reintegration packages allocated to the returnees. The reintegration project (2018), signed between the country's Refugee and Returnee Service and the EU Delegation in Ethiopia, assigned each returnee a three-thousand-euro package, in addition to support such as skills training. In comparison, the IOM Voluntary Return and Reintegration Program (VRRP) provides close to a thousand euros as a reintegration package per individual to voluntary returnees to the country. Ethiopian officials argue that increasing the finances available to individual returnees may positively influence voluntariness. Given that the main focus of the Readmission Agreement (2018) and its subsequent project by the Refugees and Returnees Services is on forced returns from the EU, the argument by Ethiopian officials to increase funds for individual returnees seems irrelevant to the issue of forced returnees. It could be argued that Ethiopian officials would in fact rather avoid forced returns because of their preference to engage with the diaspora and its desire for increased legal migration. Moreover, they would rather refrain from cooperation until they obtain increased funding for the EU return migration initiative. In the absence of securing domestic interests, such as increased opportunities for legal migration, these officials are implying an interest in receiving voluntary returns only.

Ethiopia received 370,000 returnees from Saudi Arabia from 2018 to the end of 2021 (IOM 2022) and has been struggling to provide reintegration services for them. Meanwhile, the EU project identified a total of only 2,000 potential returnees, which would have amounted to less than 635 returnees per year of the project's operation – far less than the average of 80,000 forced returnees arriving annually from Saudi Arabia since 2013. Given the vast disparity in these numbers, some migration experts have suggested that the country should cooperate better with the EU return interests in order to secure funding, which could then be used to reintegrate the overwhelming majority of returnees from the Gulf.

### 3.5 Protecting Citizens Abroad, including those en route

As was found for state actors in West Africa (Adam et al., 2019; Mouthaan, 2019; Zanker et al., 2019a), Ethiopian authorities perceive the return of citizens for humanitarian grounds, including from transit countries, as an exception to the general trend of avoiding return, considering the return of citizens facing inhumane conditions abroad, such as detention, as a protection measure. The country has been proactive in receiving detained returnees from

Gulf countries and from transit countries such as Libya and Yemen, where they were often in precarious conditions (Ogahara and Kuschminder 2019). Ethiopian officials have been observed to follow a narrative of preference for a regular/legal form of migration to countries with bilateral labour relations. The country has, for example, signed six bilateral labour agreements with the Gulf countries (Ogahara and Kuschminder 2019) and underlines the risk involved in irregular migration. Intending to protect its citizens from abuse, in October 2013, Ethiopia introduced a travel ban to the Gulf countries for low-skilled workers, which was lifted in January 2018 following the introduction of laws and procedures to prepare potential migrants with safety measures and skills required abroad (ibid.).

In line with this preference for legal migration routes, Ethiopia has seen a significant increase in the prosecution of traffickers and smugglers since 2015. The country has devoted greater institutional resources to fighting human trafficking and smuggling and takes a similar approach to the EU initiatives, with the position that human trafficking and smuggling networks threaten the lives and well-being of migrants en route. Consequently, the country has been taking a proactive role in the Khartoum process that focuses on fighting human trafficking and the smuggling of migrants. EU institutions have commended the Ethiopian government's strong stance against these issues.

At the same time, Ethiopian officials do not view their citizens residing in Europe as needing protection, even though these individuals are awaiting deportation and without access to employment or integration options, because they nonetheless remain under state support and thus not in inhumane conditions. Further, according to interviews with diplomatic officials, Ethiopian officials justify this stance based on the absence of the individuals' desire to return, and may even intentionally conceal details of these individuals' identity.

### 3.6 Additional Domestic Interests of Ethiopia

Ethiopian officials highlighted additional factors related to the return migration cooperation dynamic with the EU, which are not included in the theoretical framework based on the literature on the West African region. Ethiopian authorities claim that the country is challenged with technical difficulties in establishing the identity of individuals presented to it by the EU. The country's officials also expressed frustration concerning the asymmetrical



relationship and the domination of the return migration agenda on the overall relations with the EU. They feel that the EU is not taking the country's interests seriously despite repeated communication in several dialogues. Furthermore, the country's state actors complain that the EU's insistence and focus on return migration ignore Ethiopia's constructive role in other areas of migration relations. The country hosts nearly one million refugees, mainly from the Horn of Africa region, a fact that Ethiopian diplomatic officials consider as significant burden-sharing. Ethiopian officials claim that the EU should appreciate this responsibility toward refugees (mainly Eritrean and Somali refugees who could flee to Europe) and the country's steps in reintegrating refugees in recent years. Overall, Ethiopian officials stress that the EU's overwhelming emphasis is unreasonable, missing the bigger context and ignoring long-term relations on broader migration issues.

Ethiopian officials also hinted that the EU needs to offer more incentives. EU investment incentives and aid following the signing of the Migration Partnership Framework did not match the expectations of the country's officials, such as its ambition to expand industrialisation (Castillejo 2017). There was no strong enough incentive for the country to risk its relationship with the diaspora (*ibid.*). In general, it is plausible to argue that the country's interest in seeking more significant funding for cooperation on returnees influences its commitment to EU return migration initiatives. These additional factors highlight the complexity of cooperation on return migration.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this paper, using the analytical framework developed, show that engagement with the diaspora, increasing opportunities for legal migration, the socio-economic costs of reintegration and protection of the country's emigrants are critical policy interests in Ethiopia. The country's recent history shows increased engagement with its diaspora community, with comprehensive engagement for economic and political reasons. This policy choice has impacted the country's commitment to admitting returnees from the EU. Furthermore, the Ethiopian diaspora (at least in Germany) has advocated against the return of Ethiopian emigrants and has disrupted return identification missions. It is plausible to argue that the country's policy of close engagement with its diaspora has led Ethiopian authorities not to support the return identification mission in the EU.

The findings also show that the reluctance to offer better cooperation on returning migrants to the country is tied to the lack of legal migration pathways to the EU. Furthermore, despite EU-supported projects for the reintegration of Ethiopian returnees, the country's officials are not satisfied with the current reintegration assistance/package provided to returnees. The EU complains that the country is not committed to receiving a few hundred returnees from Europe each year while accepting several thousands of its citizens from the Gulf region. Ethiopian officials consider the return of citizens abroad facing inhumane conditions such as detention as a protection measure on humanitarian grounds, but do not consider rejected asylum seekers awaiting deportation in the EU as requiring such intervention.

The findings show that domestic interests in EU migration partner countries such as Ethiopia significantly influence the extent of migration cooperation outcomes. If return migration cooperation is taken seriously, these domestic interests and factors should not be undermined. Due to such interests, Ethiopian officials are oriented toward avoiding return, leading to a situation where the country scarcely implements return migration agreements with the EU. In general, the domestic interests in Ethiopia are similar to those identified by studies in West African states. However, unlike states in West Africa, such as Senegal and Gambia, Ethiopian officials are not concerned with public opinion from the local population.

The paper's findings have further highlighted additional factors, beyond those initially developed in the theoretical framework, that influence migration cooperation dynamics with the EU. Ethiopian authorities claim that the country is challenged with technical difficulties in establishing the identity of individuals presented to it by the EU. In addition, Ethiopian officials are frustrated with the asymmetrical relationship with the EU that they claim ignores the country's interests and demands, and with the domination of the return migration agenda on the overall bilateral relationship. Ethiopian officials feel that the EU's approach, which places such a heavy emphasis on returns, undermines broader relations with the country. Most importantly, the overall findings show that Ethiopian authorities perceive that the EU has not offered enough incentives to earn cooperation with its return policies. The country is keen on receiving more funding in relation to the EU return agenda. Future research on return migration cooperation Ethiopia and the EU should consider these additional factors.

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