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Refugee return and reintegration after mass displacement to Europe

Protocol for a rapid review

Fafo 2026

Refugee return and reintegration after mass displacement to Europe. Protocol for a rapid review

Fafo has been commissioned by the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration to review the research literature on refugee return following mass displacement to Europe. The review asks what shapes intentions, decisions and experiences of return, what leads to successful reintegration, and how measures in host countries can stimulate return. It covers refugees who came to European countries from six displacement situations, ranging from the military coup in Chile in 1973 to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This protocol sets out the criteria, search and analysis strategy, in advance of the search. Findings will be published as a separate report in Fafo's report series in March 2027.

Protocol version 1.0, 3 September 2026. Changes made to this protocol after publication will be recorded, dated and described in the final report.

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1 Background and research questions

Fafo has been commissioned by the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI) to produce a review of the research literature on refugee return following mass displacement to Europe. This review is part of a larger project on return among Ukrainian refugees in Norway, carried out by Fafo in 2026–2027. The commission specifies that the review should cover displacement situations affecting European host countries, with particular emphasis on the Scandinavian countries.

Return after mass displacement has become a policy question in both countries of origin and European host countries. The war in Ukraine and the large-scale displacement it has caused has given the question renewed relevance across Europe. Knowledge is needed about what shapes decisions to return and about the experiences of those who have returned and their reintegration. Systematically reviewing the research literature provides an overview of the available evidence while making the basis for that overview transparent and reproducible.

Norwegian authorities distinguish between situations where people holding a valid residence permit return to their country of origin (*tilbakevending*) and situations where people who have not held or have lost a residence permit return (*retur*). This review adopts the analytical vocabulary of the international literature and uses "return" to describe return intentions, decisions and experiences irrespective of residence status, while retaining the Norwegian distinction where it is empirically relevant.

1.1 Research questions

1. What does the research say about what leads to successful reintegration of refugees[1] after return from European host countries?

2. What does the research say about refugees' intentions, decisions and experiences of return from European host countries following mass displacement?

3. What does the research say about how measures in European host countries can stimulate and motivate refugees to return?

The review will be carried out by three researchers at Fafo: Ida Kjeøy, Guri Tyldum and Nadiya Fedoryshyn. Kjeøy has main responsibility for the review. Titles and abstracts

[1] Displaced from Ukraine with collective protection are not formally recognized as refugees in Europe. We still refer to this group as refugees, drawing on a sociological understanding of refugees, as persons flee their country of origin to escape political violence (see FitzGerald, D. S., & Arar, R. (2018). The sociology of refugee migration. *Annual review of sociology*, *44*(1), 387-406).

will be screened by Kjeøy and Tyldum. Included studies will be read and coded by Kjeøy, Tyldum and Fedoryshyn. The literature search will be carried out by Glenn Karlsen Bjerkenes, Head Librarian at the University of Oslo Library. Ragna Lillevik is responsible for internal quality assurance of the draft report.

2 Methods

The review is a systematic, simplified evidence review (rapid review) informed by the methodology developed by the Cochrane Rapid Review Methods Group.[2] Findings will be published as a separate report in Fafo's report series in March 2027.

2.1 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Table 2.1 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Population	Refugees who fled to Europe from an armed conflict or systematic political persecution as part of a large-scale movement of people from the same country of origin. Eligible displacement situations are listed in table 2.2. People who arrived as part of such a movement are included irrespective of the outcome of their application for protection, including those who returned after a rejected application and those who returned after a temporary permit expired or was withdrawn. Internally displaced persons are excluded. Where a study covers both eligible and ineligible groups, it is included if the findings for the eligible group can be identified separately.
Focus	Studies must address return to the country of origin: intentions, decisions, experiences, or reintegration after return. Studies of refugees in host countries that do not address return are excluded.
Host country	Studies must concern refugees who are or were in a European host country. Studies of return from host countries outside Europe, such as return to Afghanistan from Pakistan, are excluded.
Publication format	Peer-reviewed journal articles, research reports and reviews are included. Reports are included where they present original empirical material or a review of research, and where the method is described. Books, book chapters and theses are excluded, primarily for reasons of time. Working papers, conference papers and preprints are excluded, as are publications that do not present research, such as commentaries, editorials and book reviews.
Language	Studies published in English, Norwegian, Swedish and Danish are included. Studies published only in other languages are excluded because of the capacity available within the project.
Publication year	Studies published before 1989 are excluded. The limit reduces the number of irrelevant records retrieved. For Chile it also means that research on return intentions in exile, most of which was published earlier, falls outside the review; see the note on Chile below.

Mass displacement situations

The review takes as its starting point the concept of a mass displacement situation (mass influx situation / *massefluktsituasjon*) as used in Norwegian immigration law. Under section 34 of the Norwegian Immigration Act, collective protection may be granted to people in a mass influx situation on the basis of a group assessment rather than an individual one. The provision is a contingency mechanism for situations in which very large numbers apply for protection within a short period and the need for protection is

[2] Garritty, C., Hamel, C., Trivella, M., Gartlehner, G., Nussbaumer-Streit, B., Devane, D., Kamel, C., Griebler, U., & King, V. J. (2024). Updated recommendations for the Cochrane rapid review methods guidance for rapid reviews of effectiveness. *BMJ*, 384, e076335. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj-2023-076335

assumed to be temporary.[3] It is this last element that makes the concept useful here. Where protection is granted on a temporary premise, an expectation of eventual return is built into the legal status itself.

Collective protection has been used in Norway in connection with the wars in the former Yugoslavia and following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This review interprets the concept more broadly and includes also other large-scale arrivals to Europe.

This review does not use the legal status granted in the host country as an inclusion criterion. The same displacement situation has been met with different responses in different European countries, and different groups have been granted different statuses within the same country. Applying a status-based criterion would therefore exclude studies of the same displaced population on grounds that reflect national policy rather than the research question.

The situations included are listed in table 2.2. Three considerations informed the selection: 1) the scale of arrivals in European countries from the conflict in question; 2) whether preliminary test searches indicated a body of research on return from European countries large enough to be summarised; 3) the period of the displacement. Situations predating the 1990s are not included, as coverage of the research literature from that period in the databases searched is uneven. An exception here is Chile, which is included for research questions 1 and 3.

The list is closed. Studies of displacement situations not listed are excluded at screening.

Table 2.2 Displacement situations included

Country of origin	Displacement situation[4]
Chile (RQ 1 and 3)	Political persecution under military rule following the 1973 coup, 1973–1989
Bosnia and Herzegovina	The wars in the former Yugoslavia, 1991–1998
Iraq	The 1991 Gulf War, the 2003 invasion and its aftermath, and the conflict with ISIS
Kosovo	The Kosovo conflict, 1998–2000
Syria	The Syrian civil war, from 2011
Ukraine	The Russian invasion, from 2022

[3] Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion (2026). *Prop. 51 L (2025–2026). Midlertidige endringer i lovverket som følge av ankomst av fordrevne fra Ukraina (videreføring m.m.)*. https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/prop.-51-l-20252026/id3153657/

[4] What matters is whether the people studied fled the conflict in question, not when they returned or when the study was published.

Chile is included for research questions 1 and 3. Return from European host countries to Chile took place in connection with the political transition from 1988 onwards, and reintegration after return, as well as the measures host countries established to support return, fall within the period covered by the review. Research on return intentions among Chileans in exile was largely published before 1989 and is therefore not covered. The review does not aim to cover the Chilean literature comprehensively: a substantial part of it is published in Spanish or as books and book chapters, which are excluded on other criteria. Findings on Chile will be reported with this limitation stated.

2.2 Literature search

The research team will propose a list of search terms which will be collated and systematised before test searches are carried out in a selection of research databases and library portals. A reference group with representatives from UDI, IOM Norway, The Ukrainian Organisation in Norway, Caritas Norway, the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security, and The Norwegian Organization for Asylum Seekers (NOAS) will be invited to comment on a draft of the final inclusion and exclusion criteria and search terms. Once the search has been tested and relevant search strings developed, the search will be carried out by Glenn Karlsen Bjerkenes, Head Librarian at the University of Oslo Library, in accordance with this protocol.

Searches will be conducted in the following databases and portals:

- Scopus
- Sociological Abstracts
- International Political Science Abstracts
- Oria (National Library of Norway)
- SwePub (National Library of Sweden)
- Research Portal Denmark (Danmarks Forskningsportal)
- Bielefeld Academic Search Engine

Oria, SwePub, and Research Portal Denmark are the national search services for Scandinavian library collections and are included to ensure broad coverage of Scandinavian research, to which the assignment gives particular weight. The search itself is not restricted to Scandinavian host countries. The emphasis on Scandinavia is instead applied at the synthesis stage, as set out in section 2.6.

A supplementary search will be carried out in Google Scholar to capture reports and other grey literature that are not indexed in the databases and portals listed above. For this search, we will use a simplified version of the search string, adapted to the syntax

available in Google Scholar. Results will be screened in the order returned by relevance ranking, and the first 100 records will be assessed against the inclusion criteria.

Google Scholar will be used as a supplement and not as a primary source seeing as results are ranked rather than retrieved as a complete set, and the ranking cannot be reproduced with certainty at a later date.

Bielefeld Academic Search Engine is chosen because it indexes several institutional archives and can be useful in retrieving relevant grey literature. Grey literature will not be searched systematically beyond the institutional archives indexed in the databases and portals listed above. Reports from public authorities and international organisations, and from consultancies commissioned by them, are therefore covered only where captured by the searches or identified through citation searching. This is a deliberate limitation, consistent with rapid review methodology, and means that some evaluations of return programmes are likely to fall outside the review.

The date of the searches, the search strings used and the number of records screened will be reported in an appendix to the final report.

2.3 Screening and selection

Records retrieved from the searches will be imported into EndNote and duplicates removed before the screening begins. Studies will be selected for full-text reading on the basis of title and abstract. The researchers will screen for relevant studies using Covidence.

To ensure that the inclusion and exclusion criteria are interpreted consistently, we will perform piloting exercises. A purposive selection of 20 per cent of the records will then be screened independently by two researchers (Guri Tyldum and Ida Kjeøy), who will compare their decisions and record the level of agreement. Agreement is measured as the percentage of records on which the two researchers reach the same decision. Where agreement is at least 80 per cent, the remaining records will be screened by one researcher (Ida Kjeøy), for reasons of time. Where it is lower, the criteria will be clarified and a further sample double-screened before single screening begins. Disagreements will be resolved through discussion.

We will use machine learning to prioritise records for screening (Covidence). This software ranks records by predicted relevance based on decisions already made by the researchers, so that records likely to be included are screened first. Screening of the ranked records stops when at least 30 percent of the records have been screened and when 200 consecutive records have been screened without a further inclusion. The number of records screened and the point at which screening stopped will be reported.

The number of records identified, screened, assessed in full-text, excluded and included will be reported in a flow diagram following PRISMA 2020.

2.4 Citation searching

Citation searching will be carried out after full-text screening has been completed. The reference lists of included studies will be screened, and publications citing the included studies retrieved, using citationchaser.[5] Records identified through citation searching will be assessed against the inclusion criteria in table 2.1 in the same way as records retrieved from the databases.

2.5 Full-text reading and coding

Included studies will be subsequently read and coded. Three researchers (Guri Tyldum, Ida Kjeøy, and Nadiya Fedoryshyn) will divide the studies between themselves. The coding form will be piloted on five studies before coding begins and adjusted where categories prove unclear. Coding categories include:

- study design (qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods), data source and sample size
- data collection period
- whether the study concerns intentions, decisions or experiences
- displacement situation and host country
- which explanations for return are presented
- which dimensions of reintegration the study addresses
- whether the study addresses the consequences of policy changes or policy measures
- whether the study concerns return during conflict, shortly after a peace agreement, or a long time after the security situation permitted return
- characteristics of the refugees, including residence status
- whether measures intended to support return or reintegration are absent, described, or evaluated
- the type of measure addressed

[5] Haddaway, N. R., Grainger, M. J., & Gray, C. T. (2021). citationchaser: An R package and Shiny app for forward and backward citations chasing in academic searching. Doi: 10.5281/zenodo.4543513

All records screened will be retained in a database recording the screening decision, in a way that allows the body of literature identified to be used to address new research questions in later assignments, by selecting other studies for full-text reading than those selected here.

2.6 Analysis and synthesis

Findings will be synthesised narratively, structured by the three research questions. Studies will be grouped by displacement situation and host country, and, for research question 3, by the type of measure addressed. Where several studies address the same question, agreement and disagreement between them will be described, and differences considered in light of the coded characteristics of the studies, including design, data source and the period of data collection. No statistical meta-analysis is carried out, as the studies are expected to differ in design, population and outcome measures.

Where the evidence for a question is limited to a small number of studies, or to a single displacement situation or host country, this will be stated.

Findings will be reported in two layers for each research question. Studies concerning Scandinavian host countries (Norway, Sweden and Denmark) will be presented first, followed by studies from other European host countries, which serve as context and comparison. Where at least five included studies address Scandinavian host countries for a given research question, and these cover more than one displacement situation, the Scandinavian evidence is reported in a separate section. Where fewer studies are available, or all concern a single displacement situation, they are reported together with the wider European material and the limited basis is stated.

2.7 Limitations

The review streamlines several steps compared with a full systematic review. No formal quality appraisal of the included studies will be carried out. Records excluded at title and abstract stage and at full-text stage will not be verified by a second researcher, beyond the sample that is double-screened. These are deliberate choices made within the time available.

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