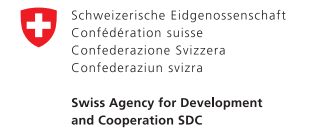


**REPORT ON THE
IMPLEMENTATION
OF LOCAL POLICIES
RELATING TO
THE STATUS OF
RETURNEES UNDER
THE READMISSION
AGREEMENTS IN
VOJVODINA IN 2018**





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The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of its authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Ecumenical Humanitarian Organisation or those of HEKS EPER and the SDC.

Novi Sad, 2018



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INTRODUCTION

The Ecumenical Humanitarian Organisation (EHO) is a non-governmental, non-profit charity that has for 25 years now been working on addressing a broad range of issues related to the building of a civil society in Serbia, through poverty reduction, human rights reinforcement and inter-church partnership projects.

In this context, the issue of the reintegration of returnees under the readmission agreements is a particularly significant one – a multi-faceted issue that concerns the most vulnerable section of the population of Serbia.

The broader framework for the issue of migrations is provided by the National Strategy for Resolving the Problems of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons, the Strategy for the Reduction of Poverty in Serbia, the Strategy for the Social Inclusion of Roma in the Republic of Serbia, as well as numerous other strategic documents and corresponding action plans which have a bearing on this issue and have broad scope in terms of significance and consequences.

The project conducted by EHO in the period 2016-2018 under the title “Improving living conditions for Roma and other vulnerable groups, prevention of illegal migration and reintegration of returnees to Serbia” comprised three project components – migration, housing and education – and did so in a comprehensive way intended to directly address

the needs of those people who needed help the most.

The numerous strategies and action plans developed and implemented by local authorities directly impact the lives of all those living in their catchment areas, and so we consider them crucial to the implementation of our own projects.

Thus we have LAPs (local action plans) – an expression of the efforts of local governments to resolve specific problems through specific measures and through the allocation of available resources in order to improve the lives of the population or a section of it.

In view of the importance of LAPs, one of the activities of the “Improving living conditions for Roma and other vulnerable groups, prevention of illegal migration and reintegration of returnees to Serbia” project was an analysis of existing local action plans relating to returnees under the readmission agreements in the territory of Vojvodina. What you see before you are the results of that analysis.

The study encompasses 45 local governments in the territory of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, and gives illustrative, specific examples and human stories which depict the circumstances returnees under the readmission agreements are faced with.

We hope that this document will encourage state institutions at the national, provincial and local levels to continue their efforts in supporting the process of reintegration of returnees under the readmission agreements. We also hope that the document will be useful in exchanging experiences in different environments at the local level. We expect the greatest benefit for those of our neighbours who will experience improved living standards thanks to the implementation of improved local action plans.

EHO owes a debt of gratitude to its partner consortium, the Swiss foundation HEKS-EPER, as well as to other organisations that have supported us – the Swiss State Secretariat for Migration (SEM), the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and of course the numerous local authorities in Vojvodina that helped us.

Robert Bu,
Project Coordinator /
Executive Director of EHO

REPORT ON LOCAL ACTION PLANS FOR MIGRATION IN THE TERRITORY OF VOJVODINA

REPORT SUMMARY



The report before you is the result of research into local policies relating to returnees under the readmission agreements, conducted by the Ecumenical Humanitarian Organisation. The data gathered reflects the current situation in regard to the capacities of local authorities to resolve the problems faced by returnees under the readmission agreements. The data gathered through the research shows a worrying trend of reduction in the number of local governments that have adopted a local action plan (LAP) for returnees under the readmission agreements. In contrast to 2015, when 13 municipalities and towns in Vojvodina did not have LAPs, this time a total of 24 local governments did not have them.

As has been the case to date, the collection of data on the status of readmittees and the specific problems they face has not been properly implemented. Available data on registered returnees under the readmission agreements is close to non-existent, whilst the lack of ability to collect disaggregated data prevents the effective and sustainable monitoring of the situation in this area.

The research confirms that migration councils have rather limited capacities for monitoring and coordinating the implementation of measures and activities relating to pursuing the rights of various groups, including (but not limited to) returnees under the readmission agreements. As a general rule, councils rarely meet, and also rarely include stakeholders in other areas of activity, whether these be public administration bodies concerned with issues of significance for the reintegration of readmittees, or civil society organisations that provide assistance to and advocate for the interests of especially vulnerable groups. Another contributing factor to the limited capacities of these bodies, and of local governments themselves, for that matter, is the fact that available budgets for addressing the needs of returnees under the readmission agreements are extremely limited, and only a small number of municipalities and towns have funds set aside for this purpose. Even in those cases in which budget funds have been set aside for this, these are very limited as a rule.

Free legal aid – another prerequisite for improving the integration of returnees under the readmission agreements – does not exist in 17

municipalities and towns in Vojvodina, while in some of those local governments where free legal services have been set up, they are reliant on the capacities of other stakeholders – charities, the Vojvodina Bar Association or specific projects.

Of the five priority areas highlighted by the national strategy, adopted with the aim of improving the integration of returnees under the readmission agreements – those being: access to personal documents, social welfare, health care, education and housing – the local action plans analysed mostly failed to address issues other than those relating to housing and economic empowerment.

Measures and activities aimed at the social inclusion of returnees under the readmission agreements most often include refugees and internally displaced persons besides returnees under the readmission agreements, and so make it impossible to effectively monitor their implementation and to analyse the inclusion of returnees under the readmission agreements in the implementation of these measures. Additionally, some of the measures have in practice shown themselves to be inadequate in providing support for the social inclusion of persons from the most vulnerable groups. Consequently, it is vital that a detailed analysis be conducted of the effects of the implementation of local action plans, with a special focus on the most vulnerable returnees under the readmission agreements, that clear systems be established for the collection of data on the number and specific needs of returnees, that planning in this area be improved and technical, financial and other capacities developed on the part of local governments in regard to the integration of returnees under the readmission agreements.



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The report on local policies relating to returnees¹ under the readmission agreements is the result of research conducted during the course of 2018.

This report follows on from the previous study conducted in 2015² and aims to provide an overview of the institutional framework for addressing the problems of returnees under the readmission agreements and promoting their rights, as well as the capacities of local governments to tackle these issues.

As in 2015, the results of this research are based on data collected pursuant to the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance, the practice and experience of the Ecumenical Humanitarian Organisation in working towards the improvement of the rights of returnees under the readmission agreements in individual municipalities and towns in Vojvodina and analysis of the existing legal and strategic framework being applied in this area, as well as changes to these in the period between 2015 and 2018.

¹ All expressions used in this report should be assumed to refer to the natural male or female gender of the person they refer to.

² Ecumenical Humanitarian Organisation, Report on the Implementation of Public Policies with Respect to Returnees under the Readmission Agreements in Vojvodina, Novi Sad, 2015, available here: <<https://www.eurodiaconia.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Report-on-the-implementation-of-public-policies.pdf>>

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS GATHERED

GENERAL DATA COLLECTED IN THE RESEARCH

The Ecumenical Humanitarian Organisation conducted its research into local policies relating to returnees under the readmission agreements in the period between June and August 2018.

In this period, applications were filed for access to information of public importance in all towns and municipalities in Vojvodina – a total of 45. Responses to these requests were received from all the local authorities we applied to, while only in a few cases were incomplete or unclear responses received to some questions from the application. As a rule, these incomplete responses were received in answer to questions relating to budget funding for the implementation of LAPs and to the number of instances of the provision of free legal aid within the services established by local authorities.

Comparing the data collected through the 2018 survey with that from 2015, it seems that the question of the rights of returnees under the readmission agreements is less the focus of local authorities than was earlier the case. No less than 24 local governments do not have local action plans for coordinating the measures and activities of administrative bodies in the area of migration, where they also have special measures in place for returnees under the readmission agreements. By contrast, in 2015 this number was significantly lower – only 13 local governments did not have LAPs in place which encompassed returnees under the readmission agreements. Local action plans are adopted for different categories – primarily refugees and internally displaced persons, while separate sections address the unique issues faced by returnees under the readmission agreements.

The questions that were posed when filing applications for access to information of public importance³ related to the number of registered returnees under the readmission agreements, the existence of a local action plan relating to the rights and status of returnees under the readmission agreements, the budget funds set aside for implementation of the LAP and the promotion of the rights of returnees under the readmission agreements, the existence of a migration council, the composition of this body and the number of meetings held in 2017.

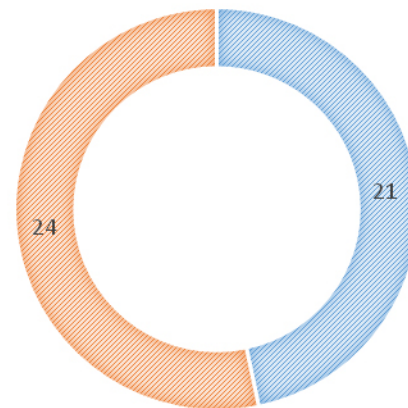
Last but not least, bearing in mind that during 2018 a Law on Free Legal Aid is to be passed, and that the question of free legal assistance is one of the more important prerequisites for the promotion of the rights of returnees under the readmission agreements and their local integration upon their return, a number of questions also related to the existence of a free legal aid service, its capacities and the total number of beneficiaries to whom free legal aid had been provided. This question is also significant in view of the fact that according to Article 67, paragraph 2 of the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia⁴, legal aid is an obligation of local government, and the compilation of data on the existence of a free legal aid service and its capacities is of importance for understanding the way in which local governments are meeting their constitutional obligations.

³ A template of the application for access to information of public importance is available in the Annex to this report.

⁴ State Gazette of the Republic of Serbia no. 98/2006

LOCAL ACTION PLANS

■ LAP exists for returnees ■ No LAP for returnees



The collection of data and its disaggregation by different demographic categories (e.g. by gender, ethnicity, place of residence – urban or rural, level of education, income etc.) is of crucial importance for the adequate planning of measures and policies to be brought to bear on issues primarily affecting the ability of those categories of the population who are at greater risk of violation of their statutory rights, or those from traditionally discriminated or excluded groups, to exercise those rights. Disaggregated data that is more detailed than that available at the national level is a key prerequisite for understanding the causes of inequality.⁵ In this sense, the introduction of a system for proper collection of data would surely also facilitate more effective planning of measures and activities for improving the status of returnees under the readmission agreements. The Republic of Serbia was made cognisant of the issues of disaggregation, data collection and the establishment of indicators for monitoring the exercise of economic and social rights (which as a rule are of particular importance in addressing the problems faced by returnees under the readmission agreements) in the previous periodic cycle of reporting on the implementation of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, recognising the importance of properly gathered and relevant data, thus made the recommendation to the Republic of Serbia that it set up a system for the collection of data based on key factors of importance for the exercise of economic, social and cultural rights, and that it perform regular and systematic evaluations in relation to a clear set of indicators to be used for measuring the achievement of these rights.⁶

⁵ United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, A Human Rights-based Approach to Data, Leaving No One behind in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, p. 7, 2018, available at: <<https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/HRIndicators/GuidanceNoteonApproachtoData.pdf>>

⁶ United Nations, Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Concluding observations on the second periodic report of Serbia, paragraph 7, 2014, UN Doc. E/C.12/SRB/CO/2, available at: <<http://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=4slQ6QSmIBEDzFEovLCuW54MwM13CZ4%2bVqjQ1kU7YRw1%2bWWofd2fBOLmHCPVP18p98WsDiiW2OUQ17gvnJpVvpoFywjLvYimxktrPdaw9Jwf3ceQg2CIUHHGzVbrdD%2fa>>

REGISTRATION AND COLLECTION OF PERSONAL DATA OF RETURNEES UNDER THE READMISSION AGREEMENTS

Unfortunately, the data obtained from the research has shown that the problem of collecting data and relevant statistics on numbers, demographics and other aspects of significance for understanding the problems faced by returnees under the readmission agreements, still has not been adequately addressed

Data is collected in such a way that only those persons officially registered as returnees are included in the responses received from local governments. The data shows that in 45 local authority catchment areas, which according to the last census in 2011 have a population of 1,929,803, there are only 1,506 registered returnees under the readmission agreements⁷, or 0.08% of the total population of these municipalities and towns in Vojvodina. It is entirely reasonable to assume that the real number is far greater, and as a result it is impossible to plan appropriate and effective measures for the improvement of the status of returnees under the readmission agreements.

On the other hand, at the central level, it seems that the issue of collecting data on returnees under the readmission agreements, albeit from so-called *false asylum seekers* will be addressed in such a way that their rights will be additionally threatened: the proposed amendments to the Law on Social Welfare, presented for public debate during the summer of 2018, envisage authorising centres for social work to collect data on stays on the part of individuals and their family members abroad for periods longer than 15 days.⁸

NUMBER OF REGISTERED RETURNEES UNDER THE READMISSION AGREEMENTS

1,929,803
Total population

1,506
Number of registered returnees

=0.08 %

⁷ The figure of 1,506 was derived by addition of the exact numbers received from local governments and the data based on the number of families supplied by individual local government authorities. The estimate in such cases was based on a family of four.

⁸ Article 41 of the draft Law on Amendments and Additions to the Law on Social Welfare.

According to current regulations no official records are kept on stays by Serbian citizens abroad for periods in excess of 15 days but less than 90 days. Only in the event that a citizen of the Republic of Serbia intends to take up residence abroad for a period in excess of 90 days are they obliged to report this to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Official records are kept on this. By contrast, the planned recording of the movements of citizens outside the Republic of Serbia for periods of more than 15 days, which is to be done by the competent centre for social work, will surely open the way for both the untransparent exchange of data and its unlawful processing, and for a potential threat to the rights of those citizens pursuing rights to social welfare in the given situation.



CAPACITIES FOR THE INTEGRATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF LOCAL POLICIES AIMED AT PURSUING THE RIGHTS OF RETURNEES UNDER THE READMISSION AGREEMENTS

In addition to data collected through the direct work of the Ecumenical Humanitarian Organisation with returnees under the readmission agreements, a key task of this study was to gain an insight into the capacities of local governments to implement local policies aimed at pursuing the rights of returnees under the readmission agreements.

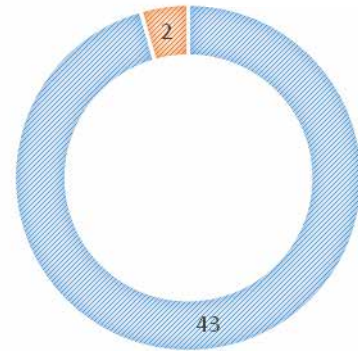
LOCAL AUTHORITY MIGRATION COUNCILS IN VOJVODINA, THEIR JURISDICTION AND COMPOSITION

Although a large number of local authorities did not have local action plans relating to readmittees, only two municipalities responded that they did not have a migration council set up. Those were the municipalities of Novi Kneževac and Titel, which do not in fact have any registered returnees under the readmission agreements, or budget set aside for this purpose, or LAPs in place.



MIGRATION COUNCILS

■ Council established ■ No council established



The composition and authorisations of migration councils do not differ greatly from one local authority to another. In the majority of cases, in their responses to requests for access to information of public importance, local authorities cited the jurisdiction of the migration council as being that defined in the Law on Migration Management.⁹This jurisdiction is defined by Article 12 of the Law, which states that the scope of operations of the migration council is the monitoring of migrations in the territory of the local government authority and reporting on them to the Commissariat, proposing programmes, measures and plans of activity to be undertaken in order to more effectively manage migration in their catchment areas, as well as other business in the area of migration management, in accordance with the Law.

The Law on Migration Management further defines the composition of the migration council. As stated in Article 12, paragraph 3 of the Law, the migration council as a rule is to be comprised of representatives of the executive body of the local government authority (municipal chair/mayor or member of the municipal/town council), the centre for social work, the police administration, the employment service, the ombudsman and a representative of the municipal or town administration. Additionally, when setting up a migration council, representatives of institutions responsible for matters of health and education may be optionally involved, as well as representatives of organisations involved in matters of significance for the area of migration and other persons conducting work of importance for the

management of migration in the territory of the local government authority.

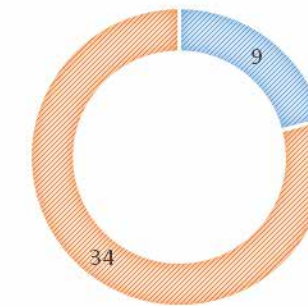
As with the previous question, local authorities stated that migration councils were composed of those persons stated by law as being required members of the migration council. However, given the significance of the problems facing returnees under the readmission agreements in pursuing their rights, as well as the fact that these problems are often multidimensional in nature and require cooperation between different parties at the local level, it is important to determine whether other stakeholders have been included in the council in addition to the "obligatory" members – first and foremost those involved in promoting rights relating to healthcare and education, but also civil society organisations that frequently serve as a link between returnees under the readmission agreements and the authorities at the local level. Excluding those local authorities giving only names and surnames of council members (of which there were five) in the council founding memoranda, as well as the two local authorities which did not have councils set up, the majority of municipalities and towns, besides the obligatory members, also had other council members who were involved in issues of significance for migrations. In most cases, representatives of the local Red Cross and the local branch of the National Employment Service were included in the council. In a minority of cases, representatives of health care institutions were also included in the council. Primarily these were directors and other persons employed in local health clinics or were members of the municipal council with responsibility for health care.

Civil society organisations and refugee associations were also involved in migration councils but in even fewer cases. Only 9 local government authorities had included organisations in the work of the migration council that were involved in issues of relevance to migration. Some of these were the City of Novi Sad, which included representatives of the Ecumenical Humanitarian Organisation in its migration council, the municipality of Ruma which included representatives of the Novi Sad Humanitarian Centre, the municipality of Srbobran which had two council members from the Serbian Coalition of Refugee Associations, and the city of Zrenjanin, which had involved representatives of the Support Association for Refugees and Expelled and Displaced Persons in the municipality. Particularly telling was the fact that only Sremska Mitrovica responded in their response to the request for access to information of public importance that there was a representative of the refugee population on their local migration council. The



INVOLVEMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS IN MIGRATION COUNCILS

■ NGOs involved ■ No council members from NGOs

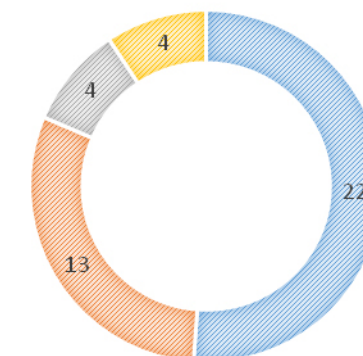


town of Vršac and the municipalities of Indija, Irig, Kovačica and Šid also involved representatives of civil society in their migration councils.

The frequency of meetings held by the migration council at the local level was an additional criterion analysed in the research. Keeping in mind that the migration council is a central body involved in the coordination and proposal of measures and activities for the effective and successful implementation of measures for the local integration of returnees under the readmission agreements, the number of meetings held by the council was a possible indicator of the efficacy of this approach to integration and the exercise of the human rights of readmittees.

NUMBER OF MEETINGS OF MIGRATION COUNCIL HELD IN 2017

■ None ■ One ■ Two ■ More than two



⁹State Gazette of RS no. 107/2012

BUDGET FUNDING FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF LOCAL POLICIES AIMED AT THE EXERCISE OF RIGHTS OF RETURNEES UNDER THE READMISSION AGREEMENTS

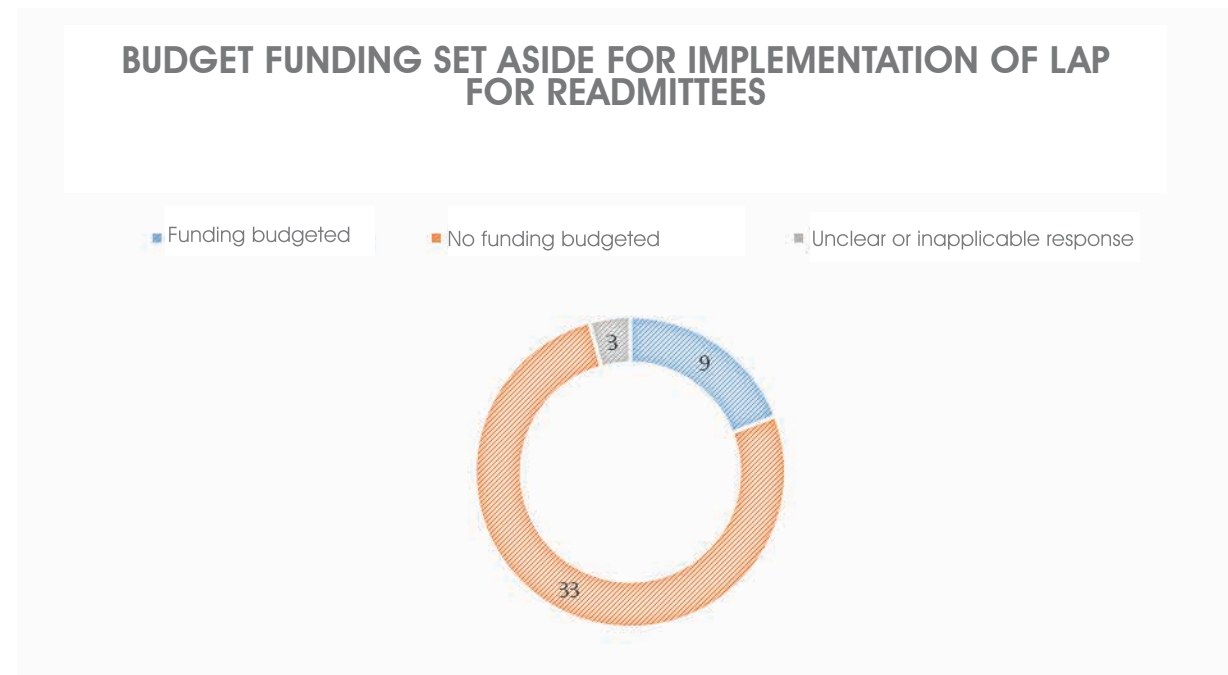
When discussing the rights of returnees under the readmission agreements in the Republic of Serbia, the most common topics mentioned are those of integration, social exclusion and improving status.

Although this terminology is useful for understanding where efforts need to be directed in order to pursue the rights of this vulnerable category of the population, its use is in fact often a distraction from the crux of integration and addressing the issues of social exclusion. At the core of the issue of the rights of returnees under the readmission agreements is the issue of their claim to statutory economic and social rights. Indeed, what else is addressing the issue of employment, improving living conditions or continuing schooling in the Republic of Serbia, but the exercise of economic and social rights (or providing the prerequisites for pursuing these rights in the case of access to personal documents)?

Until recently, the obligations of the state in regard to the guarantee of economic and social rights on the one hand, and decisions taken relating to the allocation of budget resources on the other, were considered to be two separate issues which had no effect one on the other. Paradoxically, the global economic crisis and the austerity measures which followed, highlighted the need for much greater connection between these “two worlds”, as well as the importance of taking decisions relating to the allocation of budget funds in such a way that the effects of their implementation would not disproportionately affect those worse off in the society – members of marginalised and discriminated groups, or others faced with challenges to the exercise of their rights.¹⁰

¹⁰For more on the correlation between budget policies and economic and social rights, see: UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Statement on Public debt, austerity measures and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural rights, UN Doc E/C.12/2016/1, 22nd July 2016, and the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Safeguarding Human Rights in Times of Economic Crisis, issue paper, 2013, available at: <<https://rm.coe.int/safeguarding-human-rights-in-times-of-economic-crisis-issue-paper-publ/16806daa3f>>

Thus the data gathered through the research is of significance in understanding the real capacities of local governments to resolve the problems faced by returnees under the readmission agreements in an effective and systemic way. Budget funds have been set aside for the needs of returnees under the readmission agreements by 11 municipalities and towns in Vojvodina. Of these, two municipalities – Alibunar and Kovin – have not adopted local action plans, but they do have funds earmarked for the implementation of the LAP and so we can assume that these are funds set aside for addressing the problems faced by other vulnerable groups – refugees, internally displaced persons and/or asylum seekers, or the responses were incorrectly supplied.



From the data received it is not possible to determine with any certainty whether the amount of funding set aside corresponds with a larger number of registered returnees under the readmission agreements, i.e. whether a larger number of readmittees in a local authority catchment area also means a larger sum set aside for addressing the problems that they face. For example, the city of Zrenjanin has 525 registered returnees and has set aside budget funding for “assistance to refugees, internally displaced persons and returnees under the readmission agreements” in the amount of 13,918,336.00 dinars. However, since in their response they did not state the exact amount that was set aside for addressing the needs of returnees under the readmission agreements, it is not possible to determine whether there is any correlation in this respect. It was the same case with the municipality of Žitište, which has 82 registered returnees, and where the amount of 4,500,000.00 dinars has been budgeted for “all needs of the (refugee) commission and the participation of the municipality in public calls to tender”. These were also the local authorities with the largest budgeted amounts for pursuing the rights of returnees under the readmission agreements. The smallest amount was set aside by the municipality of Senta – 220,000.00 dinars.

Budget funds in all nine municipalities and towns in Vojvodina which had funds allocated for the implementation of LAPs for readmittees totalled some 24 million dinars at least¹¹, but this figure included funds set aside for the needs of other categories of the population needing support, primarily refugees and internally displaced persons.

As regards the remaining 33 local government authorities, it is hard to see how local action plans can be implemented if no funding has been set aside for this purpose. The failure to set aside funds for the enactment of action plans pursuing public policies is an all-too-common malady in the Republic of Serbia, which has in certain cases resulted in the ineffective or inadequate implementation of important strategic documents. This was particularly the case with the Strategy for the Improvement of the Status of Roma in the Republic of Serbia between 2009 and 2015 and the action plans for its implementation. In that case, it was quite apparent that in those areas where no budget funding was allocated for the implementation of measures and activities aimed at improving the status of the Roma in Serbia, there were also no results.

FREE LEGAL AID FOR RETURNES UNDER THE READMISSION AGREEMENTS

Although the establishment of a system of free legal aid by local authorities is a constitutional obligation, Serbia still does not even have a Law on Free Legal Aid¹², nor did this research show that towns and municipalities in Vojvodina have fully established functioning systems for the provision of free legal assistance to those citizens who need it.

Out of 45 local government authorities in Vojvodina, the research showed that 17 had not established a free legal aid service. They were the following municipalities and towns: Ada, Alibunar, Bač, Bačka Palanka, Bela Crkva, Beočin, Čoka, Kovačica, Novi Bečej, Novi Kneževac, Opovo, Pećinci, Plandište, Srbobran, Subotica, Temerin and Titel.

A significant facet of the problems faced by readmittees relates to conducting proceedings before administrative or other bodies. For this reason, a system of free legal aid is essential for a systemic approach to addressing the problems of this category of the population.

¹¹ We say “at least” since the municipality of Šid did not state the exact amount of the allocated funds, but rather in its response stated that 5% of the total budget allocated to the municipality of by the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration was used for addressing the issues of returnees under the readmission agreements.

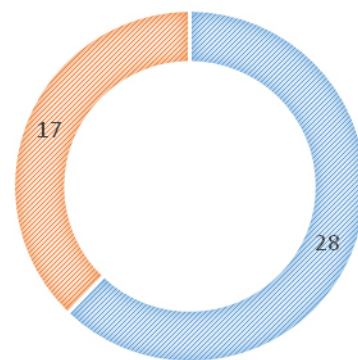
¹² At the time of writing of this report, the Law was going through parliamentary procedure.

Further evidence that capacities for the provision of free legal aid by local authorities are extremely limited can be seen in the fact that out of the 28 municipalities and towns that did have free legal aid services set up, eight of them indicated in their responses that these services had been established in cooperation with other parties – including the Vojvodina Bar Association, the Office for Kosovo and Metohija and a partnership established via a project implemented by the non-governmental organisation, the Balkan Center for Migration and Humanitarian Activities. This once again points to the need for the new Law on Legal Aid to also recognise the capacities of civil society organisations to provide free legal aid, and for maximum use to be made of existing capacities for the provision of free legal aid, in accordance with the strategic commitments of the Republic of Serbia in this area¹³, in order to ensure that those most vulnerable have access to justice. The data collected additionally showed that not all local authorities require the same capacities for the provision of free legal aid. For example, in 2017 in the municipality of Irig only 9 instances of free legal aid were provided, while in the town of Pančevo, 1,282 instances of free legal aid were provided.

Of 28 local authorities, two were unable to supply records of the number of instances of the provision of legal aid services, while another two failed to respond to this part of the request for access to information of public importance. Accordingly, we can say that at least 7,552 instances of free legal assistance were provided through these free legal aid services overall. Data on the number of returnees under the readmission agreements receiving some form of free legal aid was not available, and additional research would be needed to obtain such figures.

FREE LEGAL AID SERVICES ESTABLISHED BY LOCAL AUTHORITIES

■ FLA service established ■ No FLA service established



¹³ Government of the Republic of Serbia, Strategy for the Development of a System of Free Legal Aid in the Republic of Serbia, published in the Official Gazette of the RS, no. 74/2010, 15/10/2010.

KEY AREAS IN WHICH ADDITIONAL SUPPORT IS NEEDED FOR RETURNEES UNDER THE READMISSION AGREEMENTS

The Strategy for Reintegration of Returnees under the Readmission Agreements¹⁴ – the first umbrella strategic document to analyse the situation regarding the rights of returnees under the readmission agreements and to propose specific objectives, as well as measures and activities for achieving them – laid out a set of priority areas of significance for the rights of returnees under the readmission agreements.

Priority areas are those concerning the provision of citizenship and personal documents, housing policy, employment, social welfare, health care and education.

The Strategy for the Improvement of the Status of Roma in the Republic of Serbia¹⁵ particularly highlighted the status and specific circumstances in which returnees under the readmission agreements found themselves, in the context of the areas addressed by the Strategy.

This approach was abandoned with the adoption of the new Strategy for the Social Inclusion of Roma Men and Women in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2016 to 2025¹⁶.

In this new strategic document, the rights of persons repatriated under readmission agreements were not treated separately, but rather they were referred to in individual areas in regard to their status and specific vulnerabilities which hindered their exercise of statutory rights. The new Strategy highlights some objectives relating to the status of persons repatriated under readmission agreements as being of particular significance, notably improvement to the system of local integration and social inclusion through partnership among all social stakeholders in the local community, and the provision of suitable educational support for children returned to Serbia under readmission agreements.

¹⁴ Official Gazette of RS no. 15/2009, 27/02/2009

¹⁵ Official Gazette of RS no. 27/2009, 21/04/2009

¹⁶ Official Gazette of RS no. 26/2016, 10/03/2016

PRIORITY GROUPS WITHIN LOCAL ACTION PLANS

Analysis of local action plans showed that in their strategic documents most local authorities highlighted so-called priority groups to whom it was necessary to provide additional support in solving the problems they faced in exercising their statutory human rights.

Since local action plans are adopted for different groups – refugees, internally displaced persons and returnees under the readmission agreements – it is important to determine in which cases readmittees are highlighted as a priority group, and in which cases special attention is given to those within this population who are additionally vulnerable as a consequence of other circumstances – extreme poverty, disability, illness or others.

Refugees and internally displaced persons lacking a long-term housing solution, living in unfit or inadequate dwellings or lacking the means to self-complete construction of the dwellings in which they live, are most frequently highlighted as priority groups within LAPs. Additionally highlighted are unemployed persons who are fit for work and who have been returned under readmission agreements, or those persons who are in this category but do not have sufficient qualifications to meet the needs of the local economy in the municipality in which they live and who need “the assistance of society in securing self-employment”.

Other groups mentioned in LAPs as having priority in terms of addressing their problems, are multimember and multigenerational families categorised as refugees, internally displaced persons or returnees under the readmission agreements, women, single parents, families or persons belonging to this category and having a family member with disabilities, or those themselves having disabilities, as well as victims of domestic violence.

It seems that in determining priority areas, the majority of municipalities and towns in Vojvodina have defined a broad range of persons whose problems are to receive special attention within LAPs, and so it might well be asked how all of these priorities are to be addressed given the limited funding and resources that are available. For example, the municipality of Beočin has highlighted at least 14 different categories of person with special vulnerabilities, such as disability, age and chronic illness, and those relating to place of residence, vocational education, employment status etc., as being priority groups within its LAP. The municipality of Kikinda highlights a similar, if not even larger number of priority groups in its LAP.

As regards the status of women within the category of readmittees, refugees and internally displaced persons addressed by local

action plans, the municipality of Kanjiža emphasised that for each of the priority groups named in the local strategic document, women were to be treated as a special priority group. This was also the only local authority which emphasised the special vulnerability of women in the context of the population addressed by the LAP. Although this did highlight the multidimensional nature of the vulnerability of and discrimination against women in the category of refugees, internally displaced persons and returnees under the readmission agreements, the question remains of how this fact is to be turned into practical action – whether through special programmes aimed at pursuing the rights of women in this population category, or other measures that would take into consideration the particular vulnerability of women in this category.

Otherwise, as regards emphasising the specially vulnerable within the category of already vulnerable returnees under the readmission agreements, municipalities and towns in Vojvodina mostly highlight those persons “lacking a long-term housing solution” and those living in their own incomplete or unfit dwellings, those living as tenants and paying rent and those unable to complete construction of dwellings that they have begun of their own accord. In this sense, it is especially important to note that except in the case of the municipality of Šid, persons living in some type of informal housing are not highlighted as especially vulnerable groups within the population of returnees under the readmission agreements. In all other cases, persons lacking a permanent housing solution who are provided special support under the LAP already have some legal basis for their housing – whether a rental agreement, ownership rights over unfit or unfinished dwellings, or some other basis. By defining priority groups in this way, local authorities run the risk of omitting to plan such measures and activities in their strategic documents which have been drawn up to address the problems of returnees under the readmission agreements as are essential to those most vulnerable within this group – returnees under the readmission agreements living in informal settlements, who are most often living both without legal grounds and in unfit dwellings.

PRIORITY AREAS FOR IMPROVING THE STATUS OF RETURNEES UNDER THE READMISSION AGREEMENTS

As has already been stated, the Strategy for Reintegration of Returnees under the Readmission Agreements highlights key areas in which intervention is needed in order to improve the status of readmittees: the issues of personal documents, housing, employment, social welfare, access to health care and education.

Despite this, not one of the local action plans analysed envisaged measures that would facilitate or improve access to social or health care, or education, on the part of returnees under the readmission agreements.

A number of local action plans did address the issue of employment and of improving the prospects of employment of returnees under the readmission agreements. The measures most commonly set out in this area related to economic empowerment through the involvement of returnees under the readmission agreements (as well as refugees and internally displaced persons) in requalification and additional qualification programmes organised

in cooperation with the National Employment Service and other parties. Additionally, some local authorities had made provisions for supporting the self-employment of internally displaced persons through a local fund for small family business start-ups. In the context of employment and economic empowerment and measures for improving the current state of affairs, in some cases there was mention of the involvement of (refugees, internally displaced persons and) returnees under the readmission agreements in public works with the aim of improving their employment prospects. In most of those cases where municipalities and towns highlighted specific areas in which self-employment measures were planned, these were measures relating to self-employment in the areas of agricultural production, trades and services.

EXERCISE OF RIGHTS TO PERSONAL DOCUMENTS FOR RETURNNEES UNDER THE READMISSION AGREEMENTS

The exercise of rights to personal documents is in any case a key question which must be resolved in order for persons repatriated under readmission agreements to be able to pursue their statutory human rights.

Access to these rights was considerably improved with the passing of the Law on Permanent and Temporary Residence¹⁷ which made it possible for those persons unable to register residence at their place of abode due to the lack of legal basis for their residence could do so at the address of the centre for social work in the municipality in which they lived. Additionally, with the passage of the Law on Non-Contentious Proceedings¹⁸ and the establishment of a procedure for determining the date and place of birth of “legally invisible” persons, it became possible even for those persons who are unable to provide all the necessary evidence to complete the procedure of registering the date and place of their birth with the administrative bodies, to do so.

Although many prerequisites for addressing the question of access to personal documents have been met, some issues can still cause problems for returnees under the readmission agreements attempting to do so. These primarily concern the issue of their familiarity with these legal provisions, their access to free legal aid services and their ability to procure documents from abroad and have them subsequently translated so that they can be used in proceedings before the administrative authorities in the Republic of Serbia. Even so, only the municipality of Indija highlighted refugees and internally displaced persons who have unresolved legal issues or problems with access to personal documents as being a priority group in its local action plan. In other local government authorities, the issue of access to personal documents as a prerequisite for the exercise of other rights on the part of readmittees was not specially emphasised.

¹⁷ Official Gazette of RS no. 87/2011, 21/11/2012

¹⁸ Official Gazette of RS no. 85/2012, 31/08/2012

EXERCISE OF RIGHTS TO ADEQUATE HOUSING FOR RETURNNEES UNDER THE READMISSION AGREEMENTS

Addressing the housing needs of returnees under the readmission agreements is one of the most important and probably most demanding issues facing local authorities seeking to improve the status of these persons.

This is primarily of importance because there is a large number of persons with housing needs in Serbia – including refugees, internally displaced persons, those living as tenants, persons with disabilities and the homeless, as well as those unable to meet monthly housing costs from their income. In addition, the issue of the exercise of rights to adequate housing on the part of returnees under the readmission agreements is significant in that capacities for addressing housing needs are limited, both from the technical and the financial and other standpoints. The *Strategy for Reintegration of Returnees under the Readmission Agreement* itself notes that, “Fulfilling housing needs is considered to be one of the main conditions for returnees’ viable reintegration”¹⁹.

The exercise of rights to adequate housing is also of key importance in pursuing other human rights. Without secure housing status and life in adequate dwellings, other economic and social rights cannot be fully achieved. What does the knowledge that he/she is exercising his/her rights to social welfare mean to the individual if they are at constant risk of forcible eviction? How do children living in informal settlements overcome the difficulties they face in education? These are just some of the questions which demonstrate the interdependency between economic and social rights and the significance of the right to adequate housing for the exercise of these rights.

The results collected through the research have shown that the majority of local authorities have made provision for addressing housing needs in their LAPs for readmittees. However, a number of questions impose themselves.

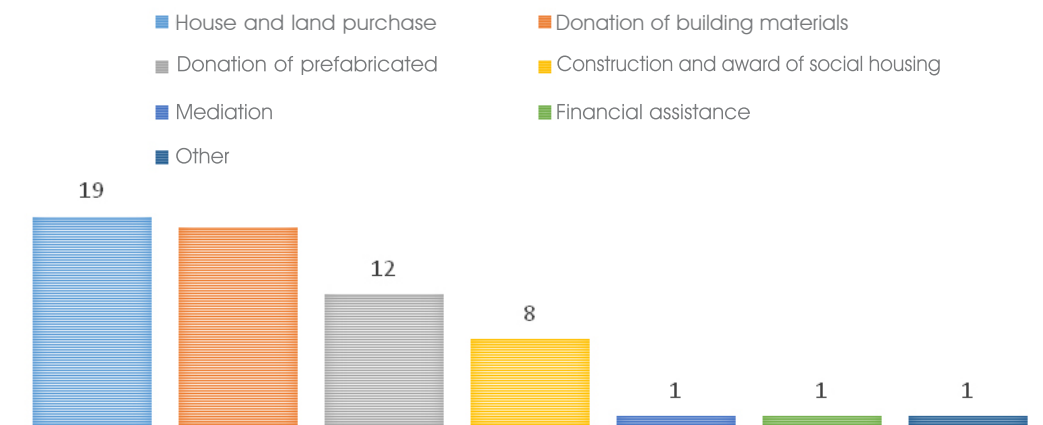
¹⁹ *Strategy for Reintegration of Returnees under the Readmission Agreement*, p. 12

The first concerns the monitoring of the planned measures and activities, especially in regard to the exercise of the rights of returnees under the readmission agreements and their local integration upon their return to Serbia. It is apparent that measures relating to the provision of some form of housing support, in all municipalities and towns that have planned for them, have been summarily listed for refugees, internally displaced persons and returnees under the readmission agreements. For example, in the statement that between 2017 and 2021, housing problems would be addressed for at least 20 families of refugees, IDPs and returnees through the house and land purchase programme in the municipality of Apatin, there was no determination of how many returnees would be housed under these measures. The municipality of Apatin is given by way of example here. The situation is the same in other municipalities and towns – housing support measures have neither been planned nor implemented solely for returnees under the readmission agreements, nor have separate objectives or indicators been set up in relation to returnees. Consequently there is no way to properly monitor whether the needs of this especially vulnerable group have been addressed through the implementation of local strategic documents, or which needs those are.

The second issue concerns the sustainability of long-term housing solutions provided to returnees under the readmission agreements. In most cases the solutions provided are the same as those envisaged for other vulnerable groups. These primarily entail social housing, the purchase of rural houses with land, donations of packages of building materials and providing prefabricated houses. For the reasons outlined above, relating to the interdependency between economic and social rights and the significance of the right to adequate housing in pursuing other rights, it is essential that housing support programmes be accompanied by other measures aimed at the economic

Almedino Osmani

MOST COMMON HOUSING SUPPORT PROVIDED TO RETURNEES UNDER READMISSION AGREEMENTS



empowerment and social inclusion of vulnerable groups. Experience hitherto has shown that in those cases where housing support is provided to the most vulnerable groups, it must be accompanied by a whole raft of measures and activities aimed at ensuring that housing is the first prerequisite for the further social inclusion of these groups, to be coupled with adequate access to employment opportunities, social and health care and education.

The third group of questions relates to the adequacy of the solutions offered and their relevance to the actual problems being faced by the most vulnerable returnees under the readmission agreements. As has already been stated, the majority of planned measures entail rural home purchase schemes, grants in the form of packages of construction materials, providing prefabricated houses or addressing housing needs through the construction of social housing. On closer inspection of the planned measures one can quickly surmise that these programmes are being offered to those who have ownership rights over the land on which prefabricated houses are to be built, or over dwellings requiring additional assistance in the form of grants of construction materials. By contrast, those persons owning no property have two possible options open to them – the purchase of rural houses with land or a housing solution entailing the construction of social housing and subsequent application for selection for social housing with the local government authority. Exceptions to this are the municipality of Pećinci, where the LAP envisages grants of prefabricated houses to be constructed on municipal land, and the city of Subotica where the plan provides for the granting of prefabricated houses to persons owning suitable construction land, while those who do not own any may be awarded prefabricated houses to be built on city-owned land.

However, the house and land purchase programme has so far proven to be inadequate for the social inclusion of the most vulnerable groups because of the lack of a support programme to overcome the other social issues faced by these persons – issues of access to social and health care, education and employment opportunities. The provision of social housing must be done in such a way as to provide adequate information to those most vulnerable of the opportunity to apply for social housing, and then to provide support to them in collecting the necessary documentation and submitting their application for this type of housing. Last but not least, in some cases additional measures need to be put in place and implemented in order to ensure the affordability of social housing in those cases where such housing is provided to persons who are solely dependent on social welfare payments.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the large number of persons returning to Serbia under the readmission agreements, the research has shown that the capacities of local authorities to address specific problems affecting this vulnerable category of the population are limited.

A particular cause for concern is the fact that in terms of numbers of municipalities and towns which have established a system by adopting a local action plan, the situation is worse than in 2015 when the previous research was conducted.

The collection of data on the status and number of readmittees is still insufficient. Additionally, it is evident that the capacities of migration councils are insufficient to effectively coordinate and implement measures to improve the status of this group, and in that regard stronger partnership needs to be established with civil society organisations. Furthermore, there is a need for an increase in funding from local budgets for the implementation of measures and activities aimed at improving the status of readmittees and their social inclusion. Last but not least, one gets the impression that certain measures, first and foremost those relating to housing support, could exclude those who are already excluded, and as a consequence of their insufficient inclusion the most vulnerable readmittees will not be given the opportunity to meet their housing needs through the implementation of these measures.

Thus there is a need on the one hand to increase the capacities of local authorities to address the problems of returnees under the readmission agreements, and on the other hand a need for the inclusion of a broader range of stakeholders in planning measures, ensuring that the needs of those most vulnerable within the category of returnees under the readmission agreements are taken into consideration.

Some of the lessons learned from other public policy areas could be brought to bear in improving matters in this area too. In this regard, there is a need to:

- improve the way in which data is collected on persons repatriated to Serbia under readmission agreements, and to establish a special system of disaggregation of data on these persons and their needs;
- increase the capacities of migration councils by bringing on board other stakeholders who are involved in issues of significance for the social inclusion of returnees under the readmission agreements at the local level;
- improve coordination and cooperation among all stakeholders involved in the issues of inclusion of returnees under the readmission agreements;
- set aside budget funding for the implementation of measures for the social inclusion of returnees under the readmission agreements;
- conduct analysis of the effects of the implementation of local action plans so far, and improve the process whereby these plans are adopted in order to fully take into account the needs of persons returned to Serbia under the readmission agreements;
- ensure that separate indicators are established for returnees under the readmission agreements and for monitoring those measures aimed at their social inclusion;
- improve local action plans by including other priority areas which are of significance for the exercise of the rights of returnees under the readmission agreements: access to personal documents, the exercise of rights to social and health care and education;
- ensure that measures and activities envisaged by local action plans take into account the status and needs of particularly vulnerable persons in the category of returnees under the readmission agreements;
- ensure that persons repatriated under readmission agreements have unhindered access to justice through the provision of free legal aid.



EFFECTIVE ASSISTANCE REQUIRES A NETWORK OF PEOPLE AND INSTITUTIONS

If everybody, or at least a majority – the positive people, the smart, the kind, the capable people, those with money to spare, those with knowledge and experience, and those holding the levers of power and authority – were to find themselves at the same table, many of the issues highlighted in the previous pages and in the stories in the following pages could start being resolved in the blink of an eye!

To begin with they would have to agree – and surely that would not be hard – that these are the most fundamental of the many difficulties of these people in need of help. To resolve them they would need to overcome, eliminate, organise and resolve the following issues:

Lack of information – how to find out who is helping, where, in what way, and how to meet the necessary requirements. How to legalise your house. How to apply for and receive the help on offer.

Administrative invisibility – show the fastest, most effective, simplest and cheapest way to prove one's identity and obtain personal documents, school certificates etc.

Lack of access to health care – even having health insurance and owning a health insurance card does not guarantee that Roma, especially women, will receive adequate health care. Children who are still not covered by school health care services, or those not attending school, or who never see a doctor or

receive their compulsory vaccinations. Health workers need to go into the Roma settlements and provide basic check-ups and health awareness and education. This points to the need for health mediators, who have been envisaged but are not present everywhere. The requirements for the profession of health mediator have not yet been made known.

Legalisation of dwellings and entire settlements, and utilities infrastructure – adequate housing is a human right,

but in the 21st century there are many still suffocating in mud and dust and living without electricity, water or sewerage. At the same time, illegal construction prevents any progress in addressing housing issues. Access to funding provided by the state or by foreign donors is impossible without resolution of property ownership issues.

An internal database (for use by civil society organisations) of potential beneficiaries and their needs in order to ensure an appropriate approach to assisting them – the fact is that there is no basic system for internal



Nataša Pušić Živanov,
Ecumenical Humanitarian Organisation



Marija Ristić Milovanović,
Ecumenical Humanitarian Organisation

registration (for use by civil society organisations) in order to provide more effective assistance to the internally displaced, returnees under the readmission agreements, the socially vulnerable and the invisible. It cannot be good to leave knowledge of the needs of these people to mere chance and to rely on sporadic, uncertain, imprecise and incomplete data. At the same time it is not clear how this could be organised, given the new legislation on the privacy of personal data, which of course must be adhered to.

Cooperation among non-governmental organisations, competent Commissariats, representatives of state authorities and institutions – in order to help one beneficiary family, assistance needs to be provided in parallel in many areas, as this is the only way to bring about effective change, change which results in a better life and in sustainability. We are convinced of this for the following reasons, among others: There is no non-governmental organisation in the country that has not collected an abundance of information and experience out in the field in the area in which it is active. Many individual activities of NGOs overlap with those of other non-governmental organisations. Almost nobody cooperates, yet only synergy can bring tangible results.

Establishing mobile teams of experts, representatives of NGOs, legal experts, civil engineers, health workers, psychologists, social workers, journalists, personal assistants, Roma coordinators, representatives of local authorities – because a single family very often has need of all of these people, and only by addressing their problems in a parallel, expert and immediate way can a family be provided with a way out of poverty, without having to wait until the next generation before this can happen.

The people we spoke to for these articles, the workers in the field and the researchers and authors of EHO's exhaustive and thorough report, in view of the fact that the situation has worsened in comparison with the previous reporting period, agree on one thing: a system is needed, a methodology and a network of people and institutions, to provide a comprehensive approach to assistance and open the way to helping people effectively. Without this, everything will continue to revolve around individual action and efforts and will depend on the goodwill and involvement of individuals which is exhausting, demands a great deal of time and effort and yields negligible results in relation to the number of people and the broad diversity of their needs.

Another very important message emerges here: Project sustainability would be more easily and more effectively provided for if donors and all other stakeholders understood and accepted the fact that help should never be discontinued when a project reaches the end of its lifetime with the case still unresolved due to slow administration or life circumstances! As it is, excellent projects often give inadequate results of limited scope and this means we are often forced to start from the beginning again. As a consequence our efforts prove fruitless, and there is no way out of this vicious circle for the needy in our country.

SUBOTICA

“Just sign, don’t panic, you are going back to where you came from,’ the policeman ordered. He and several more people in uniform had entered our home in the city of Münster in Germany that morning, in the autumn of 2017.”

SUBOTICA – A PLACE WHERE PEOPLE COME AND STAY



Stevan Nikolić, Roma Coordinator

“There my wife Indira and I and our five children, although in a reception centre, had lived like human beings for nine months. We were waiting for our papers, our eldest son did cleaning work in the Heim... When we got the deportation order we returned to Subotica, where we had come to in 2001. Two lorryloads of us had come then!” This episode from the life of Šenaj Osmani and his family fit into a few brief but eventful sentences. The second part of the story, the one from the present time, promises

to be written more eloquently, in large letters, because already things are different, getting better, and as Šenaj says, there is every prospect of them getting better still.

There is hope, because Šenaj is working, earning and supporting his family. He crafts traditional Roma cradles from wood, as well as low *sofra* dining tables. He received a grant of a complete set of carpentry tools from EHO and was able to start making tables and chairs in partnership with a carpentry firm from Subotica. Now this company sells his cradles and dining tables alongside its furniture. His pieces have made it as far as the Czech Republic! Šenaj made his first table for his mother, Zulfiya Osmani. The old lady, in her vivid patterned Roma attire – shawl and pantaloons – sitting at the head of the table in the yard of the family home in the Peščara neighbourhood, told the Ecumenical Humanitarian Organisation team, “I’m staying right here. I don’t need to go anywhere. All I need is a piece of bread and I’ll eat here! To watch over my grandchildren and for them to look after me! That’s all I want. And do you know I have counted 160 of them!”

Most of those children, her grandchildren, go to kindergarten. Those familiar with Roma life will know that this is somewhat unusual, especially when we add that of the 32 children in the Zvezdice nursery school, only three are not Roma! The teaching assistant in this kindergarten for the internally displaced and for those who have come from Europe under readmission agreements is Muhamet Bunjaku, himself repatriated from Germany in 2015 with his family of six.



“Of the seven months we spent in Germany, only nine days were spent in the Heim, and we got an apartment straight away. We were lacking nothing. When we opened the refrigerator, we couldn’t believe our eyes! We received monthly welfare payments, and the children and I collected plastic bottles which was an extra source of income. Deportation came as a great shock to us. Fortunately, no sooner had we returned than my work for EHO began,” recounts Muhamet.

The positive side of all this is that Muhamet has been through the mill and understands the circumstances and troubles of his compatriots. He is proud of the atmosphere in the nursery school he works in, where there has not been a single case of discrimination, something which unfortunately is otherwise all too common and problematic in our part of the world. The story is remembered, and often told, of how parents pulled their children out of the Zlatna Ribica kindergarten in the Novo Selo neighbourhood of Subotica because, as Muhamet says, they did not want their children going to nursery school with Roma children!

“Our work in the field has shown that the greatest trouble faced by the people that we care for, with the wholehearted support of EHO, is obtaining documents. Almost 99% of those returning from Germany did not bring school diplomas with them when they were deported. It is a very slow process, it takes a long time to get hold of those certificates, which only after validation allow children to enrol in school here. There is often no record of the children having attended school there, sometimes the school was closed down at the same time the Heim was, and then it is practically impossible to make the right contact and get hold of the papers! Proof of vaccinations is another thing almost nobody has! We assistants need the help of EHO, some kind of training on how to tackle these issues and how to get hold of these important documents, without which people are being prevented from integrating here,” says Muhamet.

He says that getting hold of birth certificates is an even bigger nightmare! Some families that came from Kosovo have no proof of the birth of their child!

Predrag Krajnović, an EHO associate since 2015, also believes that this is currently a problem which is in many cases practically insurmountable, and that assistance in obtaining documents and putting them in order, such as getting proof of birth, identity and education



Zulfija Osmani

"I have worked in Kikinda, Mali Idoš, Zrenjanin and Subotica. In three years, 103 families of internally displaced persons have been taken care of, their living conditions improved, bathrooms and septic tanks built, floors, roofs and woodwork repaired. These are serious undertakings, complicated procedures. A public invitation for applications is issued, people apply, we go out and inspect the site, draw up sketches and take pictures of dwellings. Two members of the committee for the selection of candidates are usually chosen from the recipient group. The conditions are that those applying are the owners of the dwelling and that the house has been legalised, or a legalisation application has been filed. Beneficiaries themselves participate in the renovation of their houses, providing labour and so on. People lack information, they are suspicious, they need everything from encouragement and vision, to a plan and a parts list. Good news travels fast, and now that they have seen it is worth the effort and the project is feasible – now they have seen the results – they have greater trust, and there are more of those interested. The first year 50 applied, the next year twice as many... People were encouraged, they realised that civil society organisations, especially when partnered with (state) institutions, could help in many ways," says Krajnović.

There are three mediators between the community and the state institutions in Subotica: Renata Babić, Commissioner for Refugees and Migration and two Roma Coordinators – Kladija Kurina and Stevan Nikolić, director of the Roma Education Centre.

"According to official data there are 2,959 Roma in Subotica. Unofficially there are between 3,500 and 4,000, including domiciled persons repatriated under the readmission agreements and those who have migrated from Kosovo. When you ask any of them whether they plan to return to Kosovo they reply, 'No! We work at the flea market, our kids go to school, we have freedom of movement'," says Nikolić.

The Roma of Subotica are of the Orthodox, Catholic and Muslim faiths. The careful approach to harmonising the subtle, sensitive relationships between faiths and ethnicities has resulted in recognition from the Council of Europe, which in 2011 proclaimed the neighbourhood of Peščara (where a portion of the Roma population lives) an example of good practice. Nikolić believes that prejudices arise from ignorance, and that the role of those in power is to build mechanisms for overcoming ignorance!

"The (state) system is less agile, and non-governmental organisations are there, among other reasons, to help the system wake up and get moving. I have a background in the civil sector, but I have always been partnered with the system because I work in a way that is based on cooperation with the state. I am there to remind the government what they are

and procuring health records, is more important than anything.

"The public, and seemingly the authorities too, are almost or indeed entirely unaware of the shocking and terrible situations we encounter out in the field! There are children who were born in Subotica, as well as those who came with their parents from Kosovo, who have not been registered anywhere! At best, all they have is a hospital document confirming the birth, because the parents have not entered them in the births registry, they have not been to school, they have not been vaccinated, and have never been to a doctor. The mother and father are not married and often do not have documents confirming their place and date of birth either. These people would need to travel to the village where they were born, if they even know where that was, to find two witnesses and start the process of confirming their identity that way. This is unreliable, uncertain, laborious, complicated and requires money... In other words, it is almost impossible! In practice it has very rarely happened – almost never – that someone has managed to do this by themselves with no expert help, and there are not enough of us to tackle each case individually without some kind of established approach. It is high time some kind of orderly system were set up," says Krajnović.

Krajnović has for a number of years, as a civil engineer and also as an EHO associate, been involved in providing aid through the procurement of construction materials to help people build a roof over their heads in the simplest and most effective way possible.

supposed to be doing. For example, to convince them that they should be employing people from the Roma community in state institutions!"

In Čantavir, a village just outside Subotica, there is a highly vulnerable Roma community, where domiciled persons live.

"That group needs urgent help. Nobody has set foot in that settlement in twenty years or more! The people there live off paltry social welfare! There are people starving there! Of the 300 people living there, only two have work, and one is planning to go to Hungary to seek work. Their houses are crumbling, many have collapsed already, there is no sewage system, only some households have running water and some dwellings have not been legalised, which is the greatest obstacle preventing people applying for any kind of assistance to improve their living conditions. One extremely important and encouraging development is the creation of EHO mobile legal teams, who as of recently have been working to help in obtaining documents for the legalisation of dwellings so that these people can make progress and apply for house repair grants. There are different places where they can apply – many non-governmental organisations as well as those at the provincial level have grant schemes through which they can get help. All this information should be brought together and interconnected somehow. Not long ago we applied to the Province for a pavement to be built in the settlement so that at least while we are waiting for the paperwork to fix the houses they will not drown in mud," says Nikolić.

He describes a slippery slope that is almost impossible to escape:

"If you live in poverty, you are hungry and your clothes are dirty, and they put you in special school just because of that, and you have no chance in life for at least the next three generations. Without external support you will not be able to enter the system. That is how people are excluded, and that is how Roma settlements arise – a vicious circle of poverty, a vicious circle of 'fault'. In Čantavir, after many years, we succeeded in enrolling children in nursery school, and women were finally given access to health check-ups. When I brought the doctor to the settlement she was dumbstruck by the living conditions she saw there, and the serious diseases afflicting those unfortunate, health care-deprived women," Nikolić recounts. He believes that the community needs to act more decisively and take a more complex approach in order to effect serious change. As he says, first you need a roof over your head and a paved road, health care needs to be accessible to you, and only then can you think about sending your kids to school. Once you have all that, well maybe then you can think about fixing up your house and garden and having nice, clean clothes."

Subotica has passed a local action plan for returnees under readmission agreements. The available funds are not insignificant, but are by no means enough to cover all they need to in order for these people to become visible and their human needs to be recognised and affirmed to the extent that the society can call them citizens on an equal footing with all others – citizens equal to other citizens, and not just equal to Roma, returnees, displaced or refugees.



ZRENJANIN

“When I was young I was sure I could change the world. Now I don’t think that any more. Now I know that I cannot change the world, but I am sure that in my own job I can get many things moving”. These were the words of Director of the Centre for Social Work of the city of Zrenjanin, Olivera Lisica – great and significant words given the moment and the surroundings in which they were spoken, and not to be taken lightly.

ONLY THOSE WITH SUPPORT CAN GRAB ONTO LIFE WITH THEIR OWN TWO HANDS

This city in the Banat district on the river Begej – thanks to, among others, this woman, so wholeheartedly dedicated to her job, as well as a handful of others heading city institutions – is an example of how progress can be made despite everything. The director had an ear to hear and the good will to go with it, while the Ecumenical Humanitarian Organisation brought together all the representatives of the centres of power in the local government and demonstrated by real-life example what EHO has been advocating for 25 years now, and has learned from decades of work in the field and experience with people who need support and help to be able to grab onto life with their own two hands.

“We brought together all those city services relied on by a family or beneficiary, and this intersection, the exchange of information and experience, and the complementary

action of the different services each of these institutions could provide, as well as the division of labour, ensured that the care provided was effective, the assistance was comprehensive, and the beneficiary was, as much as was feasible, supported from all sides. Because only those supported from all sides can grab onto life with their own two hands. The minimum of care and assistance is measurable, while the maximum – a dignified, secure and comfortable life – is a far-reaching goal. Multisectoral partnership is essential for individual rights to be quickly and fully pursued. We listen to one another and help one another. EHO was the first organisation in the civil sector with which the Centre for Social Work signed an agreement and established this type of partnership with. We have the professionals, EHO has the people in the field. EHO trains our staff in writing project proposals, effective planning and overcoming



*Olivera Lisica,
City of Zrenjanin Centre for Social Work*



Perica Etemović, EHO associate

stressful situations, and organises seminars in maximising our media reach and managing projects. In addition to this we work closely with the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, the police, the public prosecutor’s office, the registry office and the employment service.

Since 2007 in Zrenjanin, a multisectoral partnership has been in place for the prevention of violence and the protection of its victims, and in 2014 an agreement was signed in the city administration on multisectoral cooperation at the local level,” says Olivera Lisica. “What this entailed was putting everything we were already doing down on paper. Signatories were the Centre, the prosecutor’s office, the court, the hospital, the interior ministry, schools and the media. This partnership became known in Serbia as the ‘Zrenjanin model’ for combating violence, and the city has been cited as an example of good practice which has been incorporated into the Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence. All this has resulted in good practice in the way our services are organised, comprising 60 employees in the Centre for Social Work, where more than 20 different types of specialist roles are performed.

As of September 2017 we began doing something which proved very effective: when receiving their welfare payment slip, beneficiaries who are fit for work also receive an invitation to come to a meeting in order to devise a plan of employment together with a social worker. If the beneficiary expresses a wish to work we send them to the National Employment Service, where they are met and given additional attention, and placed with an employer as soon as possible. In this way we help them find work and at the same time ‘remind’ them that they are capable of working and that work can be found! Five years ago there were more than 10,000 people on the books of the National Employment Service, today there are less than 5,000. We involve victims of violence in a similar way. You know, when the Centre highlights somebody, they look at them differently in other institutions too. So we work towards social inclusion in the broadest possible sense, which also includes additional training and retraining. There has to be some preparation for changes in life, those people cannot just be left to fend for themselves. It is vital to raise awareness of the need for involvement in the social environment,” says Ms Lisica, adding that there are also those who feel that it is more worth their while to receive welfare payments rather than finding employment.

There are 2,060 beneficiaries of welfare payments on the records of the Zrenjanin Centre for Social Work this year. If the paperwork was expanded to include the names of those who are not recorded anywhere, but are out there, i.e. to reflect reality, it is thought that there would be more than 9,500. Roma, including the native population, internally displaced persons and returnees under the readmission agreements, comprise close to 300 out of that number, at least officially.

In Zrenjanin there is a need for expansion and for the provision of counselling/therapy and social/educational services. As of the 1st September, the Centre for Social Work in Zrenjanin has begun providing this type of service. The principles on which it operates are those of voluntary attendance by beneficiaries, confidentiality and respect for professional ethical standards.

Local EHO associates fill in where needed. They cannot be everywhere, it is true, but almost day and night they are there to lend a hand, whenever they are needed, doing all kinds of jobs, providing information, waiting in queues on behalf of beneficiaries, filling in forms, supporting and comforting and providing a link between beneficiaries and local services. One of them is Perica Etemović.

"This lad had come to Zrenjanin from Australia, he didn't know where to start or what to do, and he needed documents. They said it would cost 150 euros and he would have to wait a few weeks... Zrenjanin isn't a big town, they told him at the market, 'You'd be crazy to pay, they are trying to rob you blind, find Perica, he helps people, he knows all about it, he can get it done,'" recalls Etemović, and smiles as he recounts how this "little Zrenjanin guy from Australia told me he was getting married and invited me to the wedding!"

Local associates can work miracles – it is such a valuable asset to have someone you can rely on, but they cannot change much either if people do not gather the strength to motivate

Emina Bisljimi and son Elmedin



Muhamed Demirović and daughter Elmedina

themselves. Also, sometimes the administrative and life obstacles are so intimidating that they seem impossible to even squeeze past, let alone overcome.

Father Muhamed Demirović (27), mother Emina (25), and daughter Elmedina (3), (their son Elmedin was born in Zrenjanin 8 months ago), had to return from Germany, from the city of Karlsruhe, in 2016. Unfortunately they have no proof they were ever there, they have no papers! They say they acquired no possessions in Germany. When they returned home to Zrenjanin, they managed to settle somehow, squatting illegally in a house they say belongs to the local municipality, with no electricity.

"I wish this was ours so we could make something of this house. As it is, every day I worry that someone is going to throw us out. You can't sleep at night, living like this! I left primary school after the sixth grade, but they only count me as having completed the third grade – that's how they grade special school for children with developmental disabilities. But I had to enrol there because they told my Mum there was no room for me in 'normal' school! When you are a bit dirty and don't look great, nobody wants to speak to you, and they put you wherever they want," Emina complains. She says it is impossible to find work if you have not finished school.

"If my husband went to school, to learn a trade, then he wouldn't be able to go out on the street and work collecting plastic bottles! How am I going to feed the

children if he is not working? One kilogramme of bottles pays 30 dinars, he brings all the money home, he is my source of income!"

These stories illustrate how the circumstances of life sometimes press in so hard around people that they can hardly breathe: this family was never registered with the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, and because they are not registered and none of them are employed they cannot apply for housing assistance. They have no evidence that they are returnees under a readmission agreement, and if EHO were to try to enter into some kind of agreement with the municipal authorities to get their electricity paid for, they could evict them as squatters, or be seen to be turning a blind eye to the practice of squatting. Welfare payments of around 18,000 can't meet their basic needs.

So they can scarcely breathe. That is how things are right now. For now they just need to make it through winter. It is up to the Ecumenical Humanitarian Organisation and other civil society organisations, local associate Perica Etemović, the Centre for Social Work and the Commissariat to make the next move. If this were an isolated case, or at least a rare one, perhaps the combined efforts of all of these stakeholders – which will certainly be brought to bear eventually, knowing Zrenjanin and its strength – would bring about a quicker solution. As things stand, though they will just have to wait their turn.

KIKINDA

“See – EHO takes action, provides immediate, specific, direct, expert help, without delay and without all the formalities,” says Miroslav Meržan, EHO associate and head of the Roma Rota charity and the Roma Centre in Kikinda, commenting on a conversation between EHO representative, lawyer Nataša Pušić Živanov, and Ljiljana Vlajko, who had come for advice and help to the Centre, where the two women met by chance.

KIKINDA – A BLINDFOLDED LOCAL AUTHORITY

The specific advice concerned Ljiljana’s son who was in juvenile detention, suggestions for overcoming miscommunication with the social worker, the possibilities for dispensing with their lawyer’s services, opportunities that could be taken with the Roma educational foundation and the possibilities of enrolling Ljiljana’s daughter in school.

“The Vlajkov family are an honest, hard-working family, that has always tried to work with us, but they have faced difficulties which they cannot resolve by themselves. The Roma Coordinator might have some answers, but there isn’t one in the municipality of Kikinda! The local authority is not interested in the problems of the socially vulnerable, native Roma population, the internally displaced or people returning to Kikinda under the readmission agreements, or believes it has no obligation to address them problems.” says Meržan.

Together with his wife Slađana, Miroslav has for 17 years now been fighting for his neighbours – as of six years ago as an EHO associate – helping and trying to fill the gaping hole left as a result of the neglect of

the local authority to help improve the lot of socially vulnerable, elderly and marginalised people in Kikinda. They have some 600 people under their wing, around 200 of them Roma. Miroslav was once the only school educated Roma working in public services, formerly the Roma coordinator, whose position was made redundant and who, soon after a transfer to another position in the local administration, was terminated from employment altogether.

“There are myriad cares and troubles, the settlements are in awful condition, lacking basic utilities, the houses are not fit for humans to live in, and are not legal either,” says Meržan. “Women are discriminated against on multiple counts, they are oppressed and restricted by the antiquated rules of tradition, lack of information, neglect of health and early marriage. The local authority does nothing, nothing seems to get their attention, they see nothing, it’s as though they were blindfolded. Tanja is our local authority,” says Meržan, referring to Commissioner for Refugees, Tatjana Barbulov.

“I have been Commissioner for eleven years and I have to say that I



Miroslav Meržan – EHO associate, Nataša Pušić Živanov, Ružica Barbul, Tatjana Barbulov – Commissioner for Refugees, Slađana Meržan with children

am not impressed. There is a great deal that the local authority could be doing in partnership with the Commissariat, if only it had the willingness to do so, the available staff and of course, the appropriate funding,” says Tatjana. “There are no funds earmarked in the budget, as far as I know, for socially vulnerable Roma. The organisation I work for supports my programmes for refugees, IDPs and those deported under readmission agreements, but that isn’t enough! Nobody is working with these people in a professional and targeted way. My job is to monitor, and, with the approval of the local authority, apply for programmes being implemented by the Commissariat, such as for example care for people returned under the readmission agreements. We work on their integration, improving living conditions, economic empowerment and requalification. There are some who spent ten years or more abroad because they had nothing here, and then returned only to find nothing once again, and they don’t know where to start! According to the Commissariat’s data, between 2015 and 2017 some 160 people returned to Kikinda, although these statistics are not entirely reliable. Four years ago we helped 8 out of 70 families – that was the number that met the conditions for renovation of their houses. This was a successful formula – they

each got construction materials in the value of 550,000 dinars. The native population asks why only refugees are being helped and not them, which causes a great deal of unpleasantness. This year, the Commissariat twice published calls for applications, but the local authority did not get involved and we were unable to see it through. In the context of the local action plan for 2016 to 2020 we are waiting in triangle formation – the Commissariat, the Province and civil sector organisations – to see who will publish a call first: we have 10 applications for house purchases, 10 for assistance in the form of construction materials and 20 people want to get education or requalification. It makes no sense to me that the municipality won’t get involved. It doesn’t have to be our programmes that are adopted, there are other sources of financing, and project teams within the administration who could do much more in regard to these issues. These are people living in utterly inhumane conditions! Forget the stories of their traditions, their way of doing things, their apathy, we are here to address some of those things, and I realise that it all takes time, and manpower and money,” says Tatjana. Her reports, requests, warnings and proposals do not so much as get a foot in the door, let alone open any.

"In Kikinda what you have is a lack of respect for regulations and for the system. For one thing there is no Roma Coordinator in the Kikinda municipality, or at least I don't know who they are. All local services are insular and inaccessible, yet it would make sense for a Roma Coordinator to work closely with the Centre for Social Work and other services and institutions. Instead, the advisor at the Centre deals with a range of issues – welfare cases, divorces, custody cases... They are poorly paid, lacking in motivation and have limited authority, and so it is evident why they are not the initiators of any significant activities," says Tatjana, and adds,

"Everything is so watered-down and disorganised, everyone does their own thing and avoids taking responsibility for anything. But the only way to have any impact is to establish partnership between civil sector organisations, commissioners and municipal services and institutions! Everybody needs to be working on the same task! Instead we have unqualified people who are unmotivated and who only work because they have to, and at best are focused on the problem of the day but see no further than their desk. We have people deported under readmission agreements, IDPs, a terribly poor native population, a wave of migrants escaping wars and a predicted future wave from Africa in the wake of climate change! I do not see anyone thinking about this or making preparations, at least in terms of planning of some sort! I am talking about the local level here, you know yourselves

that there are myriad strategies and action plans at the national level on this subject, but apart from the Commissariat, which operates effectively through us at the local level I don't see anything else, or else I don't know about it," warns Tatjana.

She adds that even when there is someone able and willing to work, then approval is not forthcoming, nor any official initiative, nor willingness to work in partnership.

"The reasons for this are fear, indolence, corruption, ignorance, lack of expertise and lack of education," claims this brave, hard-working and dedicated woman. She adds, "I am not happy with what I have achieved, either, because I am unable to communicate everything that is happening – or not happening – to those taking the decisions!"

Kikinda is unfortunately a striking example of an unacceptable situation, in which there could be disastrous consequences – when the fates and lives of thousands of people hang solely on the good will of individuals acting more or less on their own initiative and who still have sufficient conscience and know-how to do their own jobs. When will somebody hear, understand and act on these facts? The trouble is that in our society everything hinges not only on a poorly organised system but very often on thoughtless individuals in decision-making positions!

RUŽICA BARBUL



Ružica Barbul is from Kikinda and lives on the outskirts of the town in the Stara Klanica neighbourhood. She is one of those women, a fighter, whom the "rest of us" can only admire, and who at the same time fill us with great sadness and an inexplicable sense of unease. It is the helplessness, probably – the inability to help her break into the world of the civilised, where her children can grow.

How does Ružica, living in mud and dust, without electricity and water, in damp and mildew, in a house that is not even a house, under a non-existent roof, raise Vesna (8), Zlata (6) and Sabrina (6)? How does their mother manage to keep her little girls' hair always shining and always smelling clean?

How does she visit her son Boris (2), sick from birth, transferred from hospital to hospital, almost every day, even though she has to buy the bus ticket from welfare payments, money that she would often otherwise spend on food? Novi Sad is a long way, the trip costs money.

What kind of steel is this woman made of, a locomotive pulling her whole family, never letting them give up? How did she deal with the fact that the gynaecologist barely even looked at her, told her to go home, that she had some kind of inflammation, it was nothing, only for the test, that she bought herself, to reveal that she was pregnant? Now she is awaiting her fifth.

Who taught her children to greet strangers politely, not to interrupt their elders when they are speaking, and to speak with wide, sparkling, joyful eyes?

"I named one foal, it's called Zlata, like me. This big horse is Maja, that is Zvezdana. Do you want to see the piglets, too?" asks little Zlata, and her sister Vesna adds, "Our Dad works the bins with the horses, collecting recyclables."

"My Boris works hard, earns money, brings it home... I

just wish my son was well, he is very sick, the doctors say he won't make a recovery... Can you do something? Everything else will be... I will... A voice comes to me in a dream that he will get better..."

Little Boris has cerebral palsy, he is mentally retarded, he has been treated in hospitals in Kikinda and Novi Sad. Now they are sending him home, where they do not have even the most basic facilities to look after him. When Ružica told the doctor this, the doctor threatened to report them to the Centre for Social Work and that they would take her child away!

Ružica went to Germany to earn some money in 2014, and to pull her children out of the mud, as she puts it. It didn't work out. They returned, moved into some ruined municipal property. From money received as a carer's allowance, saving for years, she managed to have laminate floor put down in two rooms. In the rest of the house there is practically no roof, it all leaks, there are insects and mice. Now that winter has taken hold, the children are only occasionally warm – when the wood oven is lit, with its choking smoke. There is rarely enough wood, you are not allowed to get it from the woods, she says.

The Ecumenical Humanitarian Organisation has been alongside Ružica and her troubles for a year, which is how long they have been trying to secure a roof over their heads.

"My husband and I have been living together nine years, and we get along," smiles Ružica. "If only we had our own little house, we'd all squeeze in there, just as long as the roof didn't leak, the wind didn't howl through and bugs didn't crawl over my children... we'd work a garden if only we had a bit of land, we'd keep animals... For little Boris to be warm, for the children to bath every day, that's all I want. Nothing more."



ŽITIŠTE

“Our first task with returnees under the readmission agreements is to explain to them that it is very important that they come and see us and get registered. Because if they are not visible then they don’t even exist!” That is the view of long-term EHO associate in Žitište, founder of the Roma Association Slavica Mrđa.

POVERTY FORCES PEOPLE ABROAD

they started coming to the Commissariat saying that they had been expelled! For some, the only proof of that was a stamp in their passports, they had no other documents,” says the Commissioner for Refugees, Nikola Štula. “In partnership with the Roma Association from Žitište, we tried to get them into the system and to get them any help we could. We managed to secure social assistance, food and clothing for five years for 15 returnee families. It is hard to organise anything in a systemic way, they are reluctant to apply, they do not want to be recorded as returnees, they are afraid that this will close the door for another attempt to go abroad someday,” says Štula. “The families need all kinds of assistance, we are reliant on partnership with EHO, the Roma Association and people from the local authority. We had a working meeting recently, established partnership, got an overview of the situation. A local action plan for the next four years is being drawn up. Thirty or so families need to legalise their houses. Legal assistance is essential, some have contracts from 10 or more years ago, all this needs to be revised now, they need the notary, the land registry... I believe that working together gives us great hope and opportunities to act more effectively,” says Štula.

“My Roma go because of poverty. It is poverty that forces people abroad! Very often they go without documents, illegally, which entails vagrancy, hiding, stress, police... I know one family that left Žitište, and in the end they split up the family – the men from the women, the children from their parents... Awful! There are some really tragic stories: In D.R.’s family there are three girls. When they left for France, they pulled one of them, who was a good pupil – exemplary – out of the second grade of Economics High School. The parents put their house up as collateral on a €2,000 loan so that they could go abroad with this money

“Žitište is a very underdeveloped and poor municipality. For the socially vulnerable – and this group includes 90% of the some 600 Roma families in our municipality, which include IDPs, returnees under the readmission agreements and the native population – life here is even harder. We are an agricultural region, but because almost everything is mechanised it is hard to find work in the fields. There are not enough recyclables here, either, to be able to live off collecting them. There are almost no records of people and their needs, and even where there are, the paperwork says one thing, but the only reality is what you see out in the field. You know that if people are living without electricity and water then that is no normal life at all! This brings a host of other issues along with it, especially in families with children.”

Slavica says that in every one of those families it is thought that at least one member has been abroad to try to change their lives, because here they have never seen any sort of chance, or indeed ever really had one.

“Many of those who went off to a European country with a bundle on a stick applied for political asylum and had a decent life there. When Germany began sending them home on the grounds that ‘Serbia is a safe country,’



Slavica Mrđa, EHO associate



Nikola Štula, Commissioner for Refugees

and work. They didn’t manage to earn anything, and didn’t send any money back, their house was repossessed and now they have nowhere to go back to! They are awaiting deportation any day now! Before France, that same family tried their luck in Germany. Their child had just finished primary school, with very good grades, and they pulled her out and took her abroad to seek asylum. Sanela is a nice girl, intelligent, speaks foreign languages. We have become friends on Facebook, I have gone to a lot of effort to explain to her that she shouldn’t get married, she shouldn’t leave school. Her mother is a real fighter, she is always at the forefront of her family, leading them through life. If they managed to stay abroad, that woman would pull them all through, that is the only thing that would save them. Now they hide, afraid. Because if they are forced to return, they will be on the streets, homeless! They didn’t even have bread to eat. They fell a hundred times, and managed to get back up again, that’s the kind of woman she is! Her and her husband tried to turn their lives, and the lives of their children around, but when they pulled their children out of school they clipped their wings! What are they going to do now without a house, without work, without school?” wonders Slavica, who for 20 years now has been caring for the people from her ethnic group practically as a volunteer, with no financial assistance, no funding, no support. For her and those under her care, working with EHO and reliance on the Commissariat for Refugees is the only glimmer of hope. The local authority does not want to know – these unfortunate people do not exist as far as they are concerned!

“Not long ago I went to the municipal Chairman to ask for help for Petra Zelucu. Her husband is disabled, they have seven children! The house they live in has not been legalised, but built without permission on municipal land. There is no electricity, the local authority has not paid, and they don’t even want to let the Zelucu family pay it themselves! Why won’t the local authority pay off its electricity so that these people can pay their bills regularly and not live in darkness? Why won’t they address this when the option and the authorisation is there! I don’t get it! They justify their actions and hide behind the pointless logic that if they set a precedent and help one family, then



Brane Radu



have single-phase electricity, but for the mixer I got from EHO I need three-phase electricity, and now I will have to sell my bull to pay for the upgrade. I bought a second-hand car so that I could transport cattle feed, and so because I have registered property they withdrew my welfare payments. But my daughter goes to school, she needs lunch, books, clothes, footwear... And round and round it goes... "Don't go abroad," they say, "don't run away, try and build a life at home, work for a living. But you see how that turns out. If I was an IDP, or if like many I had gone to Germany, if they had deported me, if I had registered as a returnee, I would be able to apply for aid. But as things stand, it's like I'm being punished for having stayed in this country and for trying, for knowing how to do things and for wanting to do them. EHO and Slavica are like God to me. They are my only hope that I will be able to get some kind of help, through similar civil sector organisations, even though I am not in the category of people to whom assistance is available through the current programmes and projects of NGOs," Brane hopes.

all the others squatting illegally will seek help! That makes no sense! Why not help at least one person, one family? Then at least they won't be knocking at the door of the local authority as welfare cases. Do it systematically, sort out the paperwork, make everything legal, agree with the people when and how they can go about it! We have to get moving, bit by bit, since there seems to be no other way," Slavica believes.

The following story is an example of how without assistance, and without wind in the sails – which in this country blows mostly from the direction of NGOs – it is impossible to start making progress. In comparison with other people who need help, the man whose story you will read below has much, and yet is on the edge of a precipice he has already pulled himself up from once, expending much skill, knowledge and sweat in the process. Brane Radu, from Ravni Topolovac near Žitište, worked as a waiter in the Novi Sad Vojvodina Hotel, and then lost his job and ended up on the dole. He also lost his wife through a cruel twist of fate. Now he lives alone with his 14-year-old daughter. He has started up a farm, raising animals. He proudly shows us his stable – calves, sheep, and some pigs he has got hold of. Unfortunately he is living as a tenant in his brother's house, which he will have to move out of next year. He has his own plot of land, but on it is a ruined house with no electricity, which cannot provide even basic living conditions, either for them or for raising cattle. Now he is between a rock and a hard place, and fears that he may have to start all over again. He had just begun to build up some possessions, first sheep, then other cattle which he bought from the sale of sheep's wool. Then he bought the farm, at great personal sacrifice. Slavica Mrđa suggested he contact EHO, and with their help he bought a cattle feed mixer.

"I'm hard-working, I am young, I want to work, I have ideas, some capital, a business plan... But now, due to circumstances beyond my control, I have the threat hanging over my head that my daughter and I, once we have to move out of my brother's house, will be left in the street together with the cattle that we acquired through such hard work and which provide for us," says Brane. "The administrative obstacles, and the inflexibility of the authorities we depend on, are suffocating us. I

SOCIETY IS ONLY AS STRONG AS ITS WEAKEST MEMBER

"Since 2006 we have registered 15,000 people as returnees under the readmission agreements. They are people who entered the country via Nikola Tesla Airport in Belgrade. We receive those deported persons whose arrival has been preannounced to us, and we provide them with the initial and most important information, and send them to our associates and commissioners in the towns and municipalities. We have a database on these returnees, but we lack feedback on the inclusion of those people in Serbia. Our programs can be accessed by those who have sought asylum in European countries and were not deported but voluntarily agreed to return. There is a system for working with these people, but there is a lack of money. There are 66 employees in the Commissariat. We have neither the money, nor the capacity to care for each case individually and to hold people's hands. Since 2014, an annual 20 million dinars has been provided for economic empowerment and improving housing conditions. The returnees are citizens of Serbia, and so they have everything available to them that other citizens do – help in purchasing rural houses, construction materials for house repairs, purchase of prefabricated houses etc." says Dejan Milisavljević from the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, advisor in the Department for the Reception, Care and Rights of Returnees under the Readmission Agreements.

Milisavljević notes that the Commissariat has good partnerships with non-governmental organisations who are involved in helping returnees. A total of 10 million dinars annually has been earmarked for them.

"The strength of a society is measured according to the strength of its weakest member. Our army out in the field are the commissioners, they care for refugees, the displaced and returnees. This care is more effective in smaller municipalities – it is harder working in large towns. There is not enough money for everything that we would like to do, everything we could and should do! The commissioner cannot get in a non-existent car and fill it with non-existent fuel. We need more employees and a lot more money. Local authorities are overburdened, and this is where we have a bottleneck."

Milisavljević notes that there are many questions which have not been addressed, such as whether to centralise or decentralise activities, how to establish a system of aid when many returnees under the readmission agreements do not want to be in the system and how to provide for their economic survival.

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