

## **Refugees in their own country**

The numerous Roma population from Macedonia seeking asylum in the European countries has been deported or voluntarily returned to their home country. There are no official numbers for the magnitude of the problem. Some of the returnees have a housing issue because they previously sold their homes or their houses were robbed and face problems in finding resources for meeting their basic life needs; others do not have documentation, are deleted from the employment records, social and health services. Their identification documents have been lost or left in the country in which they sought asylum. In the field of education, however, children do not have certificates or families do not have financial means for their recognition. Those who were born outside and stayed abroad for a longer period of time, when they return they do not know the Macedonian language and can hardly fit in the education process in Macedonia

### **Aneta Risteska**

Migration becomes more intense and brings many challenges. In a search of a better life, many families leave their homes. But what if, for whatever reason, they are forced to return to their home country?

How does their reintegration into society look like? To what extent does the system offer social services that should be their first support to get back on their feet? Last, but not the least, to what extent are solutions appropriate for the population (Roma), which, according to statistics, is most often in focus of this issue?

Motivated to raise the awareness of the public and all relevant stakeholders and policymakers on the conditions faced by economic migrants when returning to Macedonia, the so-called "returnees", we decided to take a more serious look at this marginalized group after returning to its home country, which initially left the country because of the bad economic status.

We realized that the obstacles were numerous, in both directions. Both at the exit, and at the entrance to their own country, and on so many levels. Specifically, the problem is ongoing, but it seems that there are no effective solutions.

### **Macedonia has no policy for reintegration of returnees**

- It was really hard. We could not manage to pay the bills. We packed up and left for Germany. We stayed for two years, they accepted us nicely. Then deportation began. They brought us back home, where an even more difficult situation awaited us. Our house was robbed and destroyed. The children could hardly fit into school with their generation, and we were also in difficult position, out of work and without money. We

tried to integrate, but we did not succeed - neither here nor there - explained 36-year old returnee from Germany Damir.

Inevitably, with the return to their own country, they face new challenges. On one hand uncertainty of exercising their social and health care rights, education, employment, housing ... But, on the other hand, their situation is already known, it is the same circle they wanted to escape from. Now, overcoming obstacles requires even more fitness and endurance, patience, but also good knowledge and/ or guidance from competent people about the actions that should take and which lead to the promotion of their rights.

According to Ahmet Jasharevski, the president of the NGO "Drom", which works on this issue, the state not only has no proper policy, but also fails even to record Roma who left the country, as well as those who returned. The first assistance, he adds, these fellow citizens receive from the domestic non-governmental organizations, and from the international ones. The only international organizations working on the problems faced by the returnees are the GIZ (German Society for International Cooperation) and UNDP, (the United Nations Development Program ).

- The obstacles are huge and different from family to family. Some have a problem with their home because they have previously sold it, or have been robbed and are facing problems with meeting their basic life needs, others do not have documentation, have been deleted from employment records, social and health services. Identification documents have been lost or left in the country where they sought asylum. In the area of education, however, the children either do not have certificates or families do not have financial means for their recognition. Those who were born outside and stayed abroad for a longer period of time, when they return, they do not even know the Macedonian language and can hardly fit in the educational process in Macedonia, explains Jasharevski, adding that health problems cannot be circumvented here, which are very complex, especially for chronically ill people who are being charged in our country, while in the countries where they were asylum seekers were exempt from any payment.

### **The education system - a challenge for returnees**

According to Jasharevski, the integration of children-returnees is one of the biggest challenges. Those who attended regular classes before going abroad, according to practice, usually return to the same grade they were before they left. In this way, their education process is undoubtedly stagnating. It is a problem because when they return, they are already older than other students, which is an additional difficulty in socializing with the group. This makes them hesitant to continue their education.

On the other hand, in cases when migrants remain for a longer period of time outside the country and when their children attend schools in the country in which they have been migrated and have graduation diplomas, the process of nostrification of documents is proving to be too long and complex factor in the continuation of the educational process in the country.

Very often, even those children who attended classes abroad do not have a document that could prove it. Another problem is that returnees are usually returning while the school year is in progress, so they should wait until next September to continue, which is a discontinuity in their educational process, reads the report prepared by the GIZ as part of the Regional Social Welfare Project for Vulnerable Groups, at the request of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, which aims to improve the conditions necessary for ensuring equal social rights, including the right to a non-discrimination of vulnerable groups.

- What is important and is missing is data on the number of children who have stopped their education in Macedonia because of their departure to another country and now do not fulfill all conditions for reintegration in the educational process. The inability to integrate is a serious threat to human rights, says social worker Remzija Muslievska.

### **Social and health care - constant problems**

Another problem faced by returnees in the country is the disrupted social assistance.

"All this trouble of knocking from door to door of the institutions is not worth the 1,300 denars I will get at the end," said Mahmud, one of the returnees, pointing out the need for covering the healthcare expenses, which are high.

It was estimated that 68 per cent of Roma (who were part of the GIZ project survey) were unable to purchase the required medicine, compared to 32 per cent that did not belong to the Roma population. Almost all returnees had at least one family member (including children) who was ill and who needed immediate and expensive medical treatment. This is, of course, a result of hard life, insufficient hygiene, malnutrition, inadequate living conditions, and the lack of medical treatments and checks.

Another problem is the provision of health care for children born in another country and who do not have a birth certificate. In such cases, they cannot obtain access to primary health care.

- Non-governmental organizations are the first to offer assistance to returnees, related to their accommodation, registration in institutions, assistance in getting all documents, but, from a financial point of view, they are unable to help them. Unfortunately, in our country people are charged for application for any document, for purchase of medicines or for scheduling a medical examination. On the other hand, if they had a money

transfer or earned some income they needed to meet these needs, the state does not offer a solution until they settled all debts to the state - explains Jasharevski.

## **Phantom People**

The personal documentation is what returnees often do not have when they return home, which is a condition for access to many other services.

A good part of them do not know how to read and write and thus cannot fill the documents needed to obtain social or other care, and for a comprehensive understanding of the procedures and the necessary steps to be taken they need legal assistance.

- A key role here is played by the non-governmental organizations that manage to speed up the process of issuing documents, but it is necessary to involve the state institutions and the local self-government much more seriously, as well as to develop strategies and programs that will be implemented. In addition, these documents should not be good just on paper, but should also stipulate allocation of funds for their implementation - emphasizes Jasharevski.

In cases of deportation, often due to stress, people forget to take with them their personal documents (certificates, certificates from medical institutions, assurances, etc.) that additionally make it difficult for them to exercise a right in Macedonia.

Merdan Muslievski, a lawyer in the Roma Information Center, explains that the state does not offer any suitable system for reintegration of Roma returnees.

- Sometimes large financial assistance is not needed as they need a legal one. These persons cannot exercise their rights until they have personal documentation. And here support should be provided because they are Macedonian citizens and have the right to all documents. It takes only one day to get a birth certificate, while an ID card requires a maximum of 10 days, which means they can quickly exercise their rights - he says.

According to the lawyer Zlatko Sarev, in many cases the only document for identification of children is the travel document issued by the deportation bodies of the foreign country.

- Without quality legal assistance, Roma returnees are not able to start and complete the procedures for additional birth registration of children (born abroad) in the Administration for Registration of Births. Only due to the cooperation of this service, a satisfactory percentage of successfully completed procedures is achieved. In the past, these procedures were conducted in the Ministry of Internal Affairs - the department for administrative and legal affairs, which had a stricter position in solving this issue - explains Sarev, adding that a special problem, almost unsolvable for Roma returnees, is the additional registration of birth of children from an extramarital community, when

paternity or maternity testing is required with DNA analysis, which is carried out in RM for a price of 300 to 500 euros.

Among other things, he recalls that in 2010 the Government of Macedonia has adopted a Program for Assistance and Support for the Reintegration of Returnees in the country. The solutions in it inspired optimism, he says, that the country will systematically solve problems through its five components: legal assistance and personal documentation, social protection, employment, health care and education.

- But in practice it's different. The National Center for Reintegration of Returnees did not give the expected results, did not build a unique system for registering and recording returnees in order to determine the status of returnee, did not build a system for exchange of information between the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education. The Strategy for the Roma in the Republic of Macedonia 2014-2020, as of June 2014, also did not specifically determine the problems related to the reintegration of Roma returnees. Generally, only the Law on Primary Education stipulates an obligation for the primary schools to organize additional classes for returnee children for learning the mother tongue, which is the first step for successful integration of the child in the educational system - Sarev explains.

### **Box: Unemployment - a key factor for migration**

We asked our interlocutors whether the existence of centers for reintegration or reception centers for returnees would be a solution to the problems they are facing.

The majority of them think that they would not give any significant results.

- But there would be results if good programs are developed, where they will directly work with returnees on literacy, completion of education, pre-qualifications, additional qualifications, studying crafts, contacts with a private business sector. This is the solution for reintegration - says Jasharevski.

Otherwise, research within the GIZ project shows that unemployment and unfavorable economic conditions are a key factor for migration, especially for this type of migrants. They all seek asylum for economic reasons. When talking about experiences in European countries, they are very grateful because their basic needs - food, accommodation, access to hot water and hygienic means - have been met. Hence, support and assistance in this sense would greatly enhance their reintegration and would mean prevention of repetition of migration.

However, assistance would be welcome in terms of housing, especially if it is known that the Roma population most often lives in substandard conditions, in improvised housing, without infrastructure for water supply, sewerage, electricity.

As the survey shows, none of the interlocutors complained that housing was an urgent issue after their return to the country. They usually return to the same dwellings they had before leaving, and for which their relatives cared for. The problem was particularly prominent with the first wave of asylum seekers, when there was a lot of misinformation about opportunities in EU countries, and many of them sold their property before going there. But these cases are less common.

### **Box: In search for a better morning ...**

Santa Maria Capua Vetere. Yes, Italy is my native country. I was born there in 1979, while my parents born in Macedonia, were working there in an effort to provide a better life. Such journeys will be part of me almost my whole-life. Together with my family, I am constantly in the European countries, looking for a better future. France, Italy, Spain ... Wherever we lived, it was not easy, but we were accommodated in collective homes and we received social help from which we could eat. When we went to a new country, it was most difficult. You do not know the language, you cannot search for work, the children were not in school.

In Macedonia, in 2011, we put our house in pledge for 1,000 Euros, and then, we had to give it to money lenders. We have nothing left but to leave. First in Spain, where the other two of my children waited for me, and I was with a baby, then in France, and then in Germany. We were determined not to live by the social assistance provided by the state, but earning our own. In Germany we were housed in Rheinhausen, Duisburg, in a small dirty room with large rats. The help we received was in the amount of 1,500 euros. The eldest children, Valeria and Devitt, began to go to a school where they studied the German language. But after the visa-free regime took place, many families remained in the country without residence documents. One night, in the apartment where we stayed, police arrived and on November 4, 2015 we were already on board of an airplane deported to Macedonia.

Now we live "at home", but in a rented one. We fill water from the neighbors, the kids constantly have viruses, and we do not have the money to take them to the doctor. The Day Center in Suto Orizari, provided for us free access to the local clinic. But they referred me to a surgery, but we did not have personal documentation, we do not have health insurance, we do not have social assistance, we do not have anything. I am in the midst of court trials, a real maze. My life is hard.

Fortunately, through the Daycare Center I had the support of GIZ, a German organization that enabled us, as a family, to see visible changes. They helped me in the divorce lawsuit, with health insurance for some family members, and thanks to them, one of my five children, Denis, now has birth certificate and is integrated into the educational process, although he is older than the other children in the class he is

enrolled. I know that these are difficult and long processes, but I believe that this procedure will be also completed for my other children. Because I want my children to study in school, to be literate, not like me, and they should not marry early and make the same mistake as me. Some of the expectations have already been met. The youngest are at least taken care of, they learn, know how to maintain their own hygiene and, most importantly - receive regular vaccines.

**(Support for Elizabeta Sulejmani and her family is provided within the framework of the GIZ Regional project for social rights of the vulnerable groups (SoRi), "Through mobile teams to social rights for the Roma families in Shuto Orizari", in cooperation with the Association for the Protection of child rights, (DCR))**