



Brussels, 26 March 2026

## Christian Group statement

### Return at what cost? Christian Group flags Human rights at risk in EU return policies

Our seven Christian organisations representing Churches throughout Europe – Anglican, Orthodox, Protestant and Catholic – as well as Christian agencies particularly concerned with people on the move are deeply worried about the [European Parliament \(EP\)'s position](#) on the EU Return Regulation.

Since September 2025, we [have warned](#) that the [European Commission's proposed reform](#) of the EU Return Directive prioritised forced returns over voluntary ones and adopted a punitive, security-driven approach that could lead to the systematic detention of migrants and severely undermine their dignity and rights. We are also concerned that invoking broad and vague notions of “public security and order” further erodes legal safeguards, blurs the line between criminal and migration law, and reinforces the criminalisation of migration. Our analysis echoes the human rights concerns raised by 16 [United Nations special rapporteurs](#) and the [Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights](#).

We deeply regret that, despite our repeated calls to the EP for stronger safeguards and protection of human rights, the position adopted in plenary on 26 March endorses even stricter measures that

undermine human dignity, fundamental rights and legal safeguards. We are particularly concerned by the following elements:

- **Enhanced detention:** Expanded detention grounds, combined with a broad definition of “risk of absconding” and strict obligations to cooperate with and remain available to the authorities, could result in all individuals under a return decision being detained for up to two years or longer. There are no exceptions for unaccompanied minors, families with children, or people in a vulnerable situation, and migrants could even face detention in normal prisons. Detention is an extremely harmful and punitive practice which should only be used as a last resort, in full respect of fundamental rights and only after all other alternatives have been genuinely exhausted. Children and families should never be detained.
- **Punitive approach undermining voluntary return:** Forced returns are prioritised over voluntary ones, which have been shown to be the most sustainable, cost-effective, and least harmful approach. We reiterate that voluntary return must remain the preferred option, requiring access to independent counselling, adequate reintegration support, and sufficient time for informed decision-making.
- **Safeguards and legal remedies undermined:** The weakening of human rights and legal safeguards, combined with limited access to legal support and the absence of automatic appeal suspension, could lead to deportations while appeals are ongoing, putting individuals at risk of refoulement. Appeals should always have an automatic suspensive effect to ensure access to an effective legal remedy.
- **Independent forced return monitoring weakened:** Given the intended scale of forced returns, an independent forced return monitoring mechanism with sufficient financial and personal resources is of utmost importance to ensure that returns are carried out in line with the EU’s human rights obligations. We regret that the EP’s position weakens the aim of establishing a strong and independent mandate for that mechanism.
- **Return hubs:** We are concerned that the EP keeps the possibility of establishing so-called “return hubs” outside the EU’s territory, which would outsource EU responsibilities and risk creating de facto deportation centres. They could lead to arbitrary and indefinite detention, leaving people in legal limbo and exposed to serious human rights violations in countries where they have no ties or guaranteed protection. Families with children could even be sent to return hubs.
- **Alternatives to return overlooked:** Every person in an irregular situation will receive a return order, overlooking alternatives for people whose return is impossible, whether for humanitarian reasons or due to family ties, and who have already endured years of legal limbo in Europe. In such cases, alternatives to return, including legal pathways to residence, should be explored.
- As trilogue negotiations begin, we are also extremely concerned that the “**investigative measures**” proposed by the Member States (Council) will be introduced. These would allow authorities to search migrants, their homes or broadly defined “other relevant premises” as well as their personal belongings and electronic devices, in order to enforce returns. Such intrusive measures risk leading to human rights violations and racial profiling, while deterring undocumented people from accessing essential services, such as health care or humanitarian support, and putting those providing life-saving support at risk.

Beyond the restrictive substance of the EP's position, we and many of our members are also highly concerned about the legislative process and political manoeuvring that led to this proposal, the limited deliberation and the exclusion of key voices from the process that produced it. We regret that MEP Malik Azmani, rapporteur on the file in the EP's Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs, was sidelined in efforts to reach a compromise with the grand coalition. Instead, the [alternative compromise](#) supported by EPP, ECR, P/E and ESN was approved without the thorough, evidence-based deliberation and discernment that a policy with such profound consequences for human lives requires.

We are deeply concerned that this signals a marked shift towards positions that erode the EU's core democratic principles and values. We fear the growing acceptance of rhetoric that divides rather than unites, and that fuels polarisation, mistrust, and exclusion. Such trends undermine peace and social cohesion within our communities by promoting harmful anti-immigrant and xenophobic sentiments. As Christian organisations, we call to uphold compassion, justice, and respect for every person, especially those in the most vulnerable situations. We call on decision makers to reconsider their "return at all costs" approach in the next phase of the negotiations, as legislative progress must not come at the expense of fundamental rights, democratic standards, and our shared values.

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- Caritas Europa, [www.caritas.eu](http://www.caritas.eu)
- Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe - CCME, [www.ccme.eu](http://www.ccme.eu)
- Don Bosco International, [www.donboscointernational.eu](http://www.donboscointernational.eu)
- International Catholic Migration Commission – ICMC Europe, [www.icmc.net/europe](http://www.icmc.net/europe)
- Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) Europe, [www.jrseurope.org](http://www.jrseurope.org)
- Protestant Church in Germany (EKD) Brussels Office, [www.ekd.de](http://www.ekd.de)
- Quaker Council for European Affairs – QCEA, [www.qcea.org](http://www.qcea.org)