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Barriers to (Re)integration: The Roma Return to the Western Balkans

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is the migration from and return of the Roma to the Western Balkan. This minority is distinctly marginalised and discriminated against across the region, and its return and (re)integration pose critical questions for migration and ethnic diversity scholars and policy makers. At the same time, Roma returns to the Western Balkans are part of a historical moment in the EU, characterised by high immigration and political pressure to respond to intense refugee flows. In this context, the problem with the 'economic asylum' of the Roma in different EU member states appears to be the access to the welfare system, not migration *per se*. The findings of this paper further suggest that the expectation towards the Roma to (re)integrate while they have a high tendency to be mobile and experience discrimination is linked to a hegemonic view of societies on minorities' integration as the end-result of their movements. While the recent focus on vulnerability of returnees is a positive development, the data also indicate within-group differences that call for a needs-based approach to be adopted in policy and service provision. Nonetheless, across the board, transnational comparison is the lens through which (re)integration is seen, especially in the initial stages post-return. A crucial challenge for the Roma is adaptation after having experienced different lifestyles and a sense of dignity in the host countries in the EU, and reconciling their expectations with the standards they re-experience upon return to the Western Balkans. Time appears as a qualitative construct as it is the experience abroad rather than chronological time that impacts returnees' attitudes towards (re)integration. In the context of a scarce state and fragmented non-governmental service provision at local, national and transnational levels, the idea of social entrepreneurship is an emerging one, with high potential to address (re)integration in a more holistic manner.

Keywords

Introduction: migration and return to the Western Balkans[1]

Since the early 90s, the six Western Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia; hereafter WB6) have experienced high rates of migration into Europe, with Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Sweden, Denmark and Norway hosting large numbers of such migrants. Ethnic minorities, including the Roma,

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[1] The main source of data for this paper was a survey carried out in 2018 in the WB6 region supported by the World Bank and funded by the EU DG NEAR. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this paper are entirely those of the author. They do not necessarily represent the views of the World Bank or the DG NEAR and its affiliated organisations, or those of the Executive Directors of the World Bank or the governments they represent.

have formed a significant part of these flows. Nonetheless, despite certain similarities in migratory patterns, each WB6 country has distinct outmigration characteristics. For example, dire financial hardship in Albania led to intense migration waves and by the mid-2000s, a quarter of the country's population was living abroad as economic migrants (Government of Albania [GoA] 2005). WB6 countries that were part of former Yugoslavia, on the other hand, experienced extensive forced migration as tens of thousands of citizens attempted to escape the violence accompanying the break-up of the Yugoslav Federation. As a result, former Yugoslavian states became main sending countries of asylum seekers to the European Union (EU) by the late 1900s and early 2000s (Bonifazi *et al.* 2008).

However, migration from the Western Balkans has not only been a one-way movement. Return migration, whether forced, voluntary, or somewhere in between, has been an integral part of this regional migration picture. Overall, return migration to the Western Balkans from EU countries can be broadly divided into two major groups.

The first group is comprised of the diaspora and long-term economic migrants returning home. The former subgroup is typical for the ex-Yugoslavian states, whereas the latter is more common in Albania and is partly induced by the economic crisis in some EU host countries. Diasporic return is the phenomenon of migrants returning to their homeland after the end of armed conflict (e.g. in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, hereafter BiH) and was prevalent in the early 2000s, but continued on a smaller scale until the late 2000s (Porobic 2017). While significantly smaller in number, groups of migrants have also chosen to return because of the lure of economic incentives, investment opportunities, and brain gain programmes in their country of origin (Black and Gent 2004). In the framework of these types of return, issues of vulnerability and (re)integration, and especially the functioning of the social protection system, have not been a primary focus of research and policy making. Indeed, sustainability was linked with macro-economic indicators and the contribution of return to the home country's development.

The second main group of returnees to the WB6 is that of irregular migrants. All WB6 countries have experienced irregular migration and have established readmission agreements with the EU or with specific EU member states. As part of this arrangement, all countries have experienced repatriation of their citizens from EU member states. For example, the International Organization for Migration [IOM] (2014) reports that of the total number of requests for readmission received in 2014 (12,967) in Serbia, 44.5% applications were made by Hungary, followed by Germany 43.2% and Sweden 3.7%. By sex, 62.3% were men, and 37.7% were women. In terms of age structure, 61.8% are adults and 38.2% are minors. In particular, three WB6 countries (Albania, Kosovo, Serbia) feature in the list of 30 top countries whose citizens have been apprehended because of 'illegal stay' in the EU. Between 2008-16, there were 375,595 so-called illegal residents in the EU from Albania, 127,165 from Kosovo, and 102,230 from Serbia. [2] Not

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[2] http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:Top_30_citizenships_of_non-EU_citizens_apprehended_and_found_to_be_illegally_present_in_the_EU,_2008-2016.PNG

surprisingly, WB6 countries also feature among top 20 citizenships of non-EU citizens returned to their country of origin from the EU in the period of 2015-16.[3]

More recently, the region has experienced the return and, in some cases, also repatriation of short-term 'economic asylum seekers' like the Roma, who form the focus of this paper. This category refers to migrants from marginalised sections of WB6 populations that utilise the freedom of movement in the EU to emigrate and lodge asylum applications in EU member states. This group faces significant barriers to (re)integration because of the sudden and largely 'forced' nature of the return and the high concentration of vulnerable groups such as women, children, and ethnic minorities. It is this wave of migration and return that has highlighted the challenges of returnees because the WB6 countries are finding it hard to cope with (re)integration of high numbers of return migrants (Arenliu and Weine 2015; Vathi and Zajmi 2017).

This second form of return is closely linked to the decision of the EU Parliament to consider the WB6 as 'safe countries of origin' as of 9 September 2015, triggered by the high number of asylum seekers from these countries. [4] Furthermore, the EU agenda on migration and repatriation was further boosted by the new partnership framework with third countries in mid-2016 (Latek 2017). Eurostat reports that Albania and Kosovo were countries of origin to a similar number of first-time asylum seekers in 2015: Albania 65,935 in total and Kosovo 66,885 Kosovar Albanians. Asylum seekers from Albania consisted of 5% of all asylum seekers in EU countries in 2015. Germany was the country where the majority of these applications were recorded. Eurostat also reports that 98% of asylum applications from Albania were rejected, which means that hundreds of thousands of migrants are returned to WB6 and are expected to go through the process of reintegration.

This paper focuses on the particular challenges of return and (re)integration of the Roma. The Roma communities in the Western Balkans are characterised by overall lower socio-economic indicators when compared to the non-Roma, and face widespread discrimination in education and in the labor market (O'Higgins 2012). The situation is somewhat different across the region; UNDP reports that the 'decade of the Roma' and measures in its framework have brought about the most positive results in Croatia and the least positive impact is recorded in Albania, while BiH shows improvements in terms of some Roma socio-economic indicators (Friedman 2015). Not surprisingly, the Roma are highly represented among the hybrid category of 'economic asylum seekers'. For example, the IOM (2014) reports that the Roma comprised 76% of the total number of returnees under the readmission agreement registered in Serbia.

The migration of Roma from the WB6 shares characteristics with overall migration from the region and the specifics of each country. Cherkezova (2014) maintains that the situation of Roma from the Western Balkans is different from their counterparts in the wider South Eastern Europe [SEE] region because of three factors. First, Roma living in former Yugoslavian states had the opportunity to travel even before the Cold War ended, enabling them to create networks in different West European countries.

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[3] http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/images/d/dd/Top_20_citizenships_of_non-EU_citizens_returned_to_their_country_of_origin_from_the_EU%2C_2015-2016.png
[4] http://www.europarl.europa.eu/EPRS/EPRS-Briefing-569008-Safe-countries-of-origin-FINAL.pdf

Secondly, refugees from the ex-Yugoslavian countries utilised existing networks in Western Europe to settle there after the onset of war. Finally, the Western Balkans are still considered 'third countries' by the EU, and are experiencing visa liberalisation at a different pace.[5] The new visa regimes are giving rise to mobility towards Western Europe, which is utilised by some to explore work opportunities and potentially gain residence in an EU member state.

Across the WB6, we see a strong focus on Roma migration and their overall inclusion, responding to the 'Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-15', and the continent-wide initiatives on this. In relation to these developments, this paper critically analyses the process of Roma return to the WB6 from the perspective of the Roma themselves and looks into the paradox of (re)integrating marginalised communities that have historically inhabited the lowest segments of the social hierarchy into the 'mainstream' (Friedman 2015; O'Higgins 2012). The paper draws on the data generated as part of the project 'Supporting the Effective Reintegration of Roma Returnees in the Western Balkans' which included interviews with 48 stakeholders[6] and 48 focus groups across the WB6. The project aimed to examine the demographic and socio-economic profiling of returnees and their vulnerability in view of their intersecting characteristics. After a section on the concept of integration and its application in the context of return to the WB6, the paper continues with an analysis of research results, focusing on the historical, time-space, cognitive and institutional factors that impact Roma (re)integration. The paper concludes with a discussion of the findings and implications for research and advocacy in the region.

Defining (re)integration: the Roma return to the Western Balkans

Concepts and definitions

Research on migrants' integration has traditionally focused on the process of immigrants becoming part of host societies, and little attention has been paid to the process of (re)integration in the country of origin. The classic sociological research on integration maintains that 'integration presupposes the elimination of hard and fast barriers in the primary group relations and communal life of the various ethnic groups of the nation' (Gordon 1964: 246). More recent research has emphasised the two-way nature of integration, and highlights the involvement of the host society (Penninx 2005). This definition has been adopted by major organisations working in the field; for example, the UNHCR (2013: 14) defined integration as 'a dynamic and multifaceted two-way process, which requires efforts by all parties concerned, including a preparedness on the part of refugees to adapt to the host society without having to forego their own cultural identity,

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[5] WB6 countries were included in the list of countries that require a visa to travel to the EU Schengen area since early 1990s. With the improvement of the economic and political situation in the region and the opening of negotiations between these countries and the EU as part of the EU membership process, the EU has lifted the visa requirement for WB6 countries. For example, the visa requirement for Albania was lifted in the autumn of 2010.

[6] Service providers, policy makers, Roma and non-Roma returnees in WB6.

and a corresponding readiness on the part of host communities and public institutions to welcome refugees and meet the needs of a diverse population'.

Integration is thus conceptualised as a multi-dimensional and multi-level process in which both host society and migrants interact and change over time, driven by interaction at the individual, collective and institutional levels. The rhetorics of integration, therefore, are traditionally associated with those on state policies and host societies' attitudes, although the roles of migrants' agency and of the migrant communities are acknowledged as important factors (Thompson and Crul 2007). A key element of the integration literature is the temporal dimension; Penninx (2005) emphasised that integration should be seen as a long-term ongoing process, as the cognitive aspect of the settlement of newcomers cannot be realised in a short period of time. The ongoing long-term dimension of integration is highlighted across the board and in different immigrant receiving settings (Joppke 2007), with a shared view that time and integration in the host societies are positively correlated.

Another area of focus of research is the structural dimension of integration (Gordon 1964), as this can be a prerequisite to the realisation of other dimensions, such as socio-cultural integration. Socio-cultural integration is closely linked with ethnicity, which has been at the heart of assimilation theory, blamed for the emphasis of the cultural over the structural, and for the one-way nature of integration as the minorities assimilate into the societal 'mainstream'. According to Esser (2004), integration depends on certain aspects of a societal system including social inequality and social differentiation. With regard to social inequality, structural integration refers to the complete disappearance of differences in education levels, occupations, and income between *ethnic* groups; a lack of structural integration, accordingly, may result in growing ethnic inequality and ethnic differentiation. As mentioned in the previous section, the Roma are unfavourably positioned against the non-Roma in the WB6 mainstream, pointing to low levels of structural integration.

The focus on structural integration has illuminated the importance of access (or lack thereof) to social protection and welfare systems in returnee integration. Ager and Strang (2008) proposed a model of integration that measures indicators in four domains: achievement and access across the sectors of employment, housing, education, and health; assumptions and practice regarding citizenship and rights; processes of social connection within and between groups within the community, and structural barriers to such connection related to language, culture, and the local environment. The role of structure is, therefore, paramount not only in providing access to key social protection provisions, but also in promoting or hampering connections and contact between migrants and host society. Empirical research has further emphasised the role of education, employment, health and housing as key areas that would ensure structural integration in the initial stages, and as such, promote the overall integration of migrants in a particular context (Nelson *et al.* 2017; Robinson 2014).

Nonetheless, research increasingly highlights the complexity of integration, critiquing the deterministic and linear approach too-often evident in the existing literature. Some empirical evidence shows that integration as an end-result of migrants' settlement in host societies is not necessarily in line with migrants' own ideas and aspirations. Furthermore, while the integration-assimilation debate in the 2000s was organised around

the socio-cultural differences between the mainstream and the migrants, and the overall access of the latter to the opportunity structure, newer models link integration with social protection and realisation of economic, social and cultural rights. Part of this research and advocacy on migrants' rights in different contexts has highlighted issues with the overall approach of state-led integration policies and programmes; a stronger focus on migrants' characteristics and needs is advocated. Several issues have surfaced, such as a lack of consideration of migrants' vulnerability and its determinants, migrants' access to economic, social and cultural rights as compared to social protection provisions, and respect for migrants' cultural identity in the process of providing social protection (Levitt *et al.* 2017; Sabates-Wheeler and Waite 2003; Vathi and Zajmi 2017).

(Re)integration upon return

The study of returnees' integration upon their return to the country of origin has received very little attention. Indeed, Cassarino (2014) maintains that what happens after return is ignored altogether, although over several decades literature has shown that return migrants experience problems in the country of origin (Cerase 1974; Gmelch 1980). A broad-brush principle is that whether return is voluntary or involuntary is crucial to fully understand the return and (re)integration experience (Cassarino 2008; IOM 2017). However, recent international research is increasingly focusing on the varying degrees of volition (Vathi 2017) and the fact that voluntary return can only be defined as such if migrants have a legal right to stay in the receiving country (Webber 2011).

The voluntariness of return is closely linked to the concept of preparedness: greater preparation for the return process from the side of migrants is expected to ease their adaptation and enhance reintegration in their country of origin. Evidence from research across the globe highlights the struggles returnees face with employment (Prickett *et al.* 2012), difficulties children of returnees have in adjusting to the education system (Vathi *et al.* 2016), and issues of access to the social protection systems (Hall *et al.* 2017). Challenges of (re)integration are found to give rise to a high tendency to maintain transnational ties (King and Christou 2014) and also to re-migrate (Carling and Erdal 2014).

To assess the prospects of (re)integration, research indicates an urgent need to consider the pre, during, and post-migration experiences of migrants. Van Houte and Davids (2008) emphasised that migrants' 'mixed embeddedness' (economic, social and cultural) post-return enhanced their re-integration and sustainability of return, and their low tendency and actual plans to re-migrate (see also Kushminder 2017). At the policy and practice level, a shift from the sustainability of return to sustainability of *(re)integration* is observable, which requires a holistic needs-based approach (IOM 2017), but empirical evidence on return migrants' social protection experiences is scarce. In particular, the transnational aspect of (re)integration is not dealt with very well; policy-level models of (re)integration illustrate high awareness of the individual and structural factors at pre-departure and post-arrival stage (Latek 2017), but the transnational links between these two stages and contexts – be they in terms of migrants' own links and experiences, or policies and programmes in place that affect migrants' experience – are rarely discussed. As far as children are concerned, there is a dearth of research exploring

the link between education and return migration, and its effects on the immigrant offspring's educational 'outcomes' (Vathi *et al.* 2016).

The transnational aspect of return and reintegration is particularly important considering the role that time plays and the change in perceptions and expectations from the side of both returnees and host communities (Cerase 1974). However, the realisation of economic, social and cultural rights also depends on the capacity of receiving countries and localities to (re)integrate the returnees. Save the Children (2012) notes that Albania is progressing towards integration in the European Union, which has had a significant impact on its legislation and policy framework, but implementation is difficult because of the under-resourced system that could tackle issues on the ground.

Nonetheless, an increased focus on the wellbeing of returnees is noticeable in policy and practice recently, with issues of psychosocial support featuring strongly in recent evidence-based studies on reintegration. Fonseca *et al.* (2015) list psychosocial support for returnees at least 12 months after arriving in the country of origin as key to the sustainability of return. However, while vulnerability has traditionally been studied in terms of sustainability, or the conditions that would make returnees disinclined to re-migrate, a much bolder approach is needed to capture the full spectrum of the impact that return to the country of origin has on migrants. Ideally, vulnerability assessment and support should aim at prevention, which means that assessment and support should start in the host country (Zevelun *et al.* 2017).

Intersectionality of vulnerabilities

Migrants' vulnerability has for a long time been obscured by the heavy focus on the issues of migration management and security, and more broadly the unequal power positionality of migrants in comparison with the host community and institutions in the receiving countries. The limited extant research in the WB6 is showing that returnees' vulnerabilities have an intersectional nature. Migrants' personal characteristics such as their age, sex, ethnicity, nationality, social class etc. combine to determine the course of their (re)integration and their wellbeing. Some of the most vulnerable groups among the returnees are children and young people, single women and the ageing migrants.

In particular, the category of child migrants is very diverse in terms of socio-economic indicators. When it comes to young asylum seekers and their return, research in Albania, albeit limited, shows that 'economic asylum' appears to involve families and children from various age groups and socio-economic backgrounds, with males and females proportionately represented, although the incidence of re-migration is higher among boys (Dibra *et al.* 2016). Most importantly, the conditions of migration and the transnational process of return matter in terms of overall wellbeing and reintegration of children. Zevelun *et al.* (2017) focused on the return of rejected asylum seekers to Albania and Kosovo as a high priority on the national agendas of European states. They found that the procedural characteristics of migration and return, and ethnicity, were major predictors of wellbeing, but the quality of the child-rearing environment was an important mediator. The most vulnerable groups of children were those who experienced irregular migration, had an ethnic minority background, and were older adolescents. Evidence presented in the following sections supports these findings.

While the focus on vulnerability of returnees is a positive development in the field of policy making in return migration, the issue of (re)integration of minorities is rarely discussed. A focus on diaspora homecoming has been part of the writings in the field (Markowitz and Stephanson 2004), including the impact of return on the wellbeing of diasporic returnees (Black and Koser 1999). The issue of reintegration of minorities, however, puts a double emphasis on the two-way nature of integration, which would entail both cultural preservation and willingness to integrate from the side of both the 'mainstream' and minority returnees. As the empirical sections below demonstrate, Berry's (1997) contention that integration of non-dominant groups depends on the openness of the dominant society and its approach towards cultural diversity, holds particular value in the context of return and (re)integration of minorities.

The historical and the contemporary: (re)integration of the Roma at an all-time low?

The situation of the Roma in the WB6, and inevitably their migration and return, are affected by major political and macro-economic changes, and by the current geo-political realities of the countries in the region. A historical dimension is evident in the narratives of the participants on their (re)integration, which seems to serve multiple purposes. First, community leaders put emphasis on the long-standing history of the Roma[7] in the Balkans and, drawing on this argument, they maintain that talking about integration is inappropriate. However, the same historical argument is engaged in conversations on the marginalisation of the Roma in the Balkans today. Others use history in explaining how especially in countries such as Kosovo and BiH, which have experienced major changes in the past few decades, but also elsewhere across the region, the collapse of communism, the effect of the wars and the re-organisation of states have had an impact on the socio-political positioning of the Roma (Sardelic 2015; Sigona 2012). Narratives of Roma interviewees point also to the negative impact of wars on trust and ensuing social fragmentation, particularly evident in BiH and Kosovo.

> Integration.... hm, for me to say 'I am integrated' poses an issue already, because I can speak about a history of the Roma in the Balkans going back 100-150 years, so to say today that I need to integrate indicates a massive issue. Because if I haven't yet managed to integrate, after 5-6 generations, I never will. On the other hand, let's consider the extent to which the state is willing to help [the Roma] so that they don't beg on the streets, or perhaps the laws, or the community... this can be a completely different matter. Let's say it is mostly a matter of support, a matter of the way systems work...[8]

Other Roma leaders interviewed suggested that the integration of Roma in the WB6 is currently at an all-time low. According to them, communism was favourable for the Roma integration as the regime totalitarised employment, among other things. Apart from the

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[7] Although historical research into the Roma in South Eastern Europe is lacking, their settlement in the region is thought to have happened six centuries ago.
[8] Interview with the leader of the association 'Nevo Koncepti', Kosovo.

collapse of communism, in Kosovo, the war destroyed industry, and the creation of the new state led to a new social and economic order which did not favour the Roma. A Roma return migrant interviewed in Kosovo noted that communism and the push for industrialisation in the Balkan countries led to the inclusion of the Roma in the building of power stations, factories and mines; and a certain shift in their employment profiles, moving away from traditional professions, such as blacksmiths, which in turn had a positive impact on their housing and overall family situation. Currently, the acute economic problems and the lack of an overall sense of security appear as key push factors to migrate across the region. An aspect of the perceived reintegration barriers in Kosovo is the fear of a new war, which makes the Roma uncertain about a future there. Whereas a young Roma migrant from Albania narrated how the main push factors for him and his family to migrate were ill-health, conflicts, blood feuds, and debts:

> There are people who leave because of economic problems, but there are others that leave because of bigger and more acute issues. Some people are in trouble with the banks and try to find any means to repay their debts; it's not that people leave for adventure. No one leaves their home to go to Germany unless there are problems...

Other migrants despair over their conditions due to an overall dire situation, and a prolonged state of misery, which is further exposed by their experience of migrating abroad. A group of Roma returnees interviewed in Rozaje (Montenegro) pointed to their inability to fulfill parental duties and difficulties providing for their families as reasons to leave:

> We went there not for a better life, but simply to exist. None of us asked for a better life, but for a solution to the question of how to survive here. We all have a house, but you can't maintain it. You cannot pay 20 euros for bills. Really, because we have no sources of income at all. We are all construction workers, trained builders, etc. What to do in Rozaje? This is a small environment and we don't have anything… Then the children came. As long as the children were in elementary school, we somehow survived. I gave him 50 cents daily, and that was his pocket money. Those kids need a phone, jeans, sneakers. How can we afford them?

These conditions have led many Roma to migrate through the 'economic asylum scheme', depleting their existing resources in the process of securing the necessary funds to migrate and without considering the risks.[9] A Roma community leader in Tirana narrates that the Roma sold most of their material possessions, from furniture to entire small business enterprises, because, as he said, 'they had lost hope and felt the only way was to leave, as things have got very difficult here'. Other stakeholders point to the hierarchy of needs and priorities within the very disadvantaged Roma families and the very vulnerable Roma girls, whose situation is exacerbated by the extreme deprivation of their families:

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[9] Interview with the representative of Terre des Hommes in Albania.

There are also families that live in improvised housing and the parents have very low parental capacities. The last resort, which they nevertheless also consider, is to marry their daughters off in order to earn money. We are talking about early marriages. Some of the families then go abroad illegally, they pay around 1500 euros to receive passports and documents to migrate to an EU country.[10]

Divisions within the Roma communities and among the returnees are also evident. In countries with a long history of Internally Displaced People (IDPs) such as Serbia and BiH, the returnees speak about a hierarchy of return that pits the wealthy Roma against vulnerable Roma, or Roma registered as IDPs against Roma as ordinary citizens. An important observation made by Roma community leaders in Tirana is that those who left via the asylum route are not the most marginalised Roma. He points to the fact that the most deprived Roma are concentrated in specific areas on the riverbank and work as beggars or collecting cardboard and plastics. Their financial resources cannot cover the costs of migration, so they feature very little among the returnees. (Re)integration may, therefore, mean a wider divide within the Roma community itself.

Yet, a common underlying factor of the dire conditions of the Roma across the WB6 appears to be discrimination. The returned Roma migrants, and in particular the Roma leaders, are vocal on this.

I'd say discrimination is a major and common factor; basically when the Roma go to receive a service they feel they are being discriminated against even though some of them cannot express it; they feel that there is some sort of discrimination even though it may be covert. So often they go to an institution, but they are sent back; they are told 'come back tomorrow' and they feel tired of this unfair treatment, racism, and stark discrimination.[11]

Other Roma interviewed mention their bad situation with housing; multigenerational families living under the same roof have seen migration as a solution to their worsening accommodation. Roma key informants in Kosovo maintain that some families of up to 15 members live in the same small house, and migration is seen as a way out of this extreme housing situation. Upon return, the families who did not have to sell their homes to secure the financial resources to sponsor their trip abroad, find themselves in the same unsuitable accommodation.

As a result, re-migration appears as a common experience, or certainly a common aspiration among the returnees. Circular migration is also part of the 'economic asylum' experience as some Roma try to gain residence in different EU countries. Re-migration and circular migration have severe consequences for Roma families and in particular for the children. Statelessness as a result of 'asylum shopping' is pointed out by a Roma man who refers to an entwinement of the old and newer forms of asylum seeking for migrants

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[10] Interview with a representative of the Megjasi Center, Macedonia. I use Macedonia as a short cut for the Republic of North Macedonia; https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/12/macedonia-agrees-to-new-name-after-27-year-dispute-with-greece

[11] Interview with Roma organisation leader in Tirana.

from Kosovo who moved to Germany when the conflict in Kosovo erupted in the late 1990s, but were unsuccessful in gaining refugee status. Their efforts to try again in other EU member states lead to a detachment from any state structures and institutions, putting these migrants in a vulnerable situation, since they cannot realise any social and economic human rights. Service providers on their part recognise the disconcertion that re-migration causes in their day-to-day work, which involves coordination with several parts of the social protection system and returnee families, and the impact on the children.

This high tendency to re-migrate is documented in existing research; in Cherkezova (2014), 54% of those interviewed across the WB6 who had previous experience living abroad would migrate again. A longitudinal research conducted in Kosovo (Society for Threatened Peoples 2015) found that in the period of 2004-13, 28,000 Roma were returned to Kosovo from Germany alone, but the numbers of Roma in Kosovo have not increased at the same pace; indeed, many of those interviewed in 2014 had already left in the summer of 2015. According to the findings of this survey, alongside the push factors, the Roma migration towards the EU is affected by several key pull factors such as family members abroad, access to asylum systems and the opportunity to gain employment, and positive experiences with the health services and education system. Many Roma interviewed indicated that their relatives are sources of 'mobility remittances' – small amounts to sponsor their families' travel to the EU, as this Roma youngster interviewed in Kosovo narrates:

> The trip cost 500 euros, which I borrowed from relatives, from an uncle who lives in Germany. In the beginning when I had just arrived I stayed for a few weeks at my uncle's place and after that they transferred me to Berlin where I stayed for 3-4 weeks. After that another uncle hosted me for 8 months. I was an asylum seeker in Germany, but I did not stay in camps, neither did I move to another accommodation. I was given 380 euros every month; staying at my uncle's, I managed to save that money and send it back to my family via Western Union. I worked a little on the side as well at a Turkish business – in the black, but I got paid 220 euros every fortnight...

Many returnees who manage to earn or save the social assistance allowances use these remittances to improve their housing conditions upon return. As the quote above shows, economic asylum seekers also make use of the diaspora businesses and the informal economy (e.g. Turkish businesses in Germany) for the purpose of employment. Some returnees contrast their modest situation as asylum seekers with the extreme deprivation they return to when their asylum applications are rejected, which requires adjusting to even more modest living, whilst the limited remittances they bring back go to pay for the debts of travel or even smuggling costs. Roma community leaders in Kosovo quoted up to 5000 euros-worth of debts that families had accumulated as costs of migrating.

> I struggled to make it to the end of the month here, and there we saved so much money and later built another floor on the house. I could not have done that here even after working an entire decade (Roma returnee in Rozaje, Montenegro).

Reintegration is however less 'plain-sailing' in the cases of forced return, not least because of the resentment that many returnees experience, which leads to a feeling of helplessness. Return by force sometimes takes place because of lack of information on the result of their asylum application, or an inability to understand official communication in the local language.

> I migrated with my family, first to Austria, where I looked for a job and for a better life for me and for my family. In Austria I couldn't find a job, because it was really hard to get employed there. I tried seeking asylum in Austria, but it didn't work. Afterwards I went to Belgium, where I stayed 4-5 months with my family. I applied for a work permit, for documents, but all the answers were negative. Then I tried finding jobs wherever I could… I would call my return here as a 'forceful return' because when you don't have enough income and you don't have a place to sleep, you have to return; you have nowhere to go (Roma returnee, Kumanovo, Macedonia).

The loss of property and of the means to work to secure the money to migrate, which often consists of very high sums, leads to the despair of return. The families' economy cannot sustain the large amounts paid out for plane tickets and other travel costs for the whole family. These conditions show that (re)integration of the Roma returnees is at an all-time low because they return to a worse situation and material scarcity. Roma community leaders in Tirana are concerned that the desperate situation they find themselves in will lead the Roma returnees to extreme behaviour to ensure their survival.

> Poverty among the Roma has increased; they will resort to cheating, stealing, and all sorts to survive. When they return after having sold everything, where will they go to feed themselves?

The temporal and the spatial: the 'when' and 'where' of short-term fixes for long-term embeddedness

One of the key findings of this survey in the WB6 is that policy and service provision are not adequately aware of the time-space dimensions of return and (re)integration. Time appears of high relevance to both migration and residence abroad, and return and (re)integration in the country of origin. First, the extensive economic asylum out from the WB6 coincided with the so-called 'migration crisis' which had a massive impact on migration management across the EU. This inevitably affected the position of the WB6 migrants and their access to asylum systems and residence application outcomes. The Roma returnees recognise a certain hierarchy of need and vulnerability in the receiving countries. According to them, the Syrian refugees take priority, whilst those from the Balkans are considered as coming from a safe country. As a representative of GIZ in Macedonia put it, a common statement among asylum seekers is 'the Syrians came and

they chased us out', pointing to their perception of shifting priorities of asylum systems and asylum agendas in the EU member states.

> At first they told us, 'you Albanians stand a chance (to gain residence) because you are working and behaving well', but after some time they told us there was no way we would be granted asylum as the Syrians are coming and there are massive migrant waves to deal with, so in 2-3 months we would be going back... as Germany cannot cope, so all those from the Balkans would return (Roma man, Albania).

Time is also of significant importance when assessing the vulnerabilities and (re)integration outcomes for these migrants upon return. The focus on time is further warranted since what happens after return has barely been explored (Cassarino 2014). Limited existing research shows that time immediately after returning has differential effects; for some migrants there are no acute issues upon return, but after a while many of them fail to achieve any return goals, and find it hard to see a future. For others, the first few months are the hardest, after which they adapt and move on with their lives (Lietaert *et al.* 2017). From a more institutional perspective, the timing of return matters for children's education as they cannot enrol in schools at any time; often they lose a school year because they return in the middle of the academic year.

The findings of this survey demonstrate that indeed time matters in terms of duration of migration experience abroad, time spent upon return to the country of origin, and time spent preparing to return versus forced returns. However, different views are held by policy makers across the region in terms of the emergencies of reintegration: some prioritise the long-term returnees, but these groups of returnees tend to have more financial and material assets. Others tend to prioritise the short-term returnees because they come from poorer social strata and are much more the focus of the EU authorities. As the quote below from an interview with the representative of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy in Macedonia shows, a short time abroad (usually less than 1 year) is not seen as a cause of vulnerability as the existing laws and policies on returnees were prepared for those who were abroad for a long time.

> In relation to the returnees we have a program[12] since 2010 where everything is defined what the state needs to do with returnees. You can notice that is focused on the most vulnerable groups, such as persons who left 10 years ago, who de-facto have lost all their contacts with the state, and the focus of the program, when it was being created, was not to support people who left for 3 months.

However, there are significant temporal differences even among short-term 'economic asylum seekers'. (Re)integration is contingent on different stages of the so-called 'economic asylum' which migrants experience; in general, those who proceed to independent accommodation and start working, learn the language and send their children to school experience a high level of integration which has a differential impact on their

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[12] National Program for the Reintegration Assistance and Support to Roma returnees in the Republic of Macedonia.

reintegration in the country of origin. Whereas asylum seekers who 'never cross the camp stage' as some of them put it, do not gain as many skills, often do not accumulate any material resources and therefore they return with no capital. Participants of a focus group in Kumanovo in Macedonia explain the 'whirlwind affair' with the asylum systems in the EU member states and the harshness of return after only 3 months:

> We had to sell our cows here, cars, whatever we had just to go there and earn something. We were there for 3 months and we had to come back because we were afraid of getting stamps on our passports. Chances were you will go with 1000 euros and return with 1200. Illegal work was the only work we could do, sleeping at any place we could find.

In most cases, even though their stay abroad is very short for the authorities, qualitatively speaking their efforts are very intense and the contact with social services due to their asylum status facilitates their integration, as compared to the situation of irregular migrants who receive no help and have to hide from the authorities (Vathi and King 2013).

> In order to learn German I attended a language course for 3-4 months and would take the train from one city to the other. Unfortunately, I didn't progress much as soon I received the notification that I had to leave. In Germany I did the language course, made a little money, and got to know many people – I made friends with many Albanians, I even went to Switzerland and worked there a bit, too. Wherever there were Albanians, we went and worked as they had their own businesses (Roma man, Prizren, Kosovo).

The stages of economic asylum translate into different amounts of social capital gained and transferred back home upon return, even for different family members; differences between parents and children, siblings, cousins, neighbours and others who planned the trip together are observed in the data.

> In France I went to school because I was 17 years old, whereas my older brother was not a minor so they did not send him to school. At school I learnt French for one year and I could communicate well. But they [the authorities] did not send me to gain any work skills; I only had some practice in a restaurant working as a chef in the kitchen; I went for that profession since I had some experience with that (Roma man, Tirana, Albania).

> Time is also linked to the traumas of forcible return and lack of preparation. The drama of return for these cases is manifold; as key informants narrate, many migrants experience raiding of their homes by the police, confiscation of financial resources, and are given half an hour to prepare to leave, sometimes returning to robbed or destroyed homes in the country of origin.[13] The confiscation of material and financial resources is

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[13] Interview with representatives of DROM Kumanovo, Macedonia.

particularly sensitive, as research has shown that returnees who go back empty-handed experience high degrees of socio-cultural shame (Schuster and Majidi 2013).

Upon return, the temporal dimension is also relevant to the approach of service providers towards (re)integration assistance. Some policy makers and service providers point to the need to tackle the discrimination trauma early on, by focusing on integration services for the children of returnees. According to them, work should be focused on long-term impact, and that is why working with children both in daycare centres through play and in schools is important. Time and life-course are therefore important variables in the easing of (re)integration barriers that the Roma returnees experience.

> I think that it is very important to have activities for little children as their habits can be changed, so it's very important for families that come back with small children, who maybe do not know the language or do not have documents, to be placed in the right hands, therefore activities that target children are very important and a great investment (GIZ, Macedonia).

The temporal dimension of (re)integration is intertwined with the spatial. An immediate reaction upon return is the observation on the differences between the quality of the environment in the countries of migration, and that upon return in the country of origin. This transnational comparison is further accentuated by the impact of migration on neighbourhoods of origin. Different interviewees noted the emptied neighbourhoods because of the explosive nature of the recent 'economic asylum waves', but there is little understanding and anticipation from the side of migrants and other stakeholders on how this condition impacts (re)integration. (Re)integration is therefore affected also by a certain range of unrecognised environmental and infrastructural benefits of migration abroad and challenges upon return.

> Since I was away for long and was in three countries, even though you didn't have anything recognised, I enjoyed some privileges, infrastructural, environmental - stuff that we lack here. When I came back I had some stresses (focus group in Kumanovo, Macedonia).

The demographic and neighbourhood impact of migration and return are also raised by Roma interviewees in Kosovo; since the intense emigration waves of the late 2010s the emptiness in the Roma neighbourhoods makes (re)integration harder as it impacts on the (re)establishment of social ties and the community feel is lacking.

> We have information that this last wave of migration in 2014 has happened so fast and pretty much overnight. Between March and September approximately 10,000 Roma and Egyptians left Kosovo, which consist of almost 20% of the total population [of Roma] of Kosovo. Official statistics report that there are 35,000

Roma Ashkali and Egyptians[14] in Kosovo; unofficially we know that the number is higher, almost 50,000. With 10,000 emigrating in such short period of time, we notice the shrinking of neighbourhoods especially in villages; we have even seen entire neighbourhoods empty! (Roma community leader, Kosovo).

On the other hand, another major spatial dimension is the concentration of returnees in specific areas. The spatial aspect, and especially the urban planning necessary in the context of return migration, is very little talked about (Porobic 2017); in countries such as BiH and Serbia where the IDPs are still an issue, this recent wave of returnees poses more serious challenges. However, the spatial (re)settlement of the Roma returnees, and the consequent need for urban planning, remain key issues across the Balkans. In Macedonia service providers also raised the issue of legalising/regularising the Roma neighbourhoods.

It'd be good if an agreement is reached with the government or some of the institutions somehow on legalisation, even though I know that there have been some programmes on that, but the Roma neighbourhoods still remain illegal because the legislation as it stands does not allow for these to be legalised. Therefore, a political agreement is needed to legalise these neighbourhoods once and for all, whether it is going to be for Drizla, Suto Orizari; both the citizens and the government will benefit from this (DROM, Macedonia).

The concentration of returnees also means that migrants' needs are dealt with in a more compound manner in areas where pilot projects are taking place; access and outreach are more intense in pilot areas, which are often chosen as they have the highest number of Roma returnees, e.g. Novi Pazar. This city seems to be the main centre for the (re)integration programmes in Serbia, starting in 2007. While the focus on high-concentration areas is warranted, the situation of the Roma in the villages is even more problematic as they sold their land before migrating and that was their main resource.

We could say that 40-50% of the Roma have sold their land or given it for rent. The information that we have shows that those who sold the land are the most vulnerable; they really regret it. But the reason for that is that they needed the money to emigrate… and the worst part is that we cannot help these returnees. We have ran projects and offered vocational training, but they do not qualify if they do not own land! (Roma community leader, Tirana, Albania).

Once again, the focus turns to the institutional arrangements and their temporalities; according to some key informants, policy makers and service providers are only looking for short-term fixes. Others focus on the short-term programmes of donors who are the ones that work on the situation on the ground, but they cannot fill in for an under-resourced state service provision and infrastructure.

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[14] Ashkali and Egyptians are the main subgroups of Roma in the region.

One of problems with the organisations that work with these issues is that they seek short-term solutions that will bring fast results, and those results stop functioning when the organisation leaves. The donor is happy and they think the problem is solved, so we need to avoid *ad hoc* fast integration in order to correct some problems that were created. We need long-term planning of activities and measures that will be sustainable and that will target these people and their problems and whose goal will be to integrate them long-term in the society they belong to. And that has to be connected to the vulnerabilities that they had before leaving the country (representative of GIZ, Macedonia).

This section has shown that the Roma returns are part of a historical moment in the EU, characterised by high immigration and political pressure to respond to these migratory flows. Time nonetheless appears to be a qualitative construct as it is the experience whilst abroad rather than the chronological time that impact returnees' (re)integration. Time upon return is indeed consequential, because of the legal and policy implications it has; eligibility for social protection services appears to depend on it, while a range of short-, medium-, and long-term policies are needed to address the (re)integration needs of returnees. The 'where' is just as an important aspect of (re)integration; space appears as institutionally managed as returnees are expected to settle in the communities of origin, which often have lost the familiarity to them, whilst many support programmes prioritise particular spaces of returnees' settlement. These conclusions point to the role that institutions have to play in managing as well as planning returnees' resettlement and (re)integration.

The institutional and the service provision: 'we need to do something about the Roma'

The return of the Roma has instigated a number of discussions and processes at the institution and service-provision levels across the WB6. The demographic and socio-economic characteristics of returnees as well as their history of migration and forms of return do indeed speak about an intersectional (re)integration: long-term *versus* short-term migrants, adults *versus* children, men *versus* women, forced *versus* voluntary returnees. An important dimension is the approach of the WB6 countries towards the status of returnee; two main approaches are recorded. The first one is the case of Albania, which has a specific legal document that enshrines the status of emigrant and benefits the returnees that have resided abroad for at least one year, [15] but this document was essentially prepared for the returnees that were part of readmission agreements. Other countries, such as Macedonia, do not consider the need to specify a status for the returnees, but treat them equally with the other citizens in terms of their rights and access to service provision. Indeed, the status of returnee in most WB6 countries is not defined

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[15] Order 1722/2007 of the Ministry of MPCSSHB (currently Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth [MoSWY]) *On the Form, Content and Procedures of Obtaining the Status of Emigrant*.

legally and appears to be vaguer in countries that have a long history of refugees and IDPs and a respective migration infrastructure in place (e.g. Serbia).

The issue with recognising the returnee status is also linked with expectations on a certain opportunistic attitude of migrants to exploit the social protection provisions, both in the receiving and home countries, which then has repercussions at political level in terms of interactions with the EU for countries going through intense EU membership negotiation. Macedonia is particularly strong on this because they are close to the EU membership and policy makers are even talking about the blaming of the Roma and ethnic profiling (EPI 2018). As a representative of GIZ in Macedonia points out, they become an issue in the EU negotiations[16] as they are recorded in the official statistics and have to be supported through the social system, which then feeds in the conditionality aspect of EU membership: 'the problem are the other 95% who go to seek asylum and who are riding on the backs of the social system. And the majority of them are Roma'. The problem with the 'economic asylum', then, is access to the welfare system, not migration per se.

Nonetheless, the rapid swelling of returnee flows is an acute issue across the region, which first exerts high pressure on the institutions and service providers; on the other hand, the flows gave rise to a higher level of scrutiny towards the within-group differences, that is, the different degrees and factors of vulnerability among returnees, and the Roma returnees as well. One of the key issues both in terms of management of returns and assessment of vulnerability appears to be that of registration of returnees, as many 'voluntary' returnees do not make contact with the service providers. This threatens the sustainability of returns. According to the Ministry of Social Policy and Labour of Macedonia, voluntary return has increased over the years demonstrating some appreciation on the limits of economic asylum, and a change in the attitude towards 'voluntary' return which, according to migrants themselves, is mostly for the purpose of keeping the right to travel in the EU, and also in relation to their plans to re-migrate through work visas as soon as an opportunity presents itself. Indeed, as service providers point out, in most cases, re-migration indicates some level of integration for the Roma families, as the only alternative for the most marginalised is begging on the streets.

> We can see that voluntary return has increased in recent years, from 12% in 2013 to 35% in 2016, so it would be good if the returnees were helped with social entrepreneurship and if these activities were supported by the country returning them and the country receiving them. The sustainability of these social entrepreneurship activities is something that needs to be owned by both of the countries. It's OK that Germany gives them 600 euros and sends them here, but after some time they will go to Belgium or to the Netherlands, and they will just make the circle and go to Germany again (MSLP, Macedonia).

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[16] Macedonia is a candidate EU member state and as such it is expected to fully adopt the *acquis communautaire* – a body of common laws and regulations binding on all member states. Some of these laws and regulation regard management of migration. For more information, see https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/glossary/terms/acquis_en

The idea of social entrepreneurship is an emerging one, which has high potential to address re-integration in a more holistic manner. Otherwise, provisions from the state are typically focused on help with housing, health, and employment. Let us deal with each of these in turn.

Issues in relation to housing as a key aspect of integration are significant across the region: loss of previous homes either because they sold them before migrating or because they lived in temporary accommodation is common. Issues with property rights (e.g. Serbia, Albania) are also recorded. The type and amount of assistance with housing varies; in Serbia assistance ranges from providing construction material, access to residential units and pre-fabricated housing to the purchase of whole village households (see also IOM 2014). However, problems with building permits have been identified when returnees have been given building materials. And most importantly, service providers maintain that housing for the Roma returnees is key to the (lack of) feeling of (re)settlement and (re)integration:

> Something that no one mentions, but is of great importance, is the question of housing; as long as that is not resolved, we will have immigrants in Germany. As long as they sleep in alternative housing they will seek better life elsewhere (representative of GIZ, Macedonia).

In turn, the approach to returnees' health issues has recorded the need for outreach, information and education, and a consideration of their psychosocial wellbeing rather than a specific mental health issue. Health is also seen as a sensitive and more confidential topic among the Roma returnees, which makes the need for outreach even more important. In particular, the situation of the Roma women and young mothers and their newborn babies appears to be the most problematic, considering their lack of access to health services and help with childbirth due to lack of insurance and the inability of the services to look after young children as they lack documentation on their age and key health needs. This has led some service providers to emphasise the need for health education, especially reproductive health in the case of the Roma. The focus on psychosocial wellbeing is indeed inspired by the need to tackle their health needs holistically, but may also play a role in adjusting their expectations upon return and thereby in improving thus access to existing services. The observed 'transnational health disadvantage' appears as one of the most crucial deal-breakers of return, as it increases the Roma's conviction of their marginalised status.

> We do work on their psychosocial state; on mental health no, but on psychosocial support yes, and these services are provided by the members of the mobile team. They also give directions to the Centre for Social Work and from thereon it is the work of the MLSP, and probably there is a lot of disappointment. Maybe someone left with medical problems and they were treated with great care abroad and then they come back here and they are treated as they are, so they are disappointed (GIZ, Macedonia).

However, across the WB6 the main focus is on employment for the adults, and education for children, as key domains for (re)integration. In particular, employment access and experience appear to be hampered by the distinct discrimination that the Roma face, and as alleviated by the capital gained whilst abroad and a sense of transfer of capital upon return.

> As Roma, we are often discriminated against in the business and work places. People have prejudices that we are thieves, we do not dress nicely, we do not smell nice, etc. I think we quickly learn the business and we are an intelligent people, especially the Roma who lived abroad, in Germany. We have learned to work there. After returning from Germany, it is much more difficult to integrate into society than before leaving (Roma man, Montenegro).

The social capital gained abroad and its impact on employment strategies is further emphasised by different key informants and migrants across the WB6. A higher awareness and standards of work ethics are observed among the returned Roma, whilst others point to the German language as a specific form of socio-cultural capital that facilitates their employment, even in the conditions of a rigid labour market.

> When I came back it took me a good month to reacclimatise as in the beginning I found it very hard, but after that it seemed very reasonable to look for a job because I speak fluent German. I went to the job seekers' office, and after that I found a job searching on Facebook. I work in a call centre (Roma man, Tirana, Albania).

However, according to other key informants, the private sector has opportunities to offer in terms of job creation and social enterpreneurship, but potential initiatives are not mobilised and due to lack of incentives and legal boundaries, and so it shies away from these social initiatives. On the other hand, the concept of social enterprises recognises and aims to 'correct' the stark discrimination that the Roma face and how that plays out in employment settings, hampering the willingness of Roma to integrate in formal employment.

> We need case management where we will work with each one of them, they have to be employed in social enterprises and we need to work with them for years to have a mind change for them to enter the system, otherwise everything will be the same (GIZ, Macedonia).

Other key informants maintain that more can be done to recognise and capitalise on the status quo, pointing to the need to regularise street work (e.g. begging, scavenging, windscreen cleaning; see Vathi 2014a, 2014b) for the poorest Roma to work formally. This is seen in the framework of short-term measures, which take on board the perspective of the Roma, understanding and enhancing their current survival and livelihood strategies. Legalism from the side of the government is seen to worsen the situation of the Roma. Instead, in the short term, more proactive and enabling measures are advocated for.

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Imagine how much garbage there would be if these people who collect the plastic on the streets did not do so. So why not for the government to give them some finances for these activities as they give to the people with special needs, and in return for these people to also be excluded from paying tax. Instead of giving them benefits, they are punishing them; for example, if they took 300 denars for the plastic bottles and did not report it, they will punish them, take the money, take away the social support and even make them return the money retrospectively (DROM Kumanovo, Macedonia).

Children's reintegration in schools is even more complicated and poses a significant challenge for the (re)integration of the whole family. This process is harder when families return involuntarily because children do not manage to get school papers from the schools and local authorities in the respective EU countries, and this makes registration harder. Another issue with school registration is that, whilst in the migration countries children attend school because not going is not an option, upon return families resort to 'optional education', which is very disconcerting for the children.

Reintegration was a huge shock for all of us. There my child went to school, the director would open the door to us and welcome us ... I was surprised. You cannot give them flowers because that's their job. My child enrolled in school, we had an interpreter. She ate halal food. They all came to say goodbye and cried when we left. When we returned, we had problems here. I brought to the school director a diploma certifying that my child has finished the third grade and he told me, 'what this is? I do not understand this! It must be translated. I cannot accept this. You must go to Podgorica to the Ministry and submit the documentation'. I could not enrol my child at school! (Roma parent, Montenegro).

Problems with transfer of educational records for children are evident across the region, but a sense of empowerment from experience abroad is also noted. Yet, anxiety and depression among children when they return is common (Vathi and Duci 2016). With their families forced to re-occupy the lowest segment of the social stratification, education loses its priority in family agendas upon return. At a more official level, reintegration in education is hampered by a transnational disjuncture between different education systems. As some key informants explain, the issue of (re)integration in education is complicated also due to the short-term nature of migration of their families, which compromises the education chances of the children, not least because they struggle with language proficiency.

Children lose the connection with education, and they have problems with the recognition of their qualifications, but what needs to be clear is that neither here nor there do they receive any kind of education. A typical trend is that children 'disappear in the class'. We do not have information on what kind of education they received abroad. There are situations where you have a child of 13/14 years who has a diploma but is completely illiterate. They forget the language as they

start to learn German. And this is a problem because when they will have to be included in the labour market they will speak another language. And another problem is that they include the children in the German classes, and they cannot learn the language this way (MSLP, Macedonia).

In light of this evidence, service provision from major international agencies and NGOs appears to have a more purposeful temporal focus, as it contains short-, medium-, and long-term goals. Some of the projects with the returnees appear to aim at improving the situation in the short term, through closing the civic gap between the Roma and the 'mainstream'; e.g. working with parents and families, teaching basic skills to families and children, raising the issue of girls' human rights which are under threat because of the cultural traditions of the Roma (e.g. early marriage, proof of virginity upon return). In the medium term, the service providers point to the need to address the situation with jobs, housing, health and education in a sustainable and holistic way. [17]

In the long term, they aim to address the issue of discrimination and marginalisation and ensure more regular contact exists between the Roma and the mainstream society. Some outreach is organised in Macedonia, e.g. through mobile teams, but they are sponsored by major international organisations (e.g. Terre des Hommes). Mobile teams appear as the main mechanism to reach out to the Roma at the micro level, though outreach in villages is limited. A similar example is the project of education that GIZ has funded in Kosovo to address the reintegration of the children of returnees in schools.[18]

Outreach appears to have a more significant effect on integration of the Roma as the attention that the Roma have received may well enhance their (re)integration in the longer term because of their recent visibility in the policy making and service provision spheres. Some service providers confess to some prejudice towards the Roma and reflect on the effect that working with them on the ground has on 'bridging the divide' as this service provider in Fushe Kosove (Kosovo) narrates:

Up to the time that I had not yet worked with this community, there was a lot of prejudice but mostly covert; when I started working with the Roma I always had this fear and the first 3 months my family were scared that the Roma will do something bad, that the Roma were not good people, they were people who had let us down during the war... But through my work we had to be in the presence of each other (with the Roma) and there has started some sort of socialisation, which has helped to understand each-other's world. It's been since 2014 that I work with the Roma and go to visit them, and we have come to realise that actually there is nothing that distinguishes them from us.

There is also a growing awareness among service providers that a more individualised approach, that treats the Roma returnees on a case-by-case basis, is more appropriate – an approach that would distance itself from the jargon of capacity building and

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[17] Interview with the representative of Terre des Hommes, Albania.
[18] For more information: https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/21123.html

implementation; real legislative measures are also proposed to underpin the efforts of international agencies and the ethos of service providers:

> But now they have even more problems than before they left: their children cannot obtain any social rights, and the system they return to functions in the same way that made them leave the country. Therefore, we need to do something about the Roma, something that is not about the decade of the Roma; not just focus on how to educate professional staff how to handle the Roma, because we have invested 1 billion in all of these activities and nothing has changed (representative of GIZ, Macedonia).

The link of between Roma returnees and the service providers, however, can go both ways; some Roma do not approach the services, others overdo it by approaching many services and duplicating the assistance and services they receive. Several policy makers and service providers emphasised the need to collect systematic data and publish returnees' statistics so as to track service provision, pointing to the fact that return migration is seen as an issue in terms of eligibility for state and non-governmental support (DROM Kumanovo, Macedonia). In relation to these, a discussion on positive discrimination as applied towards the returnees has also surfaced. Such issues are seen closely linked to the sustainability of return, as including returnees' views in the definition of vulnerability could be the only way to bridge the gap between returnees' expectations with the situation of the services on the ground (Vathi et al. 2018). On the other hand, ensuring that the needs of the domiciled citizens are also considered may address the perceptions and resentment of the locals and their shared myth of 'returnee wealth'.

> Caution has to be expressed that solutions for returnees should not further provoke tensions in the local community. In other words, the perception should be avoided that returnees get funds because they were in EU countries and now they are returned, whereas domestic population gets nothing, though they also live in dire conditions. Social housing in supportive conditions would be a good measure to counteract such a perception, as was done with refugees earlier.[19]

Coordination of different levels of policy making and forms and sources of service provision is seen as a key issue for (re)integration; some key informants maintain that this is even more important than employment, which is currently the focus across the WB6. Issues with coordination of services in the countries of origin are, firstly, in terms of building the institutions so that social workers are not left alone in their work on the ground. Secondly, the transnational communication between the EU member states and the respective WB6 countries is missing and this creates problems in supporting the returnees in their integration. Policy makers in Macedonia emphasise the lack of concern and transnational commitment to (re)integration, whilst post-return financial assistance is organised at country level.

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[19] Interview with CRM Deputy Commissioner, Serbia.

In 2010 the perception was that the sustainability of voluntary return has to be connected with something that is going to enable them to lead a normal life here, some kind of package which would make them self-sustainable. So the agreement for readmission has a protocol, and I insisted that we put something in that protocol in which we say, 'OK, we are going to accept them, but with some kind of economic package'. For the time being, no one wants to sign that kind of protocol; they say 'our focus is the return, the sustainability is your job'. And no one from the EU countries wanted the protocol to encompass such questions of economic nature. Their goal was just to return them (representative of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, Macedonia).

Discussion and conclusions: the Roma returning 'home'?

The findings of this paper show that the process of (re)integration of the Roma in the WB6 is inevitably characterised by several challenges due to the nature of the factors that their (re)integration is contingent on. These factors are rooted in the region's historical and structural contexts and the Roma's own intersectional positioning in the region. Research on the situation of the Roma should also take into consideration the significant transformation that countries in the region have gone through, while discrimination appears to be an overarching factor that continues to position them at the bottom of the social class hierarchy. At the institutional level, the recognition of the 'Roma returnees problem' appears to have had a double effect; first, in some contexts (e.g. Macedonia) stakeholders speak about the blaming and ethnic profiling of the Roma since their involvement in 'economic asylum' puts pressure on political negotiations with the EU. Second, Roma's extensive migration and return at a time when migration is at the top of the EU political agenda has put the Roma centre-stage and increased awareness among key stakeholders of their situation in the WB6.

From a theoretical standpoint, the temporal dimensions of Roma 'economic asylum' and return appear to challenge some key assumptions of the migration and integration literature. The short stays abroad and the high impact of these migration experiences on the Roma's understanding of their relationship with the 'mainstream' in the country of origin and their own cognitive transformations, show that time in migration context should be measured qualitatively, based on the intensity of migrants' experiences. The temporal dimension is closely linked to the change in perceptions and expectations that both migrants and the places of origin experience over time, posing significant challenges at the personal, community and institutional levels. Thus, (re)integration prospects and 'outcomes' should be viewed in relation to the varying mismatch between perceptions and expectations of returned migrants and of the local community (Vathi et al. 2018).

As existing integration literature suggests, high levels of integration while abroad complicate the return and (re)integration process. In the context of this study, migration to the EU countries entailed different stages of asylum and levels of integration,

sometimes differing even between family members. This finding emphasises the importance of a needs-based approach to (re)integration, focusing on individual challenges and on a more qualitative approach to the effect of time, factoring in the experiential time rather than the duration of Roma's stay abroad in terms of years or months. Another factor that plays a role is the experienced degrees of difference and similarity between the status and welfare in the country of origin and country of immigration; a high degree of difference appears in the case of the Roma, which has a negative impact on their (re)integration.

Subsequently, the (re)integration of ethnic minorities such as the Roma should be viewed in relation to their social positioning and perception of belonging to the marginalised or fringes of societies of origin prior to migrating. Perhaps linked to their acute sense of detachment from the mainstream, the 'self-assessment' of the Roma situation post-return appears to be based on a micro-level analysis, whilst a collective claim is also being articulated. The experience abroad appears to have changed the Roma's self-perception, which, on the one hand, gives rise to immediate tendencies to re-migrate and on the other, foments a quest to belong in the WB6 countries. Policy-makers, service providers and advocacy groups should focus on enhancing this belongingness since research has shown that it is key to reintegration (Lietaert *et al.* 2017; Vathi and Duci 2016).

Furthermore, the findings on the (re)integration barriers and emotional and cognitive transformation that the Roma returnees experience show that it is crucial that psychosocial support is factored in, promoted and sustained as part of (re)integration programmes and policies in the country of origin. Evidence from the WB6 countries demonstrates that psychosocial support in practice is insufficient and widespread psychosocial issues are experienced by returnees, especially children (Vathi and Duci 2016; Zevelun *et al* 2017). The need for psychosocial support is more acute considering the forced nature of these returns; as Webber (2011) maintains, voluntary returns can only be those cases in which migrants have a legal basis to stay in the country of immigration but despite their secure residence, they decide to relocate to the country of origin. Evidence presented above testifies to the unwillingness of the Roma to return and their high tendency towards re-migration.

However, migrants' vulnerability is a multi-faceted concept and experience. Sabates-Wheeler and Waite (2003) attempted a conceptual framework of vulnerabilities, which lists a myriad of spatial, socio-cultural and socio-political factors as determinants in different contexts. Migrants often suffer low-level social protection provisions, discrimination, exclusion and segregation of different degrees. As the findings of this paper show, the Roma in the WB6 score high in terms of adverse socio-cultural and socio-spatial factors that determine vulnerability considering their segregation prior to migrating and the dire material situation post-return, and their overall stigmatisation and discrimination across the region. Yet, a distinctive feature of these migration waves is the access to migration of a section of the Roma that would otherwise not be able to be mobile, even though the most vulnerable are still underrepresented in the returnee category across the Balkans. (Re)integration of those who experienced migration in the EU member states may then mean a widening of the integration gap within the Roma communities. This finding has particular implications for the designing of return policies,

and broader social policies that aim to tackle poverty, social mobility and overall social cohesion in the WB6.

Furthermore, the findings show that 'economic asylum' has a stronger impact on Roma families. They are often migrating from situations of extreme poverty in their home countries, they tend to fall prey to smugglers and so end up with debts, which they cannot repay as their migration to claim economic asylum is very short and unproductive. Migration ruins the simple and very fragile livelihood they have before they migrate; coming back only makes it more apparent to them that they live in extreme poverty with very little help from the state, but now they have lost even those small material goods they had before leaving. In particular, the issue of lack of registration is pertinent to the situation of children of Roma migrant families returning from abroad due to the complicated transnational procedures of registration. The lack of registration has strong consequences for access to resources and education for the children. Experiencing such barriers of registration early in life would lead to marginalisation of a number of children, which could create a grey social area. Yet the extent of this problem is still unknown due to the intensity of return of migrants and the still informal situation of Roma communities in the WB6.

Despite these limitations observed on the ground, the shift from the sustainability of return to that of (re)integration is a timely one. The EU Commission is rightly advocating for a more individualised approach to (re)integration, taking into account all the relevant characteristics such as age, gender, single person or family, socio-economic profile and time spent abroad. The findings of this paper though demonstrate that we should discuss sustainability as a more fleeting concept in relation to minorities' return and reintegration. The expectation towards the Roma to (re)integrate while they are usually mobile and experience high discrimination is linked to a hegemonic view of societies and minorities' integration as the end-result of their movements. From a practical point of view, achieving an individual and personalised support to returnees is difficult, as there is a tendency for action on (re)integration (policy making and service provision programmes) to be driven by quantitative rather qualitative indicators and outcomes. Considering the overall background of the WB6 and the centrality of migration in its context, a higher awareness on policy trade-offs is also needed. The WB6 have weak social protection systems (World Bank 2016), so discussions about return and (re)integration should be seen in the framework of the limited resources and dysfunctional institutional frameworks in place.

Therefore, as many key stakeholders in the region point out, (re)integration should be a concerted effort to simultaneously address the widespread issues of marginalisation and discrimination of the Roma as well as to support the returnees with short-, medium- and long-term measures. This idea of sustainability of reintegration, while difficult to realise from the side of the state administration, is embraced by major international organisations that specialise in support for families and children; a representative of Terre des Hommes in Albania defined reintegration as follows:

> I understand reintegration as a process that focuses on the management of specific cases, a process that involves a number of specialised staff in assessing the needs of all family members and a service provision that addresses the immediate needs

upon return, including among others their psychosocial wellbeing and any other needs for their economic empowerment. The whole intervention should essentially be a holistic one that tackles their short-term needs, but also their needs in the long run until the family is empowered and enabled to lead an independent life.

The findings of this paper further support this recent focus on the individual needs of returnees and the heightened awareness on (re)integration as linked to vulnerability and wellbeing. Furthermore, they highlight the need to target atypical areas in order to assist families that settle in small urban areas and in villages where employment and socialisation opportunities are limited. Second, findings suggest that service providers play a paramount role in enhancing (re)integration, which goes beyond their primary role to assist returnees with access to provisions. In general, the research results suggest that an increase in the awareness that a more individual and personalised approach is needed for returnees, that sustainability based on macro-economic indicators is not working, and a more holistic approach to what makes return sustainable is needed, putting migrants centre-stage.

Another crucial aspect is that of the locals and their considerations when assessments of vulnerability and indicators of integration of returnees are measured. A large part of the research on integration neglects factors that affect everyone alike, which can be related to age, gender and socio-economic status and not necessarily to differences in ethnic origin (Banton 2001: 159). These factors considered jointly would help to uncover the complexity of minority return migration and its contextual particularities. Future studies should focus on a more rigorous comparison between returnees and locals to analyse in depth the factors that impact on (re)integration experiences. Yet, an under-emphasised factor is the transnational aspect of Roma's vulnerability. Sardelić (2018: 489) analyses the mobilities of the Roma from the post-Yugoslav countries in the EU and maintains that 'the Roma are positioned as a racialized minority, treated only as temporary migrants in their "host country" and without prospects of inclusion in their "country of origin" as minority citizens'.

Nonetheless, at a societal level, there is a parallel integration discourse and practice taking place: that on the re-integration of recent returnees, and affected by this, a discourse on the overall minority issue in the WB6, digging in to the Pandora's box of (lack of) respect for minorities' rights and inclusion across the region. The global attention and action that the heightened emigration of the late 2010s and the return of the Roma managed to garner could work in bringing about long-overdue changes in terms of the positioning of this minority in the social structures across the region.

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