

# Managerializing expulsion: Examining the discursive critique of assisted voluntary return and reintegration policy

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## Abstract

This article examines the assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) programmes as a distinct discourse that redefines the governance of the expulsion of irregular migrants. While critical scholarship has largely blurred the line between AVRR and deportation by emphasizing how AVRR masks coercion by using the rhetoric of ‘voluntariness’, this article moves beyond that debate to argue that AVRR’s distinctiveness lies in the production of specific knowledge on expulsion. Drawing on critical discourse analysis (CDA) of key AVRR policy documents and informed by the concept of problematization, the article explores how AVRR reshapes the knowledge and techniques surrounding expulsion and establishes post-expulsion as a problematic domain that requires reintegration interventions. The analysis shows that AVRR policy actors make use of migration management discourse to position itself as a humane, cost-effective, and sustainable alternative to deportation. Three key discursive moves are identified: first, AVRR redefines expulsion as a process involving mutually exclusive interests that needs to address the concerns of all parties involved in the expulsion process; second, it recasts coercive techniques as counterproductive and instead promotes neoliberal tools such as financial incentives and psychosocial counselling; and third, it incorporates reintegration assistance as an essential domain of governance, bringing post-expulsion condition of expelled irregular migrants under the remit of expulsion policy. Yet the article shows that these discursive moves also reveal important limitations, as they remain embedded in existing power asymmetries and ultimately centralize the interests of receiving states over those of countries of origin and irregular migrants.

**Keywords** AVRR; deportation; discourse; migration management; problematization.

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# 1. Introduction

In the recent two decades, there has been a global proliferation of the so-called assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) programmes which have introduced financial incentives and psychosocial counselling in the pre- and post-expulsion process of irregular migrants. These programmes that emerged for the first time in late 1990s amid growing concerns of many migrant receiving states about the low expulsion rates of irregular migrants (usually known as ‘deportation gap’) have now become mainstreamed as a preferred solution to the expulsion of irregular migrants in bilateral, regional, and international forums on migration (Marino and Lietaert 2022; Ambrosini and Hajer 2023). For instance, the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM), which although non-binding, calls for all parties to ensure that ‘return and readmission are safe and dignified and in accordance with obligations under international law and that reintegration into home communities are sustainable’ (GCM 2018: 15, emphasis added). At regional level, the EU Commission has adopted the Strategy for European Return and Reintegration (2021) and the [Return Handbook \(2017\)](#), which highlight the importance of ‘voluntary returns’ and ‘sustainable reintegration’ as cost-effective and humane solutions for the expulsion of irregular migrants. Similarly, the provision of voluntary return and reintegration services has become part of the conditionality package in the EU’s visa agreements with third countries, and FRONTEX is increasingly involved in financing and monitoring reintegration programmes in the so-called partner countries.<sup>1</sup> This gaining prominence of AVRR in both the rhetoric and practice surrounding the expulsion of irregular migrants has not escaped the scrutiny of critical migration scholars (cf. [Khosravi 2018](#); [Cleton and Chauvin 2020](#); [Rozakou 2022](#)). Generally, there are three main aspects of AVRR programmes that have received the attention of the critical research.

The first aspect pertains to the rhetoric of ‘voluntariness’ pervasive to these programmes, with scholars arguing that it is dubious to speak of ‘voluntary returns’ in conditions where irregular migrants do not have a genuine option to stay if they refuse to comply to the expulsion orders ([Dünnwald 2013](#); [Kalir 2017](#); [Sahin-Mencuttek and Triandafyllidou 2025](#)). At the crux of these accounts is to challenge the idea that AVRR represents an alternative to deportation that respects the agency and dignity of irregular migrants, insofar as these programmes rely ‘on accompanying measures that inflict destitution or other kinds of coercion (including deportation) if the “offer” is dismissed’ ([Schweitzer et al. 2022](#): 29). The second aspect related to the practices of AVRR providers has been equally criticized, as scholars have explored how AVRR actors (state and non-state actors) make use of subtle techniques—financial incentives and psychosocial counselling—to persuade irregular migrants that they can exercise ‘agency’ over their situation, creating the impression that their decision to leave is for their own benefit ([Dünnwald 2013](#); [Leerkes et al. 2017](#); [Cleton and Chauvin 2020](#); [Schweitzer et al. 2022](#)). The key focus here has been to argue that though AVRR providers tend to distance themselves from state actors engaged in deportation ([Kalir and Wissink 2016](#)), in practice they engage in ‘ritualistic performances’ to create a semblance of difference from deportation while legitimizing the coercive character of state-sanctioned expulsions ([Cleton and Chauvin 2020](#): 309). And on the third aspect, scholars have voiced criticism about the outcomes of the reintegration component, showing how financial and psychosocial support in many contexts fails to improve migrants’ livelihoods in countries of citizenship, leaving many of them in the same pre-departure socioeconomic condition ([Dünnwald 2013](#); [Sacchetti 2016](#)). All in all, these critiques have collapsed the purported distinction between deportation and AVRR by showing how the latter is nothing more than ‘soft

deportation' (Kalir 2017: 57) which through its migrant-friendly rhetoric and neoliberal techniques aims to depoliticize and legitimize deportation and its inherent coercive character.

However, while these contributions have provided valuable insights into the hollow promises of AVRR, what has not yet been accounted for is the discursive critique that AVRR has posed towards deportation and the distinct knowledge that it produces about expulsion of irregular migrants.<sup>2</sup> More concretely, while it is inarguably true that AVRR's insistence on 'voluntariness' may amount to little more than 'deportation in disguise' in practice (Gauci 2023: 397), the dimension that has not been explored is the problematization that AVRR articulates against deportation as forced expulsion, and the corresponding solutions that AVRR brings to the field of expulsion. A focus on AVRR as problematization—as it will be explained in more depth later—allows us to look at the distinct knowledge that is promoted in AVRR's policy about expulsion, techniques of conducting it, and the post-expulsion condition of irregular migrants, by simultaneously engaging with the discursive limitations of AVRR in challenging power asymmetries inherent in deportation.

Therefore, this article argues that beyond current academic discussions on the 'voluntariness' of AVRR, we can engage productively with AVRR as a problematizing discourse which produces a distinct set of conceptualizations about what expulsion is, how it should be conducted, and what should be done with irregular migrants once they are expelled to their country of citizenship. In this regard, to maintain analytical clarity and distinction between AVRR discourse and deportation discourse, the article uses *expulsion* as a broad, generic category denoting to the removal of irregular migrants (cf. Walters 2002), while *deportation* and *return* is used to refer to two discourses on expulsion—*deportation* invoking the sovereign, coercive logic that entails the usage of force, and *return* articulating AVRR's managerial and neoliberal rationale centred on 'voluntariness' and 'reintegration'. To argue for such a distinction, the article applies critical discourse analysis (CDA) to a corpus of key AVRR policy documents and puts forward the argument that AVRR draws on the so-called 'migration management discourse'—a global discourse on migration that calls for consensus and usage of non-coercive means in migration governance—to provide: (1) a *new understanding of expulsion* as a domain of mutually exclusive interests which needs to accommodate the interests of all parties involved, (2) *recasts the techniques of expulsion* in terms of financial costs and human vulnerabilities they may cause on irregular migrants, and lastly (3) *establishes post-expulsion as a problematic domain* that needs reintegration interventions in order to contain the purported negative consequences of expulsion in the country of citizenship. Given that the discourse under scrutiny is produced by International Organization for Migration (IOM), the EU, and international forums where migrant-receiving states have considerable leverage over discursive outcomes, the analysis also engages with the limits of AVRR discourse, showing how it centralizes the interests of receiving states over those of countries of origin and irregular migrants. In arguing for the distinctiveness of the AVRR discourse, the article makes important contributions to the ongoing research on expulsion. First, that recognizing the distinctiveness of AVRR discourse implies that the governance of expulsion is a domain of multiple, competing knowledges that are irreducible to a single discursive framework. This recognition of the discursive plurality in turn shows that the rise of the subtle, 'post-control' techniques in the governance of irregular migration—aimed at governing through elicitation of subjectivities rather than coercion—requires being attentive to the corresponding knowledges that provide discursive foundations to these techniques. Second, by showing how AVRR constitutes post-expulsion as a problematic domain requiring reintegration interventions, the article invites scholars to extend the spatial and temporal scope of their analysis beyond the expulsion dynamics in receiving states towards conceptualizing post-expulsion as an interlocking stage of the governance of irregular migration in the

countries of citizenship. As irregular migrants get subjected to reintegration interventions in their countries of citizenship, scholarship on expulsion would benefit from examining the power relations that persist long after expulsion has taken place.

## 2. AVRR as a problematizing discourse

This article makes use of the concept of problematization to analyse the discourse that AVRR articulates about the expulsion of irregular migrants. Problematization as a general concept was introduced by Foucault (2001: 74) to examine how a 'set of practices which were accepted without question ... becomes a problem, raises discussion and debate, incites new reactions, and induces a crisis' in the way how a particular domain is governed (Foucault 2001: 74). The concept proved useful in his endeavour to account for the crisis that different regimes of practices concerning madness, penal punishment, and sexuality encountered at the dawn of modernity, which gave rise to competing discourses and practices that questioned the conventional ways of governing these fields (Hindess 1996; May 2006). As such, problematization as a concept has been used to denote to the discourses that respond to the perceived or real crisis of the extant regime by articulating competing knowledge about how a given domain should be governed and towards what ends (May 2006; Kalm 2008; Lawlor and Nale 2014). However, a note on the extent of change that these problematizing discourses bring needs to be made. Although problematizations aim to initiate a shift from the status quo, there are also limits to the extent they disrupt the established regimes. In Soguk's (1999: 50) words, the posing of something in terms of a 'problem' not only indicates the need to make certain kinds of changes, amendments, and introduction of 'novel' techniques to overcome the difficulties but also represents a moment of 'normalization—the conceptualization of difficulties as amenable and manageable problems within a posited framework of practice'. This dual character of problematizations as having both a disruptive and normalizing function means that problematizations do not create 'through discourse an object that doesn't exist' but rather find solutions within the ontological and epistemological realm of the existing practice that is being contested (Foucault 1996, in Kalm 2008: 82). Thus, in effect, problematizations are 'problem-solving' because they do not question the object of the practice (i.e. the mad, the criminal, the sexual 'deviant'), but the way of conceptualizing, speaking, and the procedures of handling it.<sup>3</sup> Aware of the dual character of problematizations, this article approaches AVRR as a problematizing discourse—one that critiques deportation as the dominant regime of expulsion while simultaneously reaffirming the sacrosanct sovereign right of states to expel irregular migrants.

To establish the basis for comparison between deportation and AVRR, this article draws on critical deportation and post-deportation scholarship that have conceptualized the deportation discourse as: (a) emanating from customary international law that gives exclusive sovereign right to states to decide on entry and stay of foreign citizens (Walters 2002; Lucassen 2003; Gibney 2020), (b) that makes use of securitization frames to justify the application of coercive and containment techniques to enforce expulsion (Peutz 2006; Schinkel 2009; De Genova 2018; Makaremi 2018) and that (c) it is self-limited to the task of expelling the irregular migrant to the country of citizenship (Ellermann 2010; De Genova 2018; Bauböck 2020). Regarding deportation as a sovereign right, scholars argue that deportation discourse refers to the public international law which bestows to states the discretion and sovereign right to decide on the presence of foreigners and creates the derivative duty to countries of origin to readmit citizens expelled by other states (Walters 2002; Gibney 2013; Hasselberg 2018). The key point here is that deportation frames expulsion as a non-negotiable sovereign discretion that falls under the right of territorial sovereignty of states

(Gibney and Hansen 2002; Coleman 2008).<sup>4</sup> With regard to the techniques, critical scholarship has extensively examined how securitization discourse is used to justify reliance on repressive infrastructures and apparatuses aimed at expelling irregular migrants (Schinkel 2009; De Genova and Peutz 2010; Schuster and Majidi 2015). This discourse that underpins deportation constructs migrants as existential threat to the state, thereby legitimizing coercive measures such as detention centres, surprise raids in the early morning hours, forced escorts to airports, and the use of 'neutralizing' techniques (i.e. handcuffs, immobilization belts, and sedative injections) (Fekete 2005; Makaremi 2018). And lastly, scholars have deconstructed the 'repatriation' discourse that accompanies deportation operations, which frames the expulsion of irregular migrants as the end of the migration cycle, as a 'homecoming', where the natural trinity between state-territory-citizens is restored (Hammond 1999; Peutz 2006; Alpes Maybritt 2018). This presumes that with the migrant's re-entry into the state that 'rightfully "owns" them' (Bauböck 2020: 167), the migrant 'question' is de-problematized as it moves the person from the status of ineligibility and rightlessness in the host country towards full political status as a citizen in the country of citizenship. As De Genova (2018: 9) metaphorically describes it, 'from the perspective of the departing state, deportation appears to be [...] the proverbial last word. Out of sight, out of mind. Case closed'.

Taking this conceptualization of deportation as a point of departure, this article argues that analysing AVRR through the lens of problematization enables to detect the discursive distinctiveness which are often overshadowed by the prevailing focus on the (in)voluntariness of AVRR programmes. In addition, problematization provides conceptual breadth to assess the limits or the extent to which AVRR as a distinctive discourse challenges the principles that underpin deportation. In other words, through it, the focus shifts from whether AVRR is truly voluntary to critically assessing AVRR's discourse on expulsion in which 'voluntariness', 'counselling and financial support', and 'reintegration' comes to be posed as a solution to the problem of expulsion.

### 3. Background: Migration management discourse

Understanding the critique that AVRR poses towards deportation and the knowledge it produces on expulsion requires identifying the broader discourse that provides AVRR actors with discursive resources to articulate that critique. As presented above, ample studies have shown the linkages between the discourses that securitize migration and the increased reliance on deportation and border violence (cf. Schinkel 2009; De Genova and Peutz 2010; Kalir 2023). In these accounts, securitizing discourse constitutes the overarching discursive repertoire through which state actors justify their reliance on deportation and other coercive practices. Therefore, this article contends that to critically examine AVRR's discourse, it is of analytical importance to identify the broader discourse which underpins its problematization of expulsion. In this vein, in analysing the problematizations posed by AVRR, it is important to bring to discussion the so-called *migration management* discourse, which as it will be shown later, informs AVRR's knowledge production on expulsion. Given that migration management represents a broad discourse on migration (cf. Kalm 2010; Chamie and Mirkin 2011; Pécout 2021a,b), a brief overview of the key characteristics relevant to the analysis of AVRR discourse will be presented here.

Migration management represents a global discourse on migration that has emerged in various global forums and initiatives<sup>5</sup> and which posits that an 'orderly, predictable, safe, and human' migration is possible and economically beneficial for receiving countries, countries of citizenship, and migrants (Geiger and Pécout 2010: 2).<sup>6</sup> The keyword 'management' indicates a distinct logic that is different from the paradigm of securitization of migration, in

that it invites countries to ‘steer’ and ‘channel’ cross-border movements instead of striving for total control and prevention of cross-border migration (Kalm 2010, 2012; Geiger and Pécoud 2012). Related to this seemingly more liberal approach, there are two distinctive features that stand out in this discourse. *First*, migration management discourse frames migration as ‘a normal and potentially desirable feature of a globalizing world’ and emphasizes the positive role of establishing global/consensual guidelines in conducting migration policy that can make migration beneficial to all (Pécoud 2021b: 109). For countries to materialize this positive potential of migration, a change in state behaviour is required, along with a recognition that unilateral approaches in formulating migration policy are counterproductive. What is specifically required from states is the acknowledgment that migration is a global phenomenon, that is unpreventable and cannot be governed by a single state acting unilaterally and in isolation from other states and actors (Pécoud 2021a). Migration is constituted as a global issue that creates worldwide spillover effects and externalities that in turn necessitate establishing some sort of global cooperation and coordination (Ghosh 2012). In this regard, countries are expected to take concerted actions to address collective challenges faced by them in the spirit of cooperation and partnership (Rudolph 2011). Crucially, instead of striving for the prevention of migration, this discourse advocates for ‘regulated openness’ in which states create legal pathways for migration in sectors in need of foreign labour, while taking measures to fight irregular migration, trafficking, and smuggling networks (Geiger and Pécoud 2012). *Secondly*, this managerial discourse encourages states to govern migration through evidence-based decision-making, inclusion of non-state actors, and partnerships grounded in mutual trust rather than coercion (Kalm 2010; Geiger and Pécoud 2013). The core idea advanced is that the militarization of borders, deportation, and detention are outdated instruments aiming at immobilization of people which in the long run will only increase irregular migration (Kalm 2010). Instead, states are advised to use non-coercive instruments such as information campaigns, financial incentives, and psychosocial techniques to inform and guide their population about the safe and legal migration opportunities (Andrijasevic and Walters 2010; Kunz 2013). These two key features of migration management discourse, namely the framing of migration as economically beneficial, in need of global cooperation, and the introduction of non-direct/non-coercive techniques in governing it, are understood in relation to neoliberal practices where the market principles of ‘cost efficiency’, and ‘economic profit’ inform the managerial logic of governing cross-border movements (Boucher 2008; Kunz 2013).

Consistent with the scholarly arguments on migration management, this article considers migration management discourse as a ‘global policy discourse’ (Kalm 2012: 57), which establishes certain ideas and representations about international migration that in turn provide AVRR policy actors with the discursive repertoire in critiquing deportation and producing distinct knowledge on expulsion. In other words, this article contextualizes the AVRR’s discourse as taking place within the broader discursive parameters of migration management discourse which provide the ‘cognitive framework’ for AVRR’s problematization of expulsion (Geiger and Pécoud 2010).

#### 4. Data and method: CDA of AVRR’s policy-relevant documents

To examine the knowledge that informs AVRR discourse, this article analyses policy-relevant documents produced by the IOM, UN multilateral forums on migration, and the EU. The focus on these three sources is based on their central role in generating a dominant discourse on

AVRR and institutionalizing it as a global solution to the expulsion of irregular migrants (Pécoud 2010; Bradley and Erdilmen 2023). More specifically, the IOM is included as the leading organization engaged in both producing discourse and implementing AVRR programmes (cf. Marino and Lietaert 2022); UN forums on migration are chosen as they are multilateral venues for the institutionalization of IOM's discourse and the development of non-binding international commitments for states, most notably through the Global Compact for Migration (cf. Pécoud 2021a,b); and the EU is selected due to its role in mainstreaming AVRR in its external engagements with third countries, and its position as the largest donor to IOM's AVRR programmes worldwide (cf. Bradley and Erdilmen 2023). On this point, it is necessary to make a methodological note concerning the scope and limitations of the sources included in the analysis. As already indicated, this article focuses on policy-relevant documents predominantly produced or influenced by IOM, as it has been in a dominant position of institutionalizing its discourse at a global and regional level (Pécoud 2023). In this regard, it is important to highlight that, while AVRR constitutes an institutionalized discourse, it does not represent the only problematizing perspective on deportation, nor does it encompass the full spectrum of critiques directed towards deportation. In fact, as examined by several scholars, there is an ensemble of critiques of deportation that have been advanced by irregular migrants, countries of citizenship, social movements from the Global South, and critical scholarship of deportation and post-deportation studies (cf. Lecadet 2012; Sahin-Mencutek 2020; Walters et al., 2022; Korvensyrjä 2025). These critiques highlight the consequences of expulsion, its colonial logics, and asymmetries, but they remain marginalized due to the challenges they pose to the state-centric interests of migrant-receiving countries in the Global North (cf. de Haas 2024). Having said that, the analysis here focuses exclusively on the AVRR discourse as a dominant problematizing discourse that has been mainstreamed at the global level under the strong influence of IOM.

In terms of data collection and sampling, I applied two criteria for the selection of policy documents. First, a chronological criterion was applied to establish a timeline of when AVRR first appeared in official documents from the three key institutional sources—IOM, UN multilateral forums, and the EU. A systematic search of their online databases<sup>7</sup> revealed the earliest relevant texts: IOM's *Return Policy and Programmes: A Contribution to Combating Irregular Migration* (1998); Berne Initiative's *International Agenda for Migration Management* (2004) as the first global forum document addressing AVRR; and the EU Commission's *Green Paper: Return of Illegal Residents* (2002), marking the EU's initial policy engagement with AVRR. This led to the coding of sixty-eight policy documents of different types—strategies, policy reports, manuals, and non-binding international agreements—that covered the period from 1998 to 2023.

The relatively large volume of the initial corpus required applying document relevance as a second selection criterion. To this end, I drew on the work of Marino and Lietaert (2022), who identify key policy documents produced by the IOM that inform its approach to AVRR, and on Pécoud (2021a), who highlights the central international forums that contributed to the adoption of the Global Compact for Migration. Similarly, the selection of EU documents was narrowed to include official strategies on AVRR and key texts produced in the context of the debate on the recast of the Return Directive (2018) and the adoption of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum (2023). This selection process resulted in a final corpus of twenty-eight documents (see Table 1), which constitute the material for analysis. It should be noted that the thirty-six documents identified during the initial chronological search did not present substantively different understanding of AVRR and are largely aligned with the discourse found in the documents presented in the analysis.

To analyse the empirical material, the article makes use of Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA as it provides the methodological tools to establish the connections between a

Table 1. List of Key Policy Documents on AVRR (1998–2023).

Title of the document and year of publication	Published/commissioned by
<b>International Organization for Migration (IOM)</b>	
<b>IOM return policy and programmes: A contribution to combating irregular migration (1998)</b>	IOM
<b>The return and reintegration of rejected asylum seekers and irregular migrants (2001)</b>	IOM
<b>Return migration: Policies and practices in Europe (2004)</b>	IOM
<b>Managing return migration (2010)</b>	IOM
<b>Measuring well-governed migration: The Migration Governance Index (2016)</b>	IOM
<b>Towards an integrated approach to reintegration in the context of return (2017)</b>	IOM
<b>A framework for assisted voluntary return and reintegration (2018)</b>	IOM
<b>An integrated approach to reintegration (2019)</b>	IOM
<b>IOM's policy on the full spectrum of return, readmission and reintegration (2021)</b>	IOM
<b>Advocating for alternatives to migration detention (2021)</b>	IOM
<b>Rejected asylum seekers: The problem of return (1999)</b>	Gregor Noll (commissioned by IOM)
<b>Protecting the dignity and human rights of different categories of returnees (2000)</b>	Gregor Noll (commissioned by IOM)
<b>Return, readmission and reintegration: Changing agendas, policy frameworks and operational programmes (2000)</b>	Khalid Koser (commissioned by IOM)
<b>Return migration: Journey of hope or despair? (Introduction) (2000a)</b>	Bimal Ghosh (commissioned by IOM)
<b>The way ahead: Some principles and guidelines for future action (2000b)</b>	Bimal Ghosh (commissioned by IOM)
<b>Understanding voluntary return (2004)</b>	Black et al. (commissioned by the UK government and IOM)
<b>Comparative research on the assisted voluntary return and reintegration of migrants (2015)</b>	Khalid Koser and Katie Kuschminder (commissioned by IOM)
<b>Global forums/global policy documents</b>	
<b>International agenda for migration management (2004)</b>	The Berne Initiative
<b>Joint Strategies to address irregular migration (2010)</b>	The Global Forum on Migration and Development
<b>Making migration work for all (2017)</b>	Report of the UN Secretary General
<b>Fostering the development impact of returning migrants (2017)</b>	The Global Forum on Migration and Development
<b>Global compact for migration (2018)</b>	The United Nations
<b>Fostering partnerships to realise migration-related goals (2020)</b>	The Global Forum on Migration and Development The UN Migration Network

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Title of the document and year of publication	Published/commissioned by
<p>Ensuring safe and dignified return and sustainable reintegration (2021)</p> <p>European Union policy documents/research</p> <p><a href="#">Green paper: Return of illegal residents (2002)</a></p> <p>Reintegration and development (2014)</p>	<p>The EU Commission</p> <p>Jean-Pierre Cassarino</p> <p>(commissioned by the European Union)</p>
<p>Reintegration of returning migrants (2017)</p> <p>The EU strategy on voluntary return and reintegration (2021)</p>	<p>The European Parliament</p> <p>The European Commission</p>

given text (dimension 1) and the *broader discourses* (dimension 2) and *social structures* (dimension 3) that give rise to the text (Fairclough 1995; Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000). These three dimensions of CDA proved to be apt in investigating AVRR as a problematizing discourse and addressing the aims of the article: (1) to identify the broader discourse that AVRR invokes in its conceptualizations of expulsion, its techniques, and post-expulsion, and (2) in analysing the limitations of these conceptualizations in challenging the principles that underpin deportation. In other words, CDA as a methodological approach was theoretically well-suited to capturing the dual nature of AVRR's problematizations, namely, how its discourse both criticizes deportation and reproduces existing power asymmetries inherent in the expulsion of migrants.

Related to the first aim, CDA enabled an analysis of the intertextual connections (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2014: 16), between AVRR policy documents and the broader discourse of migration management, showing how AVRR draws on managerial discourse to critique deportation and reframe expulsion in managerial terms. Regarding the second aim, CDA allowed to have a look at whose interests are articulated in the analysed text by bringing into the analysis power relations outside the text, but that are nevertheless expressed in it (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). Thus, the analysis took into considerations the broader institutional conditions that have given rise to the AVRR discourse and how this affects the interests that are promoted and those that are underrepresented in it. In this respect, given that IOM is the key institution behind AVRR's discourse, the analysis paid attention to the fact that IOM is not a neutral and disinterested actor in the governance of international migration. Instead, it has acquired an important role in the governance of migration through its reliance on project and service-based funding from migrant-receiving countries in the Global North. Therefore, the analysis considered the broader context in which AVRR's discourse is produced, highlighting that the IOM, despite presenting itself as a neutral actor, has vested interests closely aligned with its donors.

## 5. Analysis: AVRR's discursive critique and its limitations

The following section presents the analysis of AVRR policy discourse, focusing on the critique it poses to deportation as forced expulsion and the distinct knowledge it produces about the governance of irregular migrants. The analysis is organized around three empirical

dimensions: (1) the knowledge AVRR produces about expulsion, (2) the techniques through which expulsion is conducted, and (3) the knowledge it produces regarding post-expulsion. Consistent with the CDA framework outlined above, each empirical section begins by first examining how managerial discourse underpins AVRR's critique of deportation and then proceeds to identify the discursive limits of AVRR that constrain its critique and reproduce existing power asymmetries inherent in deportation.

## 5.1 On the reconceptualization of expulsion

As indicated previously, the problematization of deportation and the rise of AVRR as a solution to the problem of the presence of irregular migrants has not led to the questioning of states' right to expel irregular migrants, but to the ways of understanding expulsion, strategies of conducting it, and techniques of dealing with their expulsion to their countries of citizenship. AVRR discourse upholds the sovereign right of states to expel those who do not meet the criteria to stay but presents a new set of premises upon which the expulsion is to be conducted. In one of the first comprehensive studies on the problem of the expulsion of irregular migrants, [Noll \(2000: 11\)](#), as one of the leading contributors to the study, argues:

Undoubtedly, the return of persons not entitled to stay in each host state is *a critical element* in the discussion of a regime *regulating migratory processes at the international level*. The '*principle of regulated openness*', means a number of things in the return context. As movement is *not free and unfettered*, provision has to be made for those actors not in compliance with the regulatory framework (emphases added).

The 'regulated openness' of migration management means that since the right to move freely across international borders is not guaranteed, there will still be people who are going to be outside the regulatory framework of legal migration pathways, thus making expulsion a necessary measure. In the Berne Initiative,<sup>8</sup> the issue of expulsion (cast as return) was discussed as a domain that 'remains largely within the sovereign realm of states' and that 'the respect of the sovereignty in the field' is to be respected by all parties. The upholding of the state's sovereignty to expel irregular migrants appears in the final document of Sustainable Development Goals (2015), the final version of GCM (2020), and the reports of the Global Forum on Migration and Development ([GFMD 2010, 2020](#)). However, while the sovereign control over the presence of irregular migrants is widely acknowledged in these global forums as 'both a prerogative of a sovereign state and an essential requirement for the smooth functioning of an open system of migration' ([Ghosh 2000a: 4](#)), expulsion undergoes a reconceptualization and becomes a global concern no longer confined to the sovereign right bestowed to the states by international law.

One of the key interventions of the AVRR discourse is the framing of expulsion as a domain of mutually exclusive interests that requires some sort of global principles to enable a smooth and orderly expulsion of irregular migrants to their countries of citizenship ([Koser 2000; GFMD 2017](#)). To be clear, the international law on which deportation discourse is based acknowledges that forced expulsion may raise concerns for parties, and it encourages states to engage in readmission agreements, and allows for financial compensation to address obstacles related to the readmission process ([Hailbronner 1997; Coleman 2008](#)). However, the readmission agreements and compensation that may be derived from them are to be conducted only in purview of codifying the right and the duty of the contracting states and compensating for the administrative costs that the readmission procedure produces for the country of citizenship.<sup>9</sup> In the AVRR's discourse, expulsion is cast as an issue of interests that go beyond the obstacles of readmission procedure, and its success is framed as hanging on

the political and economic ‘interests’ of all the actors involved in it. The countries are invited to approach the expulsion of irregular migrants as ‘an area where interests clash... and becomes a source of tension and conflict among the parties concerned’ (Ghosh 2000a: 2). That is so because, based on this discourse, the three actors involved in expulsion, namely, receiving states, irregular migrants, and countries of citizenship have diverging ‘interests’, making cooperation between them difficult. In a succinct articulation of this reasoning, Noll (2000: 105–110) asserts:

In reality, a number of problems occur at the point of return ... The returning states are interested in operating their systems of migration control and asylum protection with a minimum of financial, social and political costs. Countries of origin may regard ... expatriates as a source of considerable transfers of remittances ... [and by readmitting its citizens] may face problems of large-scale unemployment, and put at risk their internal stability ... The undocumented migrant has invested considerable effort into the attempt to migrate and enter a new community. Clearly, a paramount interest is to succeed in this effort.

The problem is therefore portrayed as impinging on direct interests of irregular migrant and country of citizenship—whose cooperation is *sine qua non* for the successful expulsion of irregular migrants. To put it differently, the discretion that the receiving state has to expel irregular migrants as stipulated in international law appears as insufficient to effectively enforce their expulsion orders; to be successful in that, the receiving states need to engage in compromise, so the expulsion procedure accommodates the identified ‘interests’ of irregular migrant expected to be expelled and of the country of citizenship that readmits them (Ghosh 2000b). Expulsion in these policy documents is presented as a zero-sum game because it touches upon the cardinal interests of the three actors: receiving states are interested in enforcing their expulsion orders and boosting the public’s confidence in migration policy, irregular migrants have high stakes to block their expulsion due to their high financial and time investment into their migration projects, and crucially, countries of citizenship which count on their citizens abroad for foreign exchange earnings and consider it as a safety valve to their labour market pressures (Koser 2000; IOM 2001). As such, expulsion represents the Gordian knot in which the interests of these three actors are embroiled—the achievement of one’s interests is assumed to come at the expense of other actors’ interests. Therefore, we see a discursive move from expulsion as a matter of international law and duties among states, to expulsion as a field of competing interests between ‘stakeholders’—receiving states, countries of origin, and irregular migrants. In this regard, it is assumed that a formula is to be found that accommodates the ‘stakes’ of these actors in the expulsion procedure.

To achieve this, it is claimed that there is a need to ‘develop global principles on return’ (GFMD 2017: 1) that ultimately would ‘provide the basis for political consensus between host and countries of origin’ (Koser 2000: 69). The justification of making expulsion a topic of global dialogue and a subject of guiding multilateral principles is based on AVRR’s assumption that the unilateral actions of receiving states through forced expulsion are futile and that global forums can provide a platform for establishing consensual and shared principles to enable cooperation on expulsion (IOM 2004, 2018, 2019). To avoid obstructionist tactics of irregular migrants (bodily resistance) and countries of citizenship (non-cooperation in issuing documents, refusal to readmit), a ‘common ground’ has to be found so the ‘interests of the parties concerned largely converge’ (Ghosh 2000a: 4). And AVRR has emerged out of this global dialogue as a guiding policy that presents itself as having the potential of reconciling

the ‘interests’ of all parties and making expulsion an ‘orderly’ process. What makes AVRR such a winning formula, according to this discourse, is the principle of ‘voluntariness’ and ‘reintegration’ in conducting returns and the introduction of the financial component attached to it. Through financial stimuli and counselling, the irregular migrant to be returned is assumed to find an incentive to return ‘voluntarily’ and save herself from the drama of forced expulsion and the violation of physical dignity that comes with it (IOM 2001, 2004). Similarly, AVRR discourse stipulates that the economic concerns of countries of citizenship about expelled irregular migrants adding an extra burden to their already strained labour markets will be largely addressed through financing the reintegration of irregular migrants in their communities, making them potentially conducive to new employment opportunities (European Commission 2021).

However, despite employing a balancing discourse—which gives the semblance of accommodating the concerns of countries of citizenship and irregular migrants, that are largely absent in deportation discourse—it is important to reflect on the terminology used in this discourse, and the interests centralized behind this managerial conceptualization of expulsion. An instance of this, is to look how AVRR’s discourse casts the problem of expulsion in terms of ‘interests’ and sidelines the issue of ‘legitimacy’.<sup>10</sup> Several scholars have argued that at the core of the problem with expulsion consists of the legitimacy deficit that expulsion has among irregular migrants and countries of citizenship which consider expulsion ‘as disproportional and unjust’, and who contest ‘the content of admission requirements of who is eligible for legal residence and who is not, and the authority of states to decide over this’ (Leerkes and Kox 2017; Van Houte et al. 2021: 1270; Kox 2025). AVRR discourse marginalizes these concerns, because as shown above, it takes as *a priori* the legitimacy of receiving states to expel, thereby precluding the legitimacy claims of countries of origin and irregular migrants, who may view expulsion as rooted in colonial structures, and instead advocate for open borders as part of global redistributive justice and post-colonial redress (cf. Lecadet 2016; Achiume 2019; Korvensyrjä 2025). Therefore, self-restricted in its adherence to the framework of sovereignty that centralizes Northern migrant-receiving countries, AVRR’s discourse speaks of three ‘stakeholders’ and the need to accommodate their ‘interests’ as they emerge only after expulsion gains the status of taken-for-grantedness.

## 5.2 The techniques of AVRR: Governing modestly and through neoliberal subjectivities

Besides reconceptualizing expulsion as a domain of competing interests, AVRR is promoted as an economic policy that addresses the costly operations entailed in deportation. What strikes in this new logic is not only the posing of expulsion procedures that entail direct financial costs in pecuniary terms—for instance, assessing the efficiency of detention centres as the ratio between financial resources and expulsion rates—but also the monetarization of what is seemingly nonmaterial in these procedures. More precisely, there is a recasting of coercion and what it does to the subject in financial terms, in the sense that the usage of coercive measures is interpreted as infringing human dignity and rights which in the last instance translates into additional financial costs for the receiving country.

IOM (2001: 7), for example, provides a range of criteria to assess the ‘effectiveness of return’ and introduces cost-related criteria that include ‘direct and indirect costs’. Direct costs are those that emerge from the financing of expulsion operations (detention centres, escorts, charter flights), and indirect costs consist of hidden expenses that germinate from ‘human vulnerabilities’ that may be caused by the expulsion procedure itself and which may result in future attempts to re-migrate irregularly (IOM 2001, 2019). Alongside charts and tables that

compare the direct costs of deportation and AVRR, the technical and expert reports in the field also add into calculations the costs of 'mental health impairment', 'anxiety', and 'stress' both in short and long run (GFMD 2015; IOM 2015). IOM's report (2021: 28) that advocates for alternative options to detention provides the following insights:

The financial burden of detention is often high, stemming from infrastructure, personnel, recurrent daily costs (such as food), security, etc. Detention has several hidden costs, including longer-term health-care costs resulting from poor detention conditions, as well as claims for compensation following rights violations, including from unlawful detention.

Therefore, in AVRR's discourse, it is not wise for the receiving country to rely on coercive mechanisms because they are both inefficacious in increasing the expulsion rates and cause physical and mental vulnerabilities that will have to be dealt by the receiving state itself in the future. More concretely, deportation is framed as being expensive in both maintaining the physical infrastructure erected around it but also in the anticipated costs that result from its repressive character and what it does to the irregular migrant subjected to it. The logic that this discourse articulates is that by refraining from the overt force, the receiving country not only increases the numbers of expulsion but also saves the subjects from traumas that may hinder them from reintegrating into the country of citizenship (IOM 2015, 2001). In the next section, the attention is turned specifically to how this discourse frames the reintegration component as a necessary measure to ensure the reinsertion of irregular migrants in their communities, but here it suffices to state that the lack of coercive techniques during expulsion procedure in the receiving countries is considered at least passively contributing to the *durability* of expulsion (Ghosh 2000b). A key highlight of this new way of thinking about expulsion is that the lack of irregular re-migration becomes an independent criterion to measure the efficiency of expulsion policy as it averts future costs that may result from irregular re-migrations.<sup>11</sup> The difference between deportation discourse and AVRR's then becomes legible; whereas the former justifies the usage of repressive mechanisms that subordinate economic and human concerns to project force and control, the latter relies on the inverse logic, it is a frugal, neoliberal intervention that subordinates its investiture of force to calculations of efficacy, efficiency, and sustainability of expulsion. To use Ghosh's (2000b: 209) economic language, the receiving state is invited to consider AVRR as an 'investment' against irregular migration whose 'dividends will be reaped' in the long run and not just in the present.

Likewise, this neoliberal thinking about expulsion has direct consequences for the relationship between the receiving state and the irregular migrant and the institutional apparatus that supports it. Under deportation, the relationship is framed in terms of domination in the sense that the institutional infrastructure of detention and forced escorts concentrate primarily in the containment of migrant's bodies (cf. Schinkel 2009). AVRR's discourse, on the other hand, counts on another register of power and makes use of another set of tactics and institutions to enforce expulsion orders. A key trope that IOM uses to describe its operations is that these programmes are 'migrant-centred' which respects the 'dignity', 'agency', 'autonomy', and 'choice' of the irregular migrants in all 'return and reintegration stages' (IOM 2019, 2021). In this discourse, irregular migrants are no longer merely legal subjects who are approached through the repressive mechanisms of detention and forced escorting, but they are primarily considered as psychological subjects (Rose 1999) capable of making rational decisions, responding to incentives, and external stimuli. Accordingly, consistent with the neoliberal form of rule, the interventions are not corporeal but are staged at the

perceptive level, since it is the interior/subjectivity of the irregular migrant as a locus of adjustment and calibration (Rose 1999).

Another interesting aspect of AVRR's discourse on the techniques of expulsion is the call for new actors to get involved in the expulsion procedure, supposedly to support the irregular migrants in undertaking their own expulsion. Though the expulsion is framed to be voluntary, AVRR's discourse prescribes a requirement to 'assist' the irregular migrant in making that choice, and that this assistance should come from 'counsellors', preferably working for IOM or local NGOs that would provide them with 'unbiased and reliable information upon which to base the decision' to 'return voluntarily' (IOM 2019: 9). This is how the EU prescribes the arrangement of counselling services in its first 'Return and Reintegration Strategy':

A successful voluntary return process starts with tailored outreach and dialogue between a counsellor and the migrant, during which the migrant receives *timely, up-to-date, and relevant information on their status* and the offer to receive voluntary return support. This dialogue should take place at the earliest possible stage of the migration process, including during asylum procedures if appropriate ... The process should help the migrant plan a safe and dignified return and it should build trust and cooperation between the migrant and the counsellor. (European Commission 2021: 6, emphases added)

Therefore, the voluntariness is not expected to come naturally but needs to be elicited and requires employing the craft of persuasion and guidance. Compared to the work of detention officers and police escorts who rely on coercive state mechanisms, the work of counsellors 'consists in deploying soft-power techniques, by building close bonding relationships and foregrounding agentic power and choice to eventually elicit voluntary return' (Cleton and Chauvin 2020: 298). The appearance of neutrality and establishing deep, personal, bonding relationships in tandem with the financial incentives to opt for AVRR are the new mechanisms aiming to permeate the interior of the migrant who are expected to find in their own expulsion their 'dignity', 'empowerment', and 'freedom'. It is important to note that within this novel institutional constellation, the threat of deportation and detention does not disappear but is relegated as a negative incentive that may push the migrant to subscribe to the AVRR option. The power economy of AVRR discourse integrates the threat of force not with the ultimate intention to activate it, but to produce a deterrence effect against force itself.

However, although this discourse, in its prescriptions of techniques, shows sensitivity to the vulnerabilities and agency of irregular migrants, a closer look at the meaning of its key concepts reveals a reliance on neoliberal understandings of these terms. It is pervasive to AVRR's discourse to promote psychosocial and financial techniques as providing 'the resources and capacities that (irregular migrants) can mobilize to resist or recover from vulnerabilities' that emerge during the expulsion procedure (emphases added; IOM 2018: 15; cf. EU Commission 2017, 2021). This framing of vulnerability as resulting from a 'limited capacity to avoid, resist, cope with, or recover from harm' (IOM 2019: 229) is consistent with neoliberal discourse that makes the individual as the locus of responsabilization in which the subject is expected to become resilient in overcoming challenges on their own (e.g. unemployment, ill health) without questioning the structures that give rise to them (Dean 2009; Scharff 2016). In this sense, AVRR's discourse on expulsion techniques shifts the focus from the conditions of vulnerability that are inherent in the expulsion procedure to individual's capacity to avoid them by complying with their own expulsion. In the same vein, this discourse applies a narrow conception of 'agency', 'autonomy', and 'dignity' as it is used solely to denote to migrant's decision to comply with expulsion without being subjected to force, thereby

excluding more radical acts—such as absconding, disrupting flights, or other forms of bodily resistance—from qualifying as acts of agency (cf. Butler 2016). By emptying these concepts of their subversive connotations, AVRR discourse forecloses forms of action that might challenge or disrupt the expulsion procedure and add additional costs to the receiving states.

### 5.3 On post-expulsion as the end of irregularity

‘Return has been narrowly defined in the current lexicon of governmental and intergovernmental agencies as the fact of leaving the territory of a destination country ... and is all too often associated with the end of the migration cycle’ (Cassarino 2014: 156) is one of the criticisms articulated in a report financed by the EU<sup>12</sup> which aims to provide policymakers with ‘scientific evidence’ on the patterns of reintegration of former irregular migrants in their countries of citizenship. This explicit critique against the conceptualization of expulsion as the end of the migration cycle echoes the concerns that the expulsion policy is divorced from considerations about the potential future ‘risks’ that are associated with the forced expulsion of irregular migrants. In this regard, it is stipulated that ‘an open policy of orderly migration’ requires regarding ‘return as an important interlocking element [of migration management] ... and not an isolated event or the final part of a closed system’ (Ghosh 2000a: 4).

Hence, the recommendation coming out of AVRR discourse is that what happens to the irregular migrant and their local communities in the post-expulsion period should become a concern of policymakers in receiving countries, if they are interested in containing the potential negative consequences that come with the expulsion of irregular migrants. The following reflections by Noll (2000: 103) provide a concise summary of this criticism:

Conceiving return as a mere physical process of transportation will confine our discussion to rather technical matters: may a police officer counter the resistance of a deportee with force? If yes, within which limits? While these issues are important, they represent *only one face of a much larger problem*. Rather, we would propose to conceive return as a *comprehensive concept* spanning over a period from *the manifestation of illegal stay* in the returning country to *a lasting reintegration* in the country of origin. Is speedy return intended as a political objective in the domestic arena of a host state, demonstrating the government’s capacity to control the composition of its population? Or does the returning state subordinate the expeditiousness of return to the *preservation of stability in the country of origin?* (emphases added)

The ejection from the territory of the irregular migrant is not to be seen as the last episode of the migration cycle but only as one of the stages that require follow-up measures to ensure that the irregular migrant does not jeopardize the socioeconomic stability of the country of citizenship, leading to further episodes of irregular movements. This sensitivity to the ‘preservation of stability’ of the country of citizenship demands that the receiving state finances reintegration programmes that would assist former irregular migrants ‘lead productive lives upon return’ and assist their inclusion ‘into local, economic and social activity [so they] attain self-sufficiency’ (The Berne Initiative 2004: 56). This assistance largely consists of the provision of economic support through start-up grants, psychosocial counselling, and health support, that are supposed to guarantee ‘personal safety, economic empowerment, inclusion and social cohesion in communities’ (IOM 2021: 3).

This constitution of post-expulsion as a component of migration management infers that the conceptualization of expulsion as a transfer between sovereigns that settles once and for all the problem of migrant irregularity is posed as inadequate. AVRR’s discourse emphasizes that expulsion may rectify the migrant’s irregular *legal* status by restoring the contractual

link between the expellee and her country of citizenship but argues that this narrow understanding of expulsion does not address the conditions that pushed irregular migrant to migrate, their unfulfilled aspirations, feelings of anxiety, and importantly the fierce competition over scarce resources with the local community. The mere physical act of expulsion is presented as having the restorative legal effect of reintroducing the subject to its 'proper' sovereign but does not address the human dimension of it, the psycho-economic condition of the irregular migrant, and the socioeconomic repercussions that expulsion may have for the community at large. In other words, expulsion is no longer portrayed as 'homegoing' and a move towards sameness; expulsion is dissociated from the metaphysics of easiness, and peacefulness that the idea of 'repatriation' commonly conveys. The expert meeting of the [UN Migration Network \(2021: 3\)](#), for instance, published two papers in which it states:

Returning migrants have diverse capacities, aspirations, vulnerabilities, and individual circumstances requiring a range of tailored return and reintegration support measures. For example, in the case of children 'return' may mean moving to a country where they have never resided, of which they have no memory, or where they have limited cultural or family ties. Additionally, there are multiple adverse drivers and structural factors that compel people to leave their country of origin ... that can lead not only to further abuse and exploitation but also to more cycles of insecure and irregular migration.

Thus, AVRR discourse challenges the assumptions of a straightforward tie between citizens and their countries, by showing that these assumptions do not withstand 'scientific evidence' regarding the consequences of post-expulsion. The stigma of a failed migration journey, the association of expelled irregular migrants with crime and gangs, the problem of not fitting in, and economic deprivation are some of the negative consequences that may be the prelude of further episodes of irregular movements towards destination countries ([IOM 2019](#); [Le Coz 2021](#)). For instance, in the influential Green Paper on expulsion of irregular migrants, the [EU Commission \(2002: 2\)](#) stipulates that 'every sustainable return of an illegal resident is in the common interest of all Member States in order to avoid secondary movements.' This discursive move—from the disengagement with irregular migrants typical of deportation discourse to the urge for reintegration assistance—is significant. Post-expulsion is constructed as a concern of the receiving states, thereby bringing it within the remit of their expulsion policy. The extension of neoliberal interventions with the ultimate aim of stabilizing and including the irregular migrant as a productive member in the local community is premised on this self-enlightened interest that the 'minimize[ing] vulnerability and empower[ing] returnees' in long term will make 'unsafe and irregular remigration options' unlikely ([IOM 2015: 9](#)).<sup>13</sup> It is this risk of irregular remigration that may result from migrant's post-expulsion vulnerabilities and the presumed precarities they bring to their communities that justifies the perpetuation of the relationship between the receiving state and the irregular migrant and invites for interventions in the post-expulsion phase.

In addition, this discourse holds that reintegration programmes will have a positive effect on the economic development of their localities, that in the last instance will translate into less irregular migration of other members of community towards the receiving state. It is assumed that assisting irregular migrants to become business owners not only addresses the challenges of the individual but also opens up the opportunity for these individuals to contribute to increasing the employment prospects of those who never left but may think about leaving irregularly. In other words, reintegration assistance is framed as not only achieving the immediate ambition of stopping the individual relapse to irregular remigration drives but also utilizes them to achieve a 'meaningful impact on the economic and social development

of communities of origin' (European Parliament 2017: 3). As Koser and Kuschminder (2015: 15) assert, the two 'most commonly used indicators for the success of return programmes is the extent to which returnees do not remigrate, and the extent to which their return dissuades others from migrating without authorisation'. Whereas deportation through forceful expulsion uses the deportee as a negative example to those who may plan to migrate irregularly, AVRR through reintegration aims to instrumentalize and co-opt the productive capacities of the irregular migrants to positively affect the prospective irregular migrants to abandon their irregular migratory plans. The expelled irregular migrant is not merely an embodiment of an unsuccessful migratory ambition but also becomes discursively constructed as an active agent whose economic productivity disincentivizes irregular movements of other community members.

A closer examination of this discursive constitution of post-expulsion as a problematic domain in need of reintegration interventions reveals interesting insights into the politics of AVRR discourse. First, the emphasis on the 'sustainability' of reintegration is grounded in a utilitarian logic aimed at preventing future irregular migration, aligning with the interests of receiving states that fund such interventions. This discourse establishes post-expulsion as a site of governance, wherein the future migratory proclivities of expelled individuals are anticipated and pre-emptively addressed. In terms of the outcomes it seeks to produce, AVRR discourse does not diverge from broader migration control strategies, as it seeks to structure the expellees' field of future possible actions by excluding irregular migration as a viable option.<sup>14</sup> In this regard, the discourse suggests that the concerns of receiving states extend beyond the physical expulsion of irregular migrants to encompass a broader objective, that of subjecting expelled migrants to interventions designed to discipline their future migratory aspirations, and incorporate them into migration control agendas. Second, what invites further research is the set of divergent frames through which AVRR discourse represents post-expulsion. As discussed above, the analysed policy documents depict post-expulsion as a period marked by risk and vulnerability, thus promoting reintegration as a necessary intervention. In contrast, Fine and Walters (2022) and Pécoud (2010) have shown that IOM's information campaigns targeting irregular migrants frame expulsion as a form of 'homecoming' or 'reunification with the homeland' thereby reproducing classical imaginaries of congruence between state, territory, and people. This divergence reveals a discursive ambivalence at the core of AVRR and highlights the strategic role of audience in shaping how post-expulsion is selectively narrated. While this inconsistency warrants further empirical inquiry, it also points to the entrepreneurial nature of AVRR actors—particularly IOM—which tailor their messaging to align with the expectations and priorities of different audiences: donors, policymakers, and migrant populations.

## 6. Conclusions

This article examined AVRR's policy discourse by analysing the critique it poses to deportation as forced expulsion. While existing scholarship has provided compelling arguments that AVRR programmes, in practice, do not differ from deportation, this article shifted the focus to the discursive level to examine the distinct knowledge that underpins AVRR's policy discourse. It relied on the concept of problematization to capture the distinctive knowledge that AVRR mobilizes to critique deportation, but also to engage with its limitations in challenging the underlying principles upon which deportation is based. Drawing on CDA of key AVRR policy-relevant documents, the article first identified the broader discourse that AVRR mobilizes to produce knowledge about expulsion, and then examined whose interests are articulated in the solutions it proposes. In this regard, the findings showed that the

distinctiveness of AVRR lies in its reliance on migration management discourse to reconceptualize expulsion, the techniques through which it is carried out, and to integrate the post-expulsion phase within the remit of expulsion policy.

Regarding the *knowledge on expulsion*, the article showed that AVRR policy documents rely on migration management discourse to conceptualize expulsion as a process involving mutually exclusive ‘interests’ between the parties involved (receiving countries, irregular migrants, and countries of citizenship) that must be accommodated for expulsion to be successful. However, the article argues that although this discourse purports to address the concerns of all parties involved, it casts expulsion primarily in terms of ‘interests’, thereby limiting the discursive space in which claims about legitimacy and structural power asymmetries could be articulated. Similarly, AVRR’s knowledge on techniques problematizes the usage of force and coercion in deportation procedures and introduces neoliberal techniques (counselling, financial incentives), that are framed as reducing the vulnerabilities and respecting the agency of irregular migrants. The findings showed that the neoliberal understanding of vulnerabilities put forward by this discourse is narrow and disqualifies more radical acts of agency that may put at risk the expulsion procedure. And lastly, regarding the knowledge on post-expulsion, the article argued that AVRR constitutes post-expulsion as a distinct domain of governance with the aim of disciplining future mobilities of expelled irregular migrants.

In terms of implications of these findings, the recent rise of securitization discourses, border controls, and coercive mechanisms suggest that the managerial discourse of AVRR has not replaced unilateralism in migration governance. In fact, the EU’s growing reliance on AVRR programmes in so-called transit countries further shows that it has become another instrument of external migration control that advances the containment agendas of receiving countries. However, in light of the global proliferation of AVRR programmes, these findings invite scholars to acknowledge the complex empirical make-up of this policy field that still considered to be the last stronghold of sovereignty (Walters 2002, Walters et al., 2022). While securitization discourses and deportation represent the dominant paradigm of expulsion, arresting our analysis solely to it risks obscuring recent developments that are diversifying the discursive repertoire of expulsion governance. The findings highlight that expulsion has become a contested field at global level in which managerial post-control rationality both complement and are in tension with the dominant deportation discourse.

## Notes

1. See: <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/return-and-reintegration/reintegration-assistance/>
2. It needs to be noted that the discursive aspect has received some scholarly attention, but the focus has been mainly in (a) analysing AVRR’s information campaigns and how they try to ‘reshape the political imaginary of deportation’ (Pécoud 2010; Fine and Walters 2022: 3061) by portraying returnees as active agents whose live has changed positively after receiving AVRR assistance, and (b) analysed how the humanitarian discourse surrounding AVRR serves to legitimize and render more palatable the externalization of migration control by Northern receiving states into transit countries (Robinson 2022). This article, instead, looks at the knowledge that AVRR produces about expulsion, its techniques, and post-expulsion, and the discursive framework that underpins such knowledge production.

3. As [Kalm \(2008: 82\)](#) aptly argues, ‘hence, a moment of problematization occurs as a result of difficulties facing a particular practice. But problematization also signals a moment of normalization, as it turns these difficulties into specific problems to which solutions can be designed. In so doing, problematization ... absorbs, and in a sense neutralizes these difficulties.’
4. So, deportation invokes the language of international law to pose itself as an interstate matter of sovereign rights and duties. As [Coleman \(2008: 30\)](#) argues: ‘A recurring argument in the literature is that the refusal of a State to readmit a national who is expelled from the territory of another State would infringe upon the latter State’s territorial sovereignty’.
5. The most important initiatives that have served as multilateral platforms for establishing common principles for the governance of international migration, based on chronological order, are: Cairo International Conference on Population and Development (1994), Berne Initiative (2001), Global Commission on International Migration (2003), Global Forum on Migration and Development (2004), and High-Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development (2006).
6. The adoption of Global Compact on Migration (2018), and New York Declaration for Refugees (2016), which although non-binding documents represent a milestone achievement for mainstreaming migration management principles.
7. See: <https://publications.iom.int/>. It needs to be noted that not all policy documents produced by IOM on AVR(R) were accessible on this platform. I used the services provided by the university library to get access to materials that were not accessible online.
8. The Berne Initiative represents one the key developments and forums in establishing migration management principles. It gathered 121 states to discuss principles of migration management and fostering cooperation between states about issues that pertain to their mutual interest. This initiative delineated the way towards the International Agenda for Migration Management, a UN-led forum for developing principles of migration management.
9. On this point, [Coleman \(2008: 40\)](#) argues that international law restricts benefits that go outside administrative compensations for the readmitting country to ‘prevent the international norm from becoming conditional upon such benefits, and to ensure its continued existence’. The negotiating position of requesting States is generally that the readmission of own nationals is an existing obligation under general international law, which is therefore unconditional and ‘non-negotiable’. [Coleman \(2008: 38\)](#) argues that from the point of view of international law, benefits would ‘jeopardise the fundamental legal position that the readmission of own nationals is a non-negotiable obligation incumbent on any State.’
10. I want to thank an anonymous reviewer for inviting to reflect on the differences between ‘legitimacy’ and ‘interests’ in the expulsion context.
11. For instance, as the final report of the [Berne Initiative \(2004: 55\)](#) concludes; ‘AVR(R) is more politically palatable and cost-effective for countries of destination than mandatory return and is seen by many States as the preferred option ... (as it) *avoids the stigma of deportation* with its potential negative repercussions for successful reintegration. This is because of (its) greater durability of return, easier public acceptance of return programmes, *possible lower recurrent expenditure* to deal with a fresh attempt at re-entry through irregular channels, and increased voluntary return’ (emphases added).
12. CRIS Project is a research project funded by the EU with the aim of ‘addressing the social economic legal and institutional factors and conditions shaping returnees’ patterns of reintegration in their countries of origin’.

13. UN Network for Migration reaches the same conclusions that the risk of irregular remigration exists if no follow-up interventions are given in the post-expulsion stage: 'The limited data on the effectiveness of return programmes suggest that if they are not coupled with robust reintegration programmes, and where root causes for irregular migration persist, migrants, including those previously returned, will still undertake perilous journeys' ([Report of the UN Secretary General 2017](#): 10).
14. In this regard, [Feneberg \(2026\)](#) has also examined the growing influence of reintegration assistance in judicial decisions concerning asylum claims. Increasingly, the existence of reintegration programmes is cited by courts as sufficient justification to reject asylum seekers' assertions that they would face severe deprivation if expelled to their countries of citizenship. Such assistance is viewed as equipping expelled migrants with the necessary means to cope with post-expulsion hardships. As a result, reintegration is no longer seen solely as a post-expulsion policy, but as a factor gaining significance in the asylum determination process itself.

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