



Decentring the Study of Migrant  
Returns and Return Policies

# Who Favors Return? Exploring the Drivers of Attitudes Toward Return Migration in Europe

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Authors

**Lamis Saleh, Zeynep Şahin-Mencütek**

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## Abstract

Public attitudes toward return of migration are increasingly relevant to European policy debates, especially as governments prioritise enforcement of return orders issued to ‘unauthorised’ ‘irregular’ migrants. This paper examines the social and contextual determinants of public attitudes toward such returns in five EU member states: Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Poland, and Sweden. Drawing on original survey data, we explore how individual-level characteristics such as age, gender, education, income, political orientation, migration background, personal contact with migrants, and trust influence support for return migration. Our results show more restrictive attitudes found among respondents who are wealthier, politically right-leaning, or hold lower educational attainment. They highlight the significance of trust, personal contact with migrants, and political ideology as key predictors. Our findings also show that while national contexts matter, many attitudinal trends are consistent across borders.

This paper contributes to a limited but growing body of research on the public legitimacy of return policies, offering insights that can inform both public discourse and policy design. A key contribution of our study lies in its disaggregation of the attitudes toward return into four distinct dimensions: namely general support for return and return based on economic, cultural and security concerns. This approach allows us to move beyond the surface-level attitudes often discussed in public and political discourse and delve more into the complex nature of public opinion towards return. While certain predictors, such as political ideology, anti-migrant attitudes and trust did have consistent effects across all dimensions, others varied drastically. For instance, economic concerns prevailed more among middle-aged respondents, cultural concerns were reflected among older cohorts, and higher-income individuals were the most expressive of security concerns. These findings prove that public attitudes towards return are not uniform and indeed not one-dimensional. They are shaped by different fears and threat perceptions among people. Upon understanding the specific drivers, targeted policy interventions as well as communication strategies can be used to reduce public concern and promote better evidence-based discourses about migrants and coerced returns.

**Keywords:** Return Migration, Public Attitudes, Migration Policy, European Union

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, return migration, particularly coerced returns of rejected asylum seekers and irregular migrants, has become a central and politically charged issue in European public discourse. Debates about the return and deportation have featured prominently in election campaigns and parliamentary sessions across Europe. The trend is particularly evident in Western European countries, where immigration became salient in national elections and where radical right-wing parties have led the push to politicise migration. These parties do not only frame returns as a reaction to migration flows but as a tool to regain control and reinforce cultural sovereignty. Furthermore, political elite discourse has been found to influence public opinion directly, increasing anti-immigrant sentiment among right-leaning voters regardless of actual immigration levels (Hutter and Kriesi 2022; Schmidt-Catran and Czymara 2023).

While return migration is often used as a political currency, the general public is far from disengaged. The politicization of migration does indeed have the potential to shape broader societal attitudes. Such a discussion increases resentment, reinforces cultural and economic threats and influences how citizens evaluate who should stay and who should return (Ayasli 2024). Understanding public attitudes towards return migration is crucial, as public support or opposition can indeed influence the legitimacy and implementation of return policies. While research has extensively examined public attitudes towards immigration (Heath and Richards 2019; Czymara 2020; Coninck et al. 2021; Gu et al. 2022; Murray and Marx 2013), little is known about how individuals form opinions about return migration (Gerhards and Dilger 2020).

This paper seeks to fill this gap by answering the central question of which economic, cultural, social, and security-related factors influence public attitudes towards the return of refugees, and how these influences operate across individual and societal levels. Recognising that return migration is a complex phenomenon, we systematically examine its impact from multiple perspectives (general, economic, cultural and security angles) to capture public attitudes towards it at best. To answer our research question, we develop a set of hypotheses that shape attitudes. The first focuses on individual-level socio-demographic characteristics (such as age, gender, education and income). The second draw on contact theory and the third hypothesis explores the role of social trust in shaping attitudes towards return.

We draw on original data from a cross-national online survey conducted in five European countries (Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Poland and Sweden). The findings of our study show that attitudes towards return are shaped by a complex combination of individuals' characteristics, political orientation and the nature of social relations. Older age, lower levels of education, and right-wing political views are consistently associated with strong support for return across the different return dimensions. In contrast, higher levels of trust and more favourable attitudes toward refugee reception are consistently linked to reduced support for return.

We find additionally that on the one hand, higher contact levels with migrants do not show a consistent impact on return support, on the other hand, having close personal relationships appears to lower the support for return. Gender and income emerge as relevant in specific domains: women show less support and exhibit significantly lower support for return driven by economic concerns. Wealthier individuals express more security-related concerns. Finally, notable country-level differences do emerge in our study, with respondents specifically in the Netherlands expressing stronger return preferences across the various models.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows: in the following section, we present the scholarly work addressing attitudes towards migration and refugees, and the limited research on attitudes towards return, and then we present our hypotheses. In section three, we discuss our survey data along with an explanation about the variables we use in our analysis and our method. Section four presents the results of our analysis, and section five concludes.

## 2. Attitudes towards Return Migration

Understanding the public attitudes towards migration has been the subject of extensive scholarly research. While most of the literature has focused on attitudes towards immigration, refugees and asylum seekers, very little has explored attitudes towards return migration in particular. A distinctive exception is the study by Gerhards and Dilger 2020 which investigates European citizens' attitudes towards return. Through a quantitative survey, they find that individuals who initially supported refugee reception and those with higher contact levels with refugees are significantly less likely to support their return. Conversely, people with lower educational attainment, nationalist views, and a right-wing political orientation were more likely to favor return. They additionally find that labor market position had no effect. Interestingly, cultural openness was also linked to lower support for return.

Much of the broader literature on attitudes towards migration and refuge has pointed to individual socio-demographic characteristics as central explanatory factors. Age emerges as a salient factor in multiple studies with older respondents expressing more negative views toward immigrants and refugees (Heath and Richards 2019; Coninck et al. 2021; Gu et al. 2022; Murray and Marx 2013). Although no consensus was found on its impact, gender has also been found to affect attitudes towards migration, with females holding more positive attitudes and expressing more views against deportation (Anderson and Ferguson 2018; Cogley et al. 2019). Education is repeatedly linked to tolerance and openness, with higher levels of education associated with more favorable attitudes (Heath and Richards 2019; Anderson and Ferguson 2018; Coninck et al. 2021; Gu et al. 2022; Wike et al. 2016). Economic position, namely income levels, has been shown to correlate with perceptions of threat and resource competition, translating to lower income levels being associated with more negative attitudes (Heath and Richards 2019; Abdelaaty and Steele 2022).

Alongside socio-economic traits, political orientation plays a well-established role in shaping public opinion on refugees and migration. Individuals who identify with the right-wing of the political spectrum are more likely to hold conservative or restrictive views towards migrants and refugees (Anderson and Ferguson 2018; Czymara 2020; Meidert and Rapp 2019; Gu et al. 2022). Similarly, a strong sense of national identity or pride has been associated with increased hostility towards immigration especially when it is seen as a threat to cultural cohesion (Meidert and Rapp 2019; Cogley et al. 2019).

Another framework in the literature is contact theory, which suggests that personal interaction with members of an out-group reduces prejudice and increases positive attitudes (Williams 1947). Not only was it supported in the context of return, as found by Gerhards and Dilger (2020) presented above. Also, many studies support this claim in the context of migration and refuge as well. Valentova and Berzosa (2012), Ghosn et al. (2019) and Menshikova and van Tubergen (2022) find that greater contact with migrant and refugees leads to more favorable attitudes. However, Abdul Reda et al. (2024) found that the lack of contact as observed during the COVID-19 pandemic has been linked to more neutral or even positive attitudes.

A related but distinct variable that has also been scarcely explored in its relation to public attitudes towards migration is social trust. Studies have shown that individuals with higher levels of interpersonal or institutional trust are generally more open to immigration and less likely to view migrants, as well as refugees, as a threat (Herreros and Criado 2009; Halapuu et al. 2013).

In summary, previous research on attitudes offers a solid foundation for understanding the potential drivers of public attitudes for return migration. Drawing on this literature, we organize the determinants of attitudes into three categories: **individual-level characteristics, the role of contact and social trust**. Accordingly, we develop three sets of hypotheses that aim to explain variation in public support for return.

*Hypothesis 1: Individual socio-demographic characteristics, political orientation, and personal concerns are associated with support for return*

*Hypothesis 1a: Older individuals are more likely to support return compared to younger individuals.*

*Hypothesis 1b: Individuals with higher levels of educational attainment are less likely to support return.*

*Hypothesis 1c: Individuals with lower income levels are more likely to support return.*

*Hypothesis 1d: Individuals with right-leaning political orientations are more likely to favor return.*

*Hypothesis 1e: Individuals who hold more favorable attitudes toward refugee reception are less likely to support return.*

*Hypothesis 2: Higher levels of contact with different groups of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees are associated with less support for return.*

*Hypothesis 3: Higher levels of social trust are negatively associated with support for the return of refugees.*

### **3. Data and Methods**

This study uses original survey data collected across five European countries: Germany, Greece, Poland, Sweden and the Netherlands. The data collection took place between August 2024 and January 2025.<sup>1</sup> The final sample consists of 5,941 respondents aged 16 and above, with country samples of 1,009 (Germany), 1,430 (Greece), 863 (Poland), 1,196 (Netherlands), and 1,443 (Sweden). The study was approved by the Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies (BICC) ethical board (July 2024). The survey was conducted online, with recruitment taking place via targeted advertisements on Meta platforms (Facebook and Instagram). Respondents were recruited via ads featuring images of migrant groups and country-specific headlines (e.g. “Migration in Germany”) in respective languages, combined with a call to participate in the survey. The ad redirected respondents to the LimeSurvey introduction page of the survey, which provided information on the study’s aim, data protection measures, and voluntary participation. Proceeding with the survey was considered informed consent.

The survey instrument was originally developed in English and subsequently translated into the respective languages by local teams and back-translated to English to ensure consistency. We ensured that our design of the survey questions simplified the wording as well as reduced the length of the survey to eliminate respondents’ fatigue. Attitude questions were limited to 5-point Likert scale answers to ensure comparability. We limited the number of personal socio-demographic questions as much as possible to make sure we preserved the anonymity of participants. The structure and design of the socio-demographic questions, as well as their choice answers, were adopted from the respective country profiles of the European Value Survey. To ensure representativeness, post-stratification weights were applied to correct for any imbalances in the sample. The weights were derived from national censuses to match the sample distributions with the targeted population. Weights were specifically applied for age, gender and geographical location of residence.

The survey included several modules: a vignette experiment in which respondents evaluated hypothetical returnees varying in origin, gender, language proficiency, and educational and occupational background; items measuring attitudes toward migration, asylum, and return policies; questions on social contact with diverse groups and levels of trust; and a battery of

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<sup>1</sup> A pilot study of the mentioned survey was first carried out in Germany 2024 to test the survey instruments and procedures. For more details about the survey and its results check: Saleh, L. (2025). Public Attitudes towards Return Migration: Analysis of five EU member states. *GAPs: De-Centring the Study of Migrant Returns and Readmission Policies in Europe and Beyond*. <https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.15766714>

socio-demographic measures. The vignette experiment results are not integrated into this working paper.

### 3.1. The sample

Respondents were asked about their gender, age, marital status, city of residence, education, employment, income, political orientation, religion, and family migration history. Our sample's gender ratio is 68% males, 30% females and less than 2% non-binary and has a mean age of 53. The majority of the sample are married (60%), and the largest share either holds a vocational or a university educational degree. 75% of the participants are employed, and around 21% were once employed and are now retired. Results on household income reveal that the majority identify their household income in upper-middle- or high-income groups (62%). We have also included a measure on migration background -if one or two of the parents were born in different countries- and find that 14% of our sample have a migration background. We also find that 24% of our sample reports that their ancestors were forcibly displaced at some point in time. When it comes to religious affiliation, one main category dominates our sample, namely Christianity (97%), followed by Islam (1.3%) and Judaism (0.6%). Respondents' political orientation was measured using a self-placement scale ranging from 1 to 10, where 1 indicates a position on the far left of the political spectrum and 10 presents a position on the far right. The mean score on this scale was 6.7. Table 1 shows the breakdown of the individual characteristics of our sample by country.

Table 1. Descriptive results of individual-level characteristics

	Germany	Greece	Netherlands	Poland	Sweden
<b>Gender</b>					
<b>Male</b>	60.41	73.66	70.77	55.73	73.41
<b>Female</b>	37.96	25.48	28.29	40.85	25.39
<b>Non-binary</b>	1.63	0.86	0.95	3.42	1.20
<b>Age</b>					
<b>16-25 years</b>	8.33	4.20	3.26	17.27	4.02
<b>25-35 years</b>	7.73	8.25	5.85	15.76	8.32
<b>35-45 years</b>	11.69	15.31	9.03	15.53	10.88
<b>45-55 years</b>	16.85	27.13	20.57	16.80	18.92
<b>55-65 years</b>	32.41	30.21	31.27	16.80	28.62
<b>65 years-above</b>	22.99	14.90	30.02	17.84	29.24
<b>Marital Status</b>					
<b>Single</b>	22.37	20.85	14.72	33.33	14.30
<b>Married/ Partnership</b>	56.47	64.74	68.26	50.73	61.06
<b>Divorced/ Separated</b>	15.68	11.19	13.16	10.10	20.62
<b>Widowed</b>	5.48	3.22	3.86	5.84	4.03
<b>Education</b>					
<b>Lower Secondary</b>	34.49	3.17	6.80	2.73	5.36
<b>Upper Secondary</b>	19.94	14.11	23.00	15.07	22.52
<b>Vocational</b>	12.66	18.36	35.14	26.81	19.59
<b>University</b>	8.76	38.16	13.61	16.61	32.38
<b>Postgraduate</b>	24.16	26.21	21.45	38.79	20.16

<b>Employment</b>					
<b>Student</b>	3.04	0.61	0.37	5.42	2.77
<b>Employed</b>	84.30	83.68	70.50	72.17	67.34
<b>Unemployed</b>	1.65	2.89	1.48	1.35	1.35
<b>Retired</b>	11.01	12.81	27.64	21.06	28.54
<b>Income level</b>					
<b>Low</b>	14.02	6.95	4.84	2.63	4.72
<b>Lower-Middle</b>	17.84	16.65	8.50	5.40	9.89
<b>Middle</b>	20.16	31.20	16.30	11.09	10.11
<b>Upper-Middle</b>	20.63	21.02	32.11	20.15	19.78
<b>Upper</b>	27.35	24.17	38.24	60.73	55.51
<b>Religion Belonging</b>	36.00	72.00	31.50	65.00	34.00
<b>Religion</b>					
<b>Buddhism</b>	1.49	0.21	1.19	0.42	0.21
<b>Christianity</b>	92.50	99.50	91.90	95.60	95.00
<b>Hinduism</b>	0.00	0.00	0.30	0.00	0.21
<b>Islam</b>	3.28	0.00	3.28	1.26	0.87
<b>Judaism</b>	0.29	0.32	0.32	0.60	1.10
<b>Political Orientation</b>	5.93	5.71	7.19	6.23	7.01
<b>Migration Background</b>					
<b>Yes</b>	17.94	10.49	12.29	9.73	21.69
<b>No</b>	82.06	89.51	87.71	90.27	78.31
<b>Ancestor displacement</b>					
<b>Yes</b>	41.14	42.42	8.43	31.89	4.94
<b>No</b>	58.86	57.58	91.57	68.11	95.06

Notes: Values are in percentages unless otherwise specified. The number of observations (N) may vary by variable depending on missing values. The N shows the total number of respondents per country. Percentages (%) are calculated within each country sample. Minor rounding differences may occur.

### 3.2. Dependent Variables

To test our hypotheses, we draw upon the responses towards specific questions to create our dependent variables. Our survey enables us to tackle different aspects of return to understand the concept from all angles. We divide the notion of return into four elements, namely: (1) The general opinion towards the return of asylum seekers, (2) The link between return and the economic and social conditions, (3) The effect of return on the culture of the host country, and (4) The association between return and security threats.

To measure each of these elements, we combine different items from our survey. For the first element, we create the variable (**Return**). It measures the degree to which individuals support the return of refugees to their country of origin once their asylum claim is no longer valid. For the economic and social element, we use the variable (**Return - Economic Concerns**), which measures the degree of support for the return of refugees to their country of origin as a means to reduce pressure on the economy and social welfare system. The survey questions capturing this variable include the following items: "Asylum seekers who are working and contributing to the economy should not return to their countries of origin", "Asylum seekers who depend on social and economic support (welfare) from the government should return to

their countries of origin”, “The return of asylum seekers will remove pressure from the social services and infrastructure like (schools and hospitals) of the country”, “The return of asylum seekers will increase job opportunities in the country”.

To measure the cultural impact of return, we create the variable (**Return- Cultural Concerns**). The variable measures the degree of support for the return of refugees to their country of origin to preserve the cultural identity of the host country. It is based on the answers to the following items: “Asylum seekers who are integrated in the country should not return to their countries of origin” and “The return of asylum seekers to their countries of origin is a loss to the country”. Finally, the notion of security threats is measured via (**Return- Security Concerns**), which measures the extent of refugee return support due to perceived security risks associated with their presence. The survey questions capturing this variable include the following items: “Asylum seekers who engage in any crime or break the law should return to their countries of origin”. Items are coded to reflect the definition of the variables. All four variables are standardized to reflect the 1-5 Likert scale used in the survey. Table 2 shows, in addition to the definition of each of the variables, their corresponding survey items.

Table 2. Definition of Dependent Variables

Variable	Definition	Survey Item
<b>Return</b>	Support return to the country of origin once the claim for refugee is no longer valid	1. Asylum seekers should return to their countries of origin once the situation has improved
<b>Return-Economic Concerns</b>	Support return to the country of origin to relieve the burden on the economy, as well as the social systems	1. Asylum seekers who are working and contributing to the economy should not return to their countries of origin 2. Asylum seekers who depend on social and economic support (welfare) from the government should return to their countries of origin 3. The return of asylum seekers will remove pressure from the social services and infrastructure, such as schools and hospitals, of the country 4. The return of asylum seekers will increase job opportunities in the country
<b>Return-Cultural Concerns</b>	Support return to the country of origin to protect the culture of the host country	1. Asylum seekers who are integrated in the country should not return to their countries of origin 2. The return of asylum seekers to their countries of origin is a loss to the country
<b>Return-Security Concerns</b>	Support return to the country of origin, as the presence presents a security threat	1. Asylum seekers who engage in any crime or break the law should return to their countries of origin

We find some variation in the mean scores of our four variables of interest. While the mean for the main return variable was 4.4, we see lower scores for return support for economic as well as cultural reasons (3.8 and 3.7). When it comes to security concerns, we find the highest mean value (4.7). Table 3 shows the division of our dependent variables by country. We find

in Greece the lowest support for the main return if the situation in the home country improves. Respondents in the Netherlands seem to express the most economic concerns, followed by Swedish respondents. Cultural concerns are the lowest in Poland. All countries in our sample appear to share the same concern towards security.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of dependent variables

Dependent Variable	Germany	Greece	Netherlands	Poland	Sweden
Return	4.35 (1.14)	4.02 (1.19)	4.57 (0.98)	4.25 (1.12)	4.30 (1.15)
Return- Economic Concerns	3.42(1.04)	3.72 (1.01)	3.87 (1.01)	3.61 (1.04)	3.81 (1.04)
Return- Cultural Concerns	3.41 (1.07)	3.72(0.99)	4.11 (1.03)	3.24 (1.09)	3.81 (1.04)
Return- Security Concerns	4.61 (0.96)	4.54 (0.95)	4.78 (0.69)	4.79 (0.695)	4.74 (0.76)

### 3.3. Controls

We refer to other variables within our survey that will help explain the variations in attitudes according to our hypotheses. We are first interested in understanding how the view towards migration shall affect our variables of interest, so we use the respondents' evaluation of the following item: "How does increasing the number of people of different nationalities living in the country affect you?" We additionally investigate the impact of the view towards the arrival of refugees in the first place, using "Refugees that come to the country escaping from war/prosecution shall be allowed to stay". We also use the rate of satisfaction with government performance as one of our explanatory variables "How would you rate your satisfaction with the way the current government is dealing with refuge and asylum processes". To inspect our third hypothesis concerning contact levels, we use two variables: how often respondents get in touch with migrants, refugees and asylum seekers and if they have any friends with a migration background. We use questions on trust to investigate our social trust hypothesis. The control variables, along with their definitions, are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Definition of control variables

Variable	Definition	Survey Item
Anti-Migration	The extent to which respondents are against the presence of people of different nationalities living in their country	How does increasing the number of people of different nationalities make living in the country (1= A lot better, 5= A lot worse)
Refugee Admission Support	The degree to which the respondent supports the admission of refugees into the country	Refugees who come to the country escaping from war/persecution shall be allowed to stay (1=Strongly disagree, 5=Strongly Agree)

Government Unsatisfaction	The degree of satisfaction of respondents with the government when it comes to refugee policy and asylum procedures	How would you rate your satisfaction with the way the current government is dealing with refugee and asylum processes (1= Very Satisfied, 5= Very Unsatisfied)
Contact levels	The level of contact with migrants and asylum seekers	How often do you come into contact with migrants and asylum seekers (1= Never, 5= Very Often)
Migrant Friends	Dummy variable inquiring if the respondent had any friends from a migration background	Do you have any friends with a migration background (0= No, 1= Yes)
Trust levels	Dummy variable for the degree to which the respondents trust other individuals	Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people: Most people can be trusted (0= No, 1= Yes)

Table 5 presents the descriptive statistics for the control variables. Overall, the values indicate moderate to high levels of anti-migration sentiment and government dissatisfaction in most countries, alongside not very high support for refugee admission. Contact levels with migrants fall in the mid-range, suggesting different levels of social interaction. More than 50% of respondents in all countries have friends with a migration background. When it comes to trust levels, they vary between countries, with low trust tendencies across all.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics of control variables

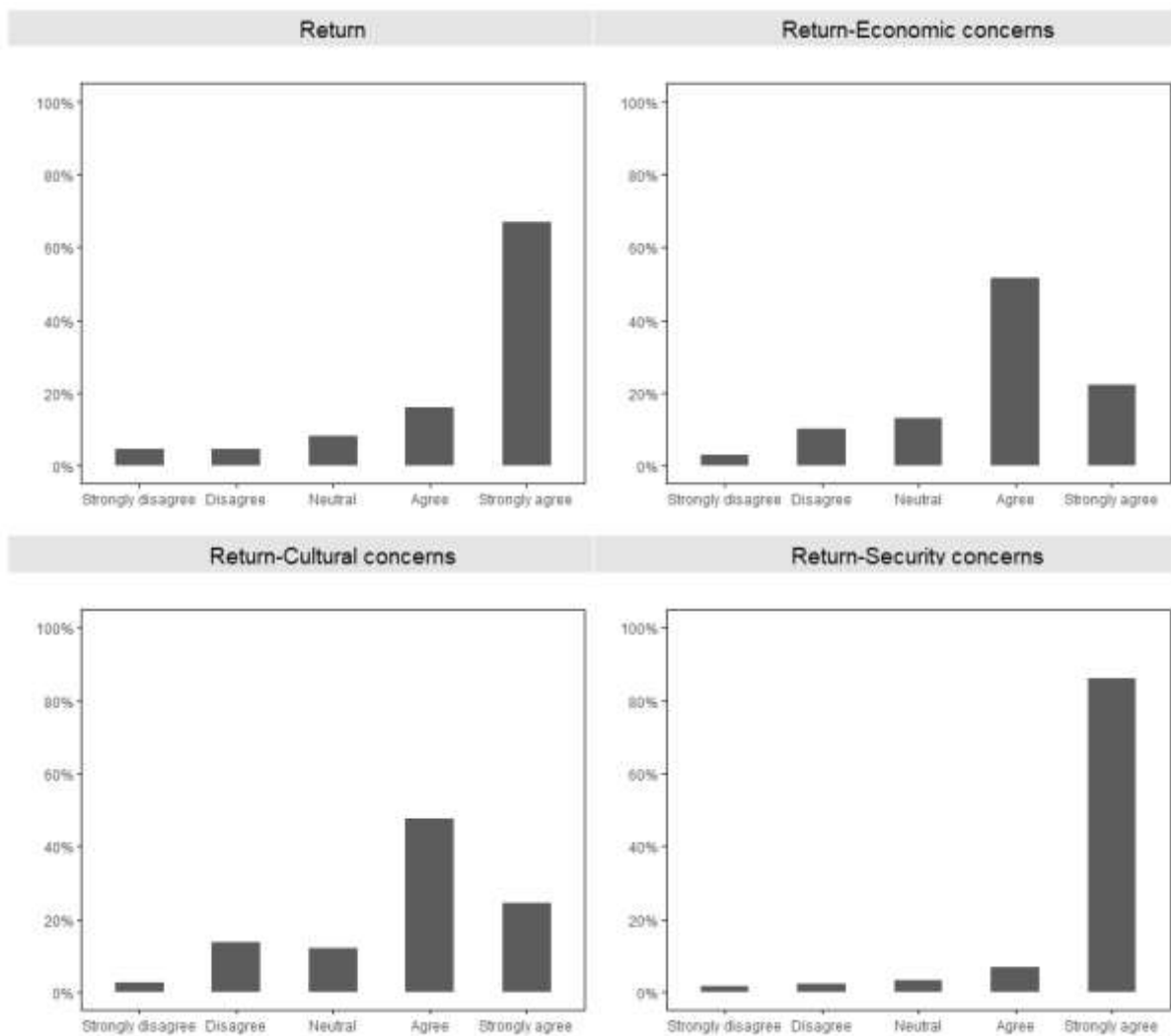
Independent Variable	Germany	Greece	Netherlands	Poland	Sweden
<b>Anti-Migration</b>	4.30 (1.15)	4.30 (1.03)	4.39 (1.06)	3.99 (1.21)	4.21 (1.21)
<b>Refugee Admission Support</b>	2.67 (1.43)	2.64 (1.39)	2.56 (1.49)	2.55 (1.37)	2.37 (1.39)
<b>Government Unsatisfaction</b>	4.69 (0.76)	4.41 (0.87)	4.19 (1.11)	4.27 (0.94)	3.72 (1.25)
<b>Contact levels</b>	3.69 (0.89)	3.18 (1.01)	3.61 (0.85)	3.29 (0.87)	3.66 (0.89)
<b>Migrant Friends</b>	0.71 (0.45)	0.61 (0.49)	0.61 (0.50)	0.57 (0.50)	0.82(0.38)
<b>Trust levels</b>	0.33 (0.47)	0.23 (0.42)	0.35 (0.48)	0.15 (0.36)	0.48 (0.50)

Given the ordinal nature of our dependent variables, we employ ordinal logistic regression models to analyze the data. This approach allows for the outcomes that reflect ordered categories, as it accounts for the rank order of the responses. To ensure that the results are representative of the broader population, we apply post-stratification weights based on the main demographic characteristics, namely: age, gender and region. These weights correct for sampling imbalances and align the sample distributions with the known population parameters.

#### 4. Results

Figure 1 shows the distribution of responses for the four dependent variables, each measured on a scale from strongly disagree to agree, which represents a higher return support strongly. The plots illustrate how respondents evaluated the different types of return migration. Notably, Return and Return- Security Concerns are characterized by notably stronger agreement levels, with the majority of respondents selecting strongly agree, suggesting that they are the most compelling justifications for return migration. On the other hand, Return-Economic Concerns and Return- Cultural Concerns display more evenly distributed responses, though Agree remains the most common choice still. The patterns presented indicate that general return and return for security concerns are intensely endorsed, while return for economic and cultural considerations elicit more mixed views among respondents.

Figure 1. Support of Return by category

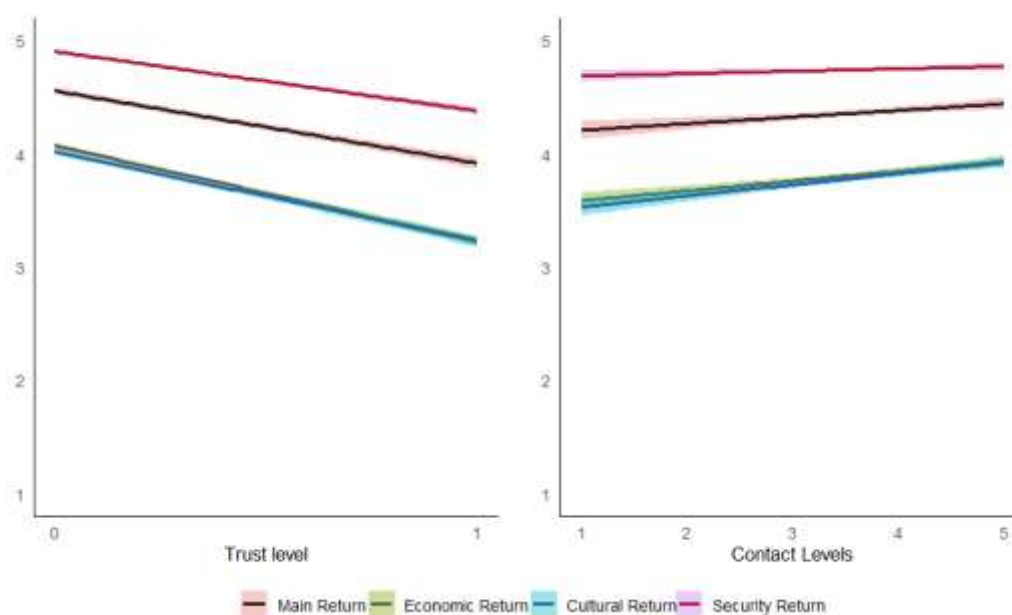


We then move to explaining attitudes towards return in line with our hypotheses. We first examine our second and third hypotheses, namely that contact levels and social trust shape attitudes towards return. In Figure 2, we present the predicted values of the four return categories as a function of trust levels (left panel) and contact levels (right panel)<sup>2</sup>. We find a

<sup>2</sup> The dependent variables are renamed in the figure into Main Return, Economic Return, Cultural Return and Security Return respectively for spacing reasons.

clear negative association between trust and return. As trust increases, support for return migration drops across all dimensions, showing initial support of our hypothesis towards trust and return attitudes. When it comes to contact levels, the results reveal a positive relationship between contact with migrants and asylum seekers and return support, contradicting our hypothesis about the negative association between contact levels and return support. We provide more support for these initial insights in our regression models.

Figure 2. Trust levels, Contact Levels and Return support



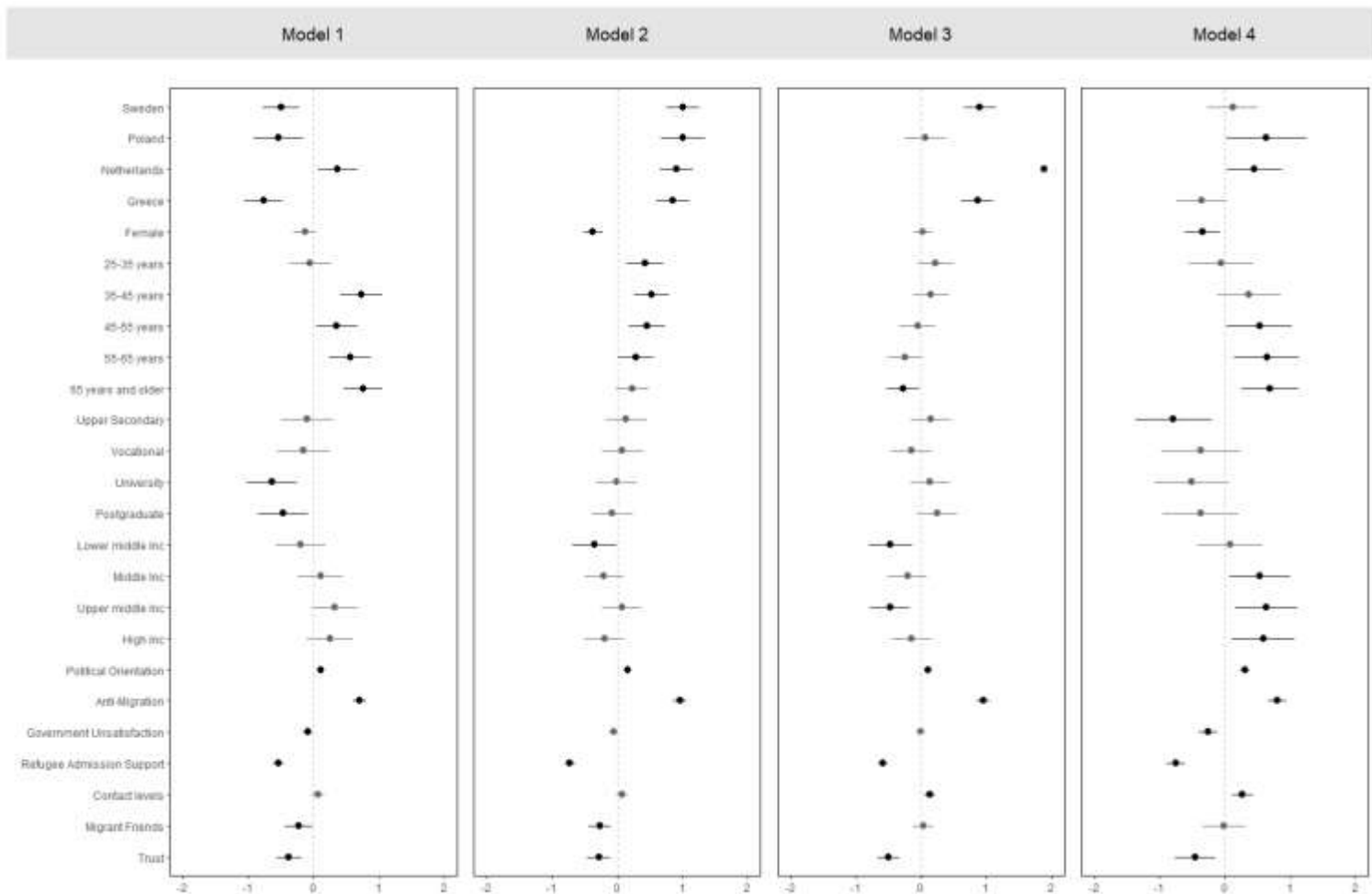
We show the results of our models using coefficient plots in Figure 3. Models 1 to 4 represent the ordinal logistic regression results of our different dependent variables. In model 1, we find that age is positively associated with support for return. In contrast, higher levels of education are negatively related to support for return, suggesting that more educated respondents are less supportive of such measures. Anti-migrant attitudes are linked to greater endorsement of return, while individuals with more right-leaning political orientations similarly show increased support. We find that the attitudes towards accepting war refugees have an opposing effect, with more favourable views toward refugee admission associated with diminished support for return. Although we do not find a significant impact of higher contact with migrants, having friends with a migration background is associated with reduced support for return. Finally, we find that higher trust levels are associated with lower support for return. We find some country variation, with Germany being the baseline, respondents in Sweden, Poland, and Greece exhibit significantly lower support for return. In contrast, those in the Netherlands display substantially higher support.

Moving on to our second measure of return attitudes, which focuses on economic considerations shown in model 2. We find that females exhibit significantly lower support for return driven by economic concerns. We do not find a consistent pattern of age; for those aged between 25 and 55 years, there is an economic concern calling for return, an effect that is not observed among older cohorts. We find stronger economic motivations for supporting return for those with anti-migrant attitudes. Political placement also plays a role here, with people with a right-wing orientation expressing greater economic concerns that translate into higher support for return. We find a slightly positive effect of contact levels with migrants on economically based support for return. Similar to the main return variable, we find that friendships with migrants and higher trust levels reduce the economic concerns that affect

return support. We also find some country differences, with respondents from all countries significantly expressing more economic worries that favour return than in Germany.

Model 3 shows our third variable of analysis, examining support for return based on cultural concerns. Here, we find that age plays a role; individuals in older age groups express less concern about cultural threats, corresponding with lower support for return on cultural grounds. At the same time, we do not find consistent evidence that education or income significantly shapes cultural motivations for return. Similar to our previous results, anti-migrant attitudes are positively associated with the belief that return is necessary to safeguard one's culture. On the other hand, we find that more welcoming attitudes toward accepting refugees are linked to reduced support for culturally motivated return. Trust also exhibits a negative relationship, indicating that higher trust levels are associated with diminished cultural concerns prompting return. We also find greater support for return based on cultural reasons among respondents in Sweden and the Netherlands.

Figure 3. Coefficient plot of determinants of attitudes towards return migration



When it comes to the regression results for the support of return on security grounds, as shown in model 4, we find that respondents from Poland and the Netherlands show more support for security-based return in comparison to Germany; no substantial differences are found for Greece and Sweden. Age is a consistent variable with more support for return. Educational attainment does not show significant associations. On the other hand, we find here that income plays a role, with more wealthy individuals exhibiting more security concerns. As before, anti-immigration and right-wing political attitudes are more pro-return on security

grounds. Similar to higher contact levels with different migrant groups. Similar to the previous models, we find that higher trust levels negatively affect support even for security grounds. The regression results are shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Determinants of Attitudes Toward Return

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Return	Economic concerns	Cultural concerns	Security concerns
Greece	-0.769*** (0.146)	0.852*** (0.130)	0.865*** (0.128)	-0.357* (0.198)
Netherlands	0.373** (0.156)	0.906*** (0.129)	1.885*** (0.132)	0.449** (0.217)
Poland	-0.540*** (0.194)	1.003*** (0.173)	0.058 (0.166)	0.640** (0.314)
Sweden	-0.502*** (0.144)	1.007*** (0.129)	0.903*** (0.128)	0.121 (0.200)
Anti-Migration	0.699*** (0.051)	0.958*** (0.053)	0.953*** (0.052)	0.803*** (0.070)
Refugee Admission Support	-0.540*** (0.042)	-0.725*** (0.040)	-0.591*** (0.037)	-0.755*** (0.073)
Government Unsatisfaction	-0.091** (0.042)	-0.055 (0.035)	-0.001 (0.035)	-0.258*** (0.072)
Contact Levels	0.066 (0.054)	0.075* (0.044)	0.139*** (0.044)	0.271*** (0.081)
Migrant Friends	-0.228** (0.107)	-0.270*** (0.087)	0.029 (0.085)	-0.011 (0.167)
Trust	-0.376*** (0.100)	-0.285*** (0.090)	-0.502*** (0.087)	-0.459*** (0.159)
Female	-0.131 (0.089)	-0.374*** (0.076)	0.028 (0.075)	-0.340** (0.135)
Age (25-35 years)	-0.057 (0.162)	0.428*** (0.143)	0.225 (0.142)	-0.060 (0.255)
Age (35-45 years)	0.734*** (0.168)	0.525*** (0.140)	0.151 (0.140)	0.369 (0.249)
Age (45-55 years)	0.357** (0.162)	0.456*** (0.141)	-0.053 (0.139)	0.532** (0.255)
Age (55-65 years)	0.561*** (0.162)	0.286** (0.141)	-0.247* (0.139)	0.641** (0.255)

	(0.163)	(0.140)	(0.139)	(0.253)
Age (65-older)	0.765***	0.231*	-0.276**	0.691***
	(0.149)	(0.131)	(0.131)	(0.224)
Education (Upper Secondary)	-0.097	0.134	0.149	-0.791***
	(0.200)	(0.160)	(0.155)	(0.298)
Education (Vocational)	-0.149	0.077	-0.143	-0.370
	(0.205)	(0.163)	(0.158)	(0.312)
Education (University)	-0.641***	-0.013	0.140	-0.509*
	(0.194)	(0.160)	(0.156)	(0.293)
Education (Postgraduate)	-0.466**	-0.076	0.249	-0.367
	(0.197)	(0.162)	(0.157)	(0.297)
Income (Lower Middle Income)	-0.198	-0.345**	-0.466***	0.077
	(0.194)	(0.173)	(0.171)	(0.258)
Income (Middle Income)	0.111	-0.207	-0.211	0.535**
	(0.177)	(0.155)	(0.154)	(0.235)
Income (Upper Middle Income)	0.330*	0.067	-0.476***	0.630**
	(0.180)	(0.156)	(0.155)	(0.245)
Income (High Income)	0.251	-0.198	-0.145	0.590**
	(0.181)	(0.156)	(0.154)	(0.245)
Political Orientation	0.112***	0.155***	0.106***	0.303***
	(0.022)	(0.019)	(0.018)	(0.036)
Observations	3,159	3,208	3,208	3,187

Notes: the table shows ordinal logistic regression model results. The dependent variables are: (1) Return: The main return coded on a scale from 1= Strongly Disagree to 5= Strongly Agree, (2) Economic Return coded on a scale from 1= Strongly Disagree to 5= Strongly Agree, (3) Cultural Return coded on a scale from 1= Strongly Disagree to 5= Strongly Agree, (4) Security Return coded on a scale from 1= Strongly Disagree to 5= Strongly Agree. The reference categories for the categorical dependent variables are for the Country (Germany), Gender (Male), Age groups(16-25 years), Education (Lower secondary), Income (Lower income). Observations are weighted by combined survey weights for age, gender and regional location. Statistical significance: \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

In summary, our analyses reveal certain patterns across the different dimensions of the return attitudes examined. Age turns as a significant factor, with older individuals generally showing more support for return, except in the context of cultural considerations where they appear less concerned about cultural threats. Higher levels of education tend to reduce support for return, particularly with respect to the main measure of return attitudes, though education is less influential for cultural or security considerations. Income plays a more nuanced role, with higher-income respondents expressing greater support for return driven by security concerns, while economic motivations are most pronounced among those aged 25 to 55.

Across all models, anti-migrant attitudes and right-leaning political orientations consistently predict stronger support for return, underscoring the role of ideological dispositions. By contrast, positive attitudes toward accepting refugees, having friendships with migrants, and higher levels of trust systematically correspond to lower support for return. Contact with migrants shows limited or mixed effects, slightly increasing economic concerns but otherwise not strongly shaping attitudes. We find also notable country differences: respondents from Sweden, Poland, and Greece generally exhibit lower support for return on the main measure, while those from the Netherlands show higher support; however, economic and security concerns prompt greater support for return across all countries relative to Germany.

Our findings support most of our hypotheses regarding the determinants of public attitudes towards the return of refugees. In consistency with our first hypothesis, we find that age plays an important role, with older individuals generally more supportive of return across most models, notably less though when it comes to concerns regarding cultural threats. We find that higher educational attainment as expected is associated with reduced support for return. However, our hypothesis regarding income was not supported, as lower income is not systematically associated with greater support for return. Our results robustly support our hypothesis regarding political orientation, right-leaning individuals consistently express stronger support for return across all dimensions. We also find support for our last sub-hypothesis, individuals holding more favorable views towards accepting refugees are less likely to support their return.

Moving on to the rest of our hypotheses. We find limited support for our second hypothesis as general contact levels produce mixed results, however having personal contact with migrants specifically having friends with a migration background is associated with reduced support for return, this highlights that it is more about personal ties rather than broader contact. Finally, our third hypothesis was strongly supported: higher levels of social trust are consistently linked to lower support for refugee return. Our results show that public attitudes towards return are determined by an interplay of socio-demographic, ideological and social factors. While some relationships align with theoretical expectations, others might reveal context dependent notions that require further investigation.

## 5. Conclusion

In our study we examined the determinants of public attitudes towards return migration, a topic that despite its prominence in European political discourse, received limited empirical investigation. We use original cross-national survey data from five European countries (Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Poland and Sweden). We investigated how individual characteristics, political orientation, social trust and contact levels affect attitudes towards return migration. We additionally disaggregated these attitudes into four dimensions, main, economic, cultural and security-based return.

It is worth mentioning that our study has its limitations that should be taken into consideration in future research; Our analysis is based on cross-sectional survey data which limits our ability to draw causal inferences about the relationship between our variables. Additionally, although we apply weighting mechanisms, they cannot fully account for unobserved heterogeneity among populations. Our research focuses on attitudes at one point of time in various countries, this does not consider longitudinal changes and actual events happening at the time before or after the survey conduct. That being said, the findings of our research show consistent patterns across the different dimensions of return attitudes. We find that right-wing political orientation, anti-migration sentiments and negative attitudes towards refugee reception consistently emerge as the strongest predictors of support for return. On the other hand, higher levels of trust and having migrant friends were connected with lower support for return. When it comes to traditional demographic variables, we find that they played a rather inconsistent role, with older individuals as well as females less likely to support return. When it comes to contact theory, we find that contact levels in general had little to no effect on attitudes towards return, while meaningful connections such as friendships as

mentioned before were more relevant. Our findings align to a greater extent with the existing literature specifically when it comes to political ideology, threat perceptions and trust levels. However, they tend to diverge from earlier studies that have emphasized the prominent role of demographic traits and broad social contacts.

A key contribution of our study lies in its disaggregation of the attitudes toward return into four distinct dimensions: namely general support for return and return based on economic, cultural and security concerns. This approach allows us to move beyond the surface-level attitudes often discussed in public and political discourse and delve more into the complex nature of public opinion towards return. While certain predictors, such as political ideology, anti-migrant attitudes and trust did have consistent effects across all dimensions, others varied drastically. For instance, economic concerns prevailed more among middle-aged respondents, cultural concerns were reflected among older cohorts, and higher-income individuals were the most expressive of security concerns. These findings prove that public attitudes towards return are not uniform and indeed not one-dimensional. They are shaped by different fears and threat perceptions among people. This multi-dimensional view enriches our understanding of how the public engages with an issue such as return migration. This calls for policy makers to draw on these dimensions separately in order to better address the fears underlying attitudes towards return. Upon understanding the specific drivers, targeted policy interventions as well as communication strategies can be used to reduce public concern and promote better evidence-based discourse among refugee return.

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## About the Authors

**Dr. Lamis Saleh** is a Senior Researcher at the Bonn International Center for Conflict Studies, Germany

**Dr Zeynep Şahin-Mencütek** is a Senior Researcher at the Bonn International Center for Conflict Studies, Germany

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