

Scirocco - Latest News from Italy

24.4.2026: The Myth of “Voluntary” Returns

The Italian Minister of the Interior, Piantedosi, regularly announces on his social media accounts the number of migrants and asylum seekers who have returned “voluntarily”, as in a post dated 8 April in which he celebrated [the return of 174 people from Libya to their home country](#). Whilst these returns are portrayed as “humanitarian” and “voluntary”, they mask coercion and the violation of rights, as criticised by several civil society organisations and UN experts. So what lies behind the “voluntary” return programme?

Voluntary Assisted Return (VAR) and Voluntary Humanitarian Return (VHR) are programmes implemented by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and financially supported by Italy and the EU. These are aimed both at third-country nationals [living in Italy](#) and at [people staying in transit countries](#) such as Libya or Tunisia. The IOM offers support to people returning to their home countries, for example by organising transit and, in some cases, providing financial support for reintegration.

Since 2017, [the Italian government has allocated around €19.5 million](#) for the return of 11,000 people from Libya and €9 million euros from 2022 onwards for the return of 1,400 people from Tunisia. In July 2025, [the Italian government approved](#) the disbursement of a further €4 million to the IOM for the construction of 70 reception centres in Libya and €3 million for the voluntary repatriation programme. This was despite the fact that the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights had advised Italy [in a letter](#) against further funding of the programme and questioned its voluntary nature.

Just how little this programme is actually voluntary is particularly evident when looking at the figures for those who have returned. [Around 76.5% of them](#) were detained in Libyan detention centres prior to their return, including women, children and victims of human trafficking. [Whilst voluntariness would presuppose](#) that there are genuine alternatives, such as access to protection and regular and safe migration routes, and that the decision is made freely, in full knowledge of the facts and without any physical or psychological coercion, these conditions do not exist in Libya and other transit countries. Return is undertaken as the only way out of a hopeless situation in which people experience violence and violations of their human rights. Consequently, the RVA and VHR programmes are pressuring people to return to their home countries, where they are often once again exposed to the unsafe conditions from which they fled.

This also violates the [principle of non-refoulement](#), i.e. the right not to be sent back to countries where one’s safety is at risk. Furthermore, by presenting the return as ‘voluntary’, [bilateral agreements with the countries of origin are circumvented](#), and procedural guarantees and safeguards required under international law in the case of forced return are suspended. This thus also enables a faster and cheaper return under the pretext of voluntariness. By supporting ‘voluntary’ return, [the migratory pressure on transit countries](#) such as Libya and Tunisia is reduced, making their governments more willing to cooperate with Italy under other agreements or to readmit their own citizens.

Therefore, “voluntary” return programmes from transit countries should be understood far less as humanitarian programmes and instead as yet another externalisation strategy of the Italian and European border regime. To combat this strategy and the resulting human rights violations, a number of civil society organisations have joined forces to file a lawsuit and launch the “[Voluntary Humanitarian Refusal](#)” campaign. They “denounce the so-called ‘voluntary’ returns from transit countries and demand that funding for these disguised deportations be stopped”.

Similarly, the voluntary nature of the return of people living in Italy can also be called into question. For instance, people detained in Italian deportation centres (CPRs) have increasingly reported being pressured to agree to such a ‘voluntary’ return. Furthermore, there is [a financial incentive of €615](#), which is paid in cash upon boarding the aircraft. In total, [4,059 people have returned since the programme began in Italy in 2015 up to 2024](#), for which the Italian government has spent €35.5 million. To increase this number of returnees, the Italian government passed a new law this week which provides for financial rewards not only for returnees but also [for their lawyers](#) if their clients agree to “voluntary” return to their home country. This not only further calls into question the voluntary nature of such returns, but also undermines the Italian Constitution and the integrity of legal representation. More on this new law can be read in our [Scirocco](#).

Further problems also arise with regard to the reintegration support in the countries of origin. Such support is criticised as being [highly unsustainable](#) and deeply problematic, and further [reaches only a small proportion of returnees](#). IOM support is often only short-term and does not adequately address the systemic causes of flight. Instead, it follows a neoliberal ‘development policy’ whereby returnees are supposed to be empowered through the promotion of entrepreneurship and market activities. However, these approaches are [often standardised](#) and take little account of the concrete realities of life, which is why many of the supported enterprises fail. Consequently, returnees often end up in even more precarious circumstances than those from which they fled. At the same time, this programme allows Italy and the EU to present themselves in a positive light, thereby concealing their [neo-colonial attempt at migration control](#).

All these points show that ‘voluntary’ return programmes should not be described as such; rather, the term ‘[soft deportation](#)’ is far more appropriate. Their sole aim is to control migration and to present deportations as humanitarian and voluntary. Piantedosi’s regular announcement of the numbers of returnees further illustrates that these programmes serve purely to appease the right-wing electorate. Italy and the EU must no longer force people back into precarious conditions and be complicit, through such programmes, with states that systematically violate human rights and. Instead, legal and safe escape routes are needed to effectively protect vulnerable groups.