

What are the challenges faced by Roma returnees in Macedonia?

Scope of the issue

A good indicator of the seriousness and the scope of this issue is the number of people – Macedonian citizens who sought asylum in EU member states according to Eurostat amounts to 1,130 for the second trimester of 2017. Macedonia ranks 30th on the list of countries with the highest number of citizens seeking asylum in EU member states. Out of the total number of Macedonian citizens who seek asylum in the EU, the majority are Roma, something that has been confirmed by the European Commission itself on at least two occasions.

Response from the government

In 2010 the Macedonian government adopted a national Program for Reintegration Assistance and Support to Roma Returnees in the Republic of Macedonia in accordance with the readmission agreements. What is typical of this program is that it did not involve setting a predetermined timeframe within which the program was to be implemented. Unfortunately, in practice, apart from certain initial steps taken in the first two years - 2010 and 2011, the program has almost not been implemented at all.

Consequences

The non-implementation of the Program for Assistance and Support for the Reintegration of Returnees in the Republic of Macedonia according to the Readmission Agreements indicates the absence of coordination mechanisms between the competent state institutions (and other relevant stakeholders) regarding the reintegration of returnees. This situation aggravates the reintegration of Roma returnees and appears to even further encourage the occurrence of multiple departures abroad, either as asylum seekers, or as economic migrants.

Challenges

Social protection

The social protection of Roma returnees is mainly accomplished through financial transfers, and to a lesser extent in the form of services and support for their empowerment strengthening and for encouraging their psycho-social well-being. The fact, however, that the amount of financial allowance is low, means that they do not offer a good basis for full and active involvement of returnees in the community and in the society as a whole.

Healthcare

Roma returnees who started a certain treatment abroad that needs to continue after their return are faced with difficulties in ensuring fast and easy continuation of the treatment in Macedonia. Apart from the issue of health insurance that some returnees are facing, there is also a request for these people to submit an official (certified) translation of the documentation related to their health condition, which was issued to them in the foreign country. Without a court-certified translation, the returnees are asked to re-run their tests in the Macedonian healthcare institutions. Both options are associated with high costs and require time.

Education

A significant impediment to the inclusion of child returnees in the education system is the question of nostrification and verification of documents for completed education abroad. Roma returnees included in the research were not familiar with the opportunities for adult education or for non-formal education.

Employment

An exceptionally low number of Roma-returnees involved in the research as returnees or interviewees informed us that they had a job. Nearly all of them had gone back to the jobs they had before leaving. The vast majority of Roma returnees covered by the survey are engaged in informal activities such as: waste collection, occasional physical work, cleaning individual homes, construction and craft jobs, resale and retail trade, taxi services, seasonal agricultural work, etc.

Housing

Many of the returnees returned to the same substandard conditions they lived in before they left and faced the difficulties in providing decent living conditions for themselves and their families. In fact, the desire to provide a "roof over one's head" is a strong and sufficient reason for a number of Roma to leave the country and seek asylum in an EU member state.

General recommendations

1. Intensifying the measures and activities for the inclusion of Roma people in Macedonian society in general.
2. Reviewing the need for the Program for assistance and support to returnees in the Republic of Macedonia in accordance with the readmission agreements with its current provisions.
3. Establishing an inter-ministerial body or mechanism for coordination and exchange of data and information related to returnees, with a focus on Roma returnees.
4. Intensifying the efforts to register people in vital public records and to provide personal documents to all persons in the country that have not yet regulated these issues, including Roma and returnees.
5. Intensifying the efforts to inform the returnees about their rights and obligations as citizens of the Republic of Macedonia, immediately after their arrival in the country.
6. Providing the opportunity for short-term accommodation of returnees immediately after their return to Macedonia, for those persons who do not have any housing provided in the country.
7. Strengthening the capacities and resources of Roma Information Centers and Roma Health Mediators to provide information and effective paralegal assistance to Roma returnees (and Roma in general) in the exercising of their human and civil rights, in cooperation with the relevant institutions.
8. Alleviating and promoting the access of Roma to free legal aid.
9. Providing financial support from the public budget to the organizations working to provide free legal and paralegal assistance and support to Roma and returnees.
10. Promoting the opportunities and significance of the role of the local self-government in ensuring the sustainable reintegration of Roma returnees.