



COMMENTARY

VOLUME 3

CHALLENGES FOR
REINTEGRATION OF
THE RETURNEES IN
MACEDONIA UNDER
THE READMISSION
AGREEMENTS

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After the visa liberalisation, the EU member states faced numerous asylum applications from Western Balkans nationals, including citizens of Macedonia. When the problem with misuse of the visa liberalisation system appeared in the initial years of the visa liberalisation, the country was determined to address the issue. The focus so far has been on repressive measures, such as strengthened border controls or prosecution of facilitators of irregular migration. However, little has been done regarding reintegration of returnees. Reintegration is important not only from the aspect of providing social services to vulnerable categories, but also to prevent repeated migration.

The policymakers have recognised the risks that returnees face once they arrive back to Macedonia, including social exclusion, marginalisation and poverty.¹ Also, in 2010 the Government adopted a Programme for reintegration of the returnees in the Republic of Macedonia under the readmission agreements. The Programme

envisages establishing a Coordinative body for returnees with an aim to monitor the situation. Even more importantly, it was planned to establish a National Centre and at least two Local Centres for reintegration of returnees equipped with lawyers, social workers, psychologists and medical doctors. The responsibilities of these “Reintegration Centres” include not only registration and evidence of returnees and issuing a confirmation of their current status (needed for realisation of their rights and obligations), but also free legal aid and counselling, informing about existing rights and obligations, preparation of annual action plans with activities for reintegration etc. However, there is little operational follow up in this regard and challenges persist in each pillar of reintegration: legal aid, socio-economic support, health services and education.

The first problem that returnees face upon their return to Macedonia is the problem with personal documentation. Although almost all of them have left the country legally with legitimate travel documents, some of them have left their documents

in the foreign country especially in the cases of deportation when they have little time to pack and are under pressure. Personal documents are essential for having access to services such as social aid, health protection, education etc. In the Programme for reintegration of returnees, it was planned that the returnees will be provided with a confirmation of the status of a returnee that can be used for administrative purposes until their documentation gets issued. However, in practice, returnees do not get any confirmation proving their status. When it comes to other types of documents (health card, validation of diplomas etc.), there is no organised system for legal aid assisting returnees. Another issue is that many returnees, especially those who have returned to Macedonia voluntarily, might resist reporting their status to the authorities fearing some consequences. This is especially the case if they used assistance from facilitators or organised groups that might evoke criminal liability.

After obtaining personal documentation, the first thing that returnees need is obtaining the right to social protection in a form of monthly financial support in line with the Law on so-

¹ Programme for reintegration of the returnees in the Republic of Macedonia under the readmission agreements, Government of the Republic of Macedonia, January 2010

cial protection.² There are no concrete social services targeting returnees directly as they do not recognised as a separate category in need of social protection.³ If eligible, they are able to apply for social services available for all other categories. Another problem that returnees face is housing. Many have sold all of their possessions before leaving the country and once they are back, they are left without shelter. There is no institutional support for this issue, even though the Programme for reintegration envisages opening of a Reception Center where returnees without permanent domicile will be temporarily accommodated for a period of up to 60 days, upon their return in the country. Therefore, they are turning to family and friends or they are renting accommodation. Given that the majority of the returnees are from Romani origin⁴, this is happening in an environment where the housing is one of the main problems that the Roma population faces in general. They are

2 Article 15

3 Programme for attainment of social protection in Macedonia for 2016, Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, no. 2 from 08.01.2016, available (in Macedonian) at: http://www.mtsp.gov.mk/content/pdf/dokumenti/12.1_programa%20za%20SZ%202016.pdf

4 New facts and figures on Western Balkan Asylum Seekers, European Stability Initiative, 6 April 2015, pg. 5, available at: <http://www.esiweb.org/pdf/New%20facts%20and%20figures%20on%20WB%20asylum%20claims%206%20April%202015.pdf>

often based in informal settlements, in improvised houses and without basic infrastructure.

The next challenge is the employment and access to the labour market as an important pillar of any policies empowering vulnerable groups. Poor economic conditions are the main reason for increased irregular migration. There is no institutional support for the returnees to help them with information about employment opportunities. As any other active job seeker, they have access to the measures implemented by the Employment Service Agency. According to UNDP, rates of unemployment and joblessness are at least twice as high amongst the Roma population as among the non-Roma population. Roma—and especially Roma women—are employed less, paid less for similar jobs, and are more likely to be working in low skilled and informal employment than their non-Roma counterparts.⁵ Therefore this is another area that needs to be addressed.

Furthermore, the National Programme for Reintegration envisages assessment of the overall health condition of the returnees and their families that was supposed to be done upon their reception in the Reintegration Centers including an assessment of their current physical and mental health condition and

5 UNDP Macedonia, http://www.mk.undp.org/content/the_former_yugoslav_republic_of_macedonia/en/home/operations/projects/poverty_reduction/improving-the-institutional-response-to-domestic-violence1.html

registration of all relevant information on previous health problems and interventions. Based on this initial information, returnees would be informed and referred to competent institutions for additional treatment, when needed. Moreover, the Strategy envisaged a primary health protection package for returnees for a period of maximum 60 days until they arrange their health insurance. In practice, as the Reception centres do not function, returnees do not get any initial health assessment or medical packages as a separate category. After their registration at the Employment Service Agency as unemployed persons, they are entitled to health insurance as any other citizen. Another problem is the health insurance of the children born in another country, without birth certificates in which case it is difficult to access primary health protection.

Finally, challenges also arise in the efforts for integration in the Macedonian educational system. A recent policy study⁶ estimated that half of the returnees need to be reintegrated in mainstream education. The Programme for reintegration envisaged that the questionnaire filled upon registration of returnees will include questions about their educational background with the purpose

6 Durmis, Zaklina and Mitanski, Aleksandar “Roma children repatriates and their constitutionally guaranteed right to education” in Pecakovska, Suzana and Lazarevska, Spomenka (eds.) Roma activists on informed and efficient Roma integration policies: policy briefs, Foundation Open Society Macedonia, 2016

of providing them with information about existing educational opportunities. However, as returnees do not go under any specific registration process, especially in the case of a voluntary return, they do not get such service. The main problem that returnees face upon their return is integration in the educational system when the children are not literate in Macedonian, have difficulties in recognition of their diplomas or they do not possess any documents regarding their previous education. Also, it should be borne in mind that those children went under traumas related to their deportation, quick changes of environment etc. so there is a need for psycho-

logical support and socialization.

It is also important to note that there is a lack of publicly available statistical data on asylum applicants and returnees in Macedonia. The problem with the scarcity of statistical data has been also identified in the Programme for reintegration of returnees. Lack of data is especially evident regarding voluntary returns where the document relies on statistical data provided by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM).⁷ This

⁷ Programme for reintegration of the returnees in the Republic of Macedonia under the readmission agreements, Government of the

is an especially problematic issue as statistical analysis would be the initial step for understanding the returnees as a target group and developing tailor-made programmes and measures. Therefore, the Ministry of Interior should be responsible for collecting and publishing data on the issue. Then, an information exchange system between the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the Centers for social work and the schools need to be placed so each stakeholder could better contribute towards reintegration of returnees according to their roles and responsibilities.

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