

Abstract:

In the Global North, a recurring policy challenge is the return enforcement against irregular migrants. EU member states issue hundreds of thousands of orders-to-leave each year, yet only about one-third to one-fourth results in actual return (including deportation, assisted return, or unassisted departure). This persistent gap between policy ambition and implementation motivates my PhD project which consists of three empirical studies. Study 1 asks what explains variation in return enforcement outcomes between EU member states and non-EU countries. Study 2 explores under what conditions do countries formalize cooperation in return and readmission by signing intergovernmental agreements. These two studies treat return policy as a type of international cooperation, testing theories from rationalist cost-benefit analysis to constructivist norm diffusion and socialization. Study 3 shifts the focus to migration outcomes; It examines to what extent do return enforcement patterns, immigration control policies, and alternative policies like regularization shape future migration flows. Methodologically, all studies develop regression models with causal inference designs to analyze panel data on enforced returns and economic, political, and sociocultural conditions. In doing so, I contribute to the literature in the political economy of international migration and cooperation.