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ASSESSMENT OF POLICY, INSTITUTIONAL AND SERVICE GAPS RELATED TO SUSTAINABLE SOCIO-ECONOMIC REINTEGRATION OF RETURNEES IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA



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ACRONYMS

ASBiH	Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina
BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
COM	Council of Ministers of BiH
CRS	Catholic Relief Service
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
ETF	European Training Foundation
FBiH	Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina entity
IDDEA	Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina Identification and Data Exchange Agency
IOM	International Office for Migration
IT	Information Technology
LC	Local Commissioners
LFS	Labor Force Survey
LRT	Local Readmission Teams
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GIZ	German Agency for Cooperation
MHRR	Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees of BiH
MCA	Ministry of Civil Affairs of BiH
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of BiH
MS	Member States
MOS	Ministry of Security of BiH
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PES	Public Employment Services
RRPP	Regional Research Promotion Programme
RS	Republika Srpska entity
SEEJGD	South Eastern Europe Jobs Gateway Database
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
VET	Vocational Education and Training
VB	Western Balkans



1.1 Rationale

Migration is an important development issue for all Western Balkans (WB) economies. Over the past several decades, the Western Balkans have experienced sizeable emigration from the region, with (significant) impact on its development, including demographic trends, human capital, and availability of the workforce (ETF, 2022). Outmigration has led to the documented need for bringing-in labor force from other countries to the WB, and this labor market trend may grow, if the outmigration trends from the WB continues in the future (World Bank, 2023, Zbinden et al., 2016).

The share of emigrant stocks to total population is relatively high and varies across WB, ranging from 49 percent in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 44 percent in Albania, 34 percent in North Macedonia and 30 percent in Kosovo¹ to 21 percent in Montenegro and 15 percent in Serbia (UN DESA, 2020, ETF 2022). While migration is a highly debated topic in the WB, there is need for a deeper understanding of its consequences, challenges and risks related to it and development outcomes, including comprehensive policies that can mitigate and address these risks and challenges.

Migration trends in the WB shifted from late 2015 onwards, with regular migration increasing and irregular emigration decreasing. Prior to 2015, the European Union (EU) recorded an increasing number of asylum applications from the WB, which reached its peak level in 2015 since then, however, there has been a declining trend (see Figure 1). Factors contributing to the decrease in irregular emigration included changes in asylum policies in the EU Member States, primarily the shortening of asylum-seeking procedures, and the designation of WB countries as safe countries of origin by the EU Member States. New migration trends in the WB indicate an increase in regular forms of emigration, primarily for employment purposes, and to a lesser extent for family reunification and education.

¹References to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).



Figure 1 : First-time asylum applications from the Western Balkans - 2014 to 2022

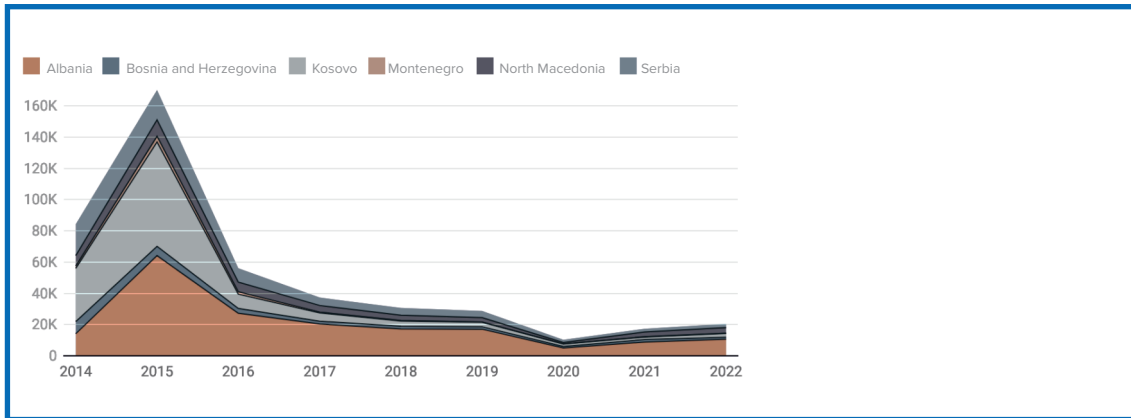
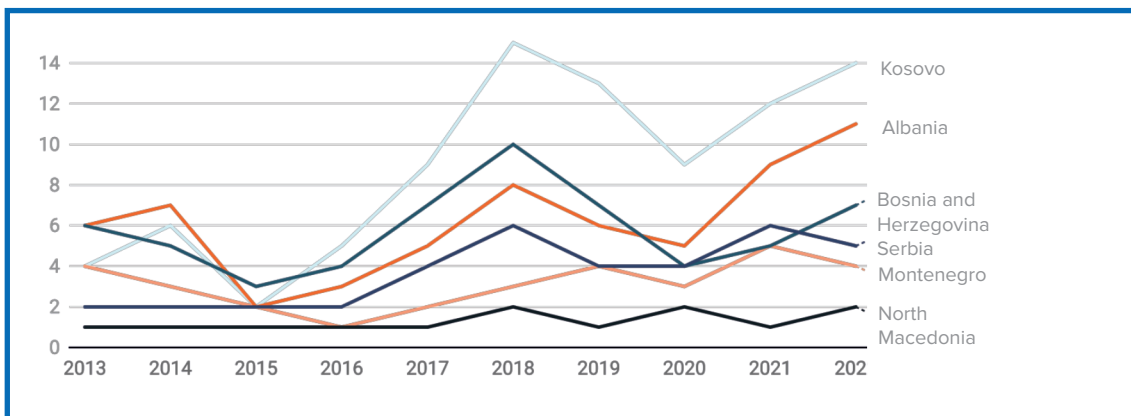


Figure : First-time asylum applications from the Western Balkans - 2014 to 2022

Despite the high number of asylum applications, the success rate of getting a positive decision for asylum requests is very low, ranging from 2 to 14 percent of first-instance asylum applications (see Figure 2). Success rates increased over the past decade, mainly driven by increases from Albania and Kosovo, which saw respectively a 5 and 10 percentage point increase from 2013 to 2022.

Figure 2 : First-instance positive decisions as share of total asylum applications from the Western Balkans - 2014 to 2022



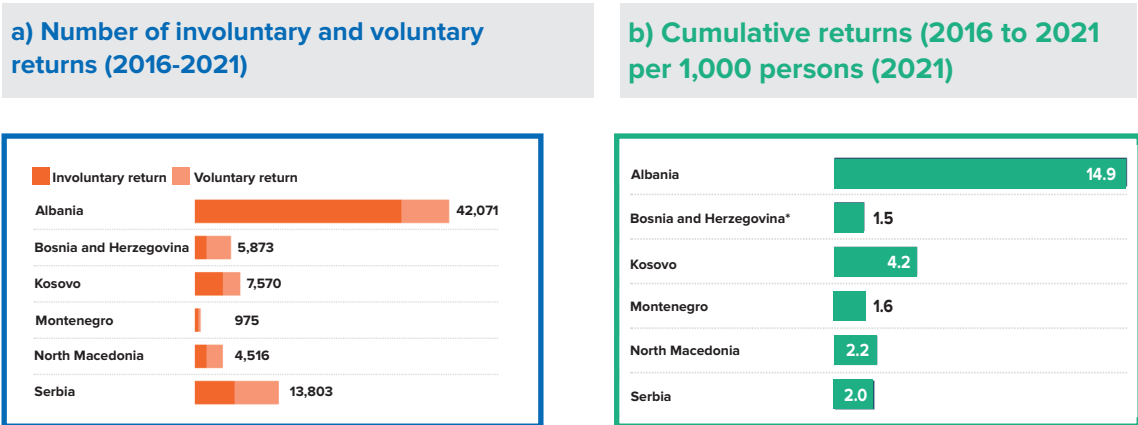
Source: Eurostat. Indicator: migr_asydcfst

There are significant push and pull factors at play that influence migration trends. Among the push factors are the relatively high youth unemployment rate and general unemployment (youth unemployment exceeding 30 percent in WB countries in 2021, with BiH having a rate of over 37 percent, as reported by ESAP2 (2023) and the World Bank (2023), though in recent years there have been positive changes in labour markets in terms of decline of unemployment rates).

In addition, low private-sector wages, inadequate public services, including poor healthcare and education, as well as perceptions of political instability, security concerns and quality of life all contribute to push factors. On the other hand, the demand for foreign workers in selected economic sectors attracts WB citizens to EU Member States.

Between 2016 and 2021, approximately 6,000 individuals returned to Bosnia and Herzegovina, which translates to 1.5 persons per 1,000 inhabitants, the lowest rate in the WB region (see Figure 3). While these numbers may not be high at the country level, returnees may face different vulnerabilities upon their return and as such the return journeys deserve attention. Understanding the profile of returning migrants, their journeys, vulnerabilities, interactions with various institutions and challenges faced are thus fundamental to improve returnee reintegration in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Figure 3 : Cumulative returns (2016-2021) and share of returnees in total population (2021)



Note: * Latest population estimates available for Bosnia and Herzegovina are from 2012 (ASBiH). Source: Eurostat, 2016-2021 (indicator: migr_eirt_vol) and Eurostat, 2021 (indicator: demo_pjan).

1.2 Methodology and data sources

The methodology chosen for this report follows a "returnee-centered" approach. It places its primary emphasis on evaluating the requirements of and obstacles encountered by (vulnerable) returnees and their families in achieving sustainable reintegration. This approach encompasses multiple facets encompassing economic, social, and psychological integration and support. This report has been built on existing knowledge and research conducted on outmigration from and return migration to Bosnia and Herzegovina: it used desk research, quantitative and qualitative data to shed light on (vulnerable) returnees' journeys.



Literature Review. This study incorporated pertinent research findings from various sources, including the United Nations Development Programme, the World Bank, the European Training Foundation, the International Organization for Migration, Ministry of Security of BiH, Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees of BiH, Central Bank of BiH, Agency for Statistics of BiH and other international and domestic organizations. Additionally, it drew insights from academic publications and studies on labor migration, return migration, and the role of diaspora conducted by research institutes, and various ministries and agencies from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Quantitative Data. To analyze migration patterns and trends from Bosnia and Herzegovina to the EU, this report utilized multiple databases on migration. Key data sources included:

- ▶ Migration and demographic data collected by the Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina (ASBiH)
- ▶ Migration data collected in collaboration with the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees of BiH, Ministry of Civil Affairs of BiH, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of BiH, Ministry of Security of BiH, Ministries of Interior, and ministries or agencies involved with migration to and from Bosnia and Herzegovina
- ▶ Eurostat Migration and Migrant Population Database
- ▶ The BiH-representative survey data on migration from 2015² available to authors.

Qualitative data on returnees. Between August and September 2023, qualitative data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with 17 returnees in Bosnia and Herzegovina.³ These interviews were instrumental in capturing the first-hand experiences and perceptions of various types of returnees. They took place in six municipalities across Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although some informants were initially hesitant to share their experience openly, and the majority preferred not to be recorded, valuable information was obtained on returnees' journey from the EU back to Bosnia and Herzegovina. In organizing the initial interviews, we enlisted the assistance of friends and municipal service providers to identify vulnerable returnees on the ground. We also used a snowballing method, whereby informants referred us to other potential respondents for interviews. All interviews were anonymized, and basic sample information is available in Annex 2.

Expert Interviews. Between August and September 2023, qualitative data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 8 experts from different institutions.

² This survey was conducted to support the project 'Social capital and migration – evidence from post-conflict environment' (RRPP, 2015), which aimed to explore how different dimensions of social capital interact with diverse migration categories of individuals. The project was supported by University of Fribourg, Interfaculty Institute for Central and Eastern Europe, Regional Research Promotion Programme in the Western Balkans – RRPP.

³ Given the existing information on the types of returnees coming back to Bosnia and Herzegovina, the sample for the qualitative research has encompassed multiple types of returnees, and although it cannot be considered representative for quantitative analysis due to its size, it does provide rich qualitative insights relevant for the report.



These interviews convened key migration policy stakeholders including representatives of BiH-level ministry, municipalities and local service providers, centers for social work and public nursery schools, including local coordinators and team members in the readmission system of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The discussions provided insights into policy objectives, challenges, initiatives, and institutional capabilities in areas such as managing labor migration, addressing the consequences of emigration, facilitating return migration, and supporting return migrants. They also facilitated the identification of effective policy practices, which could encourage mutual learning within other stakeholders in the region. This information formed a critical foundation for the policy recommendations.

In the context of the socio-economic reintegration of vulnerable returnees, this report focused on three dimensions of reintegration.

- ▶ **Economic Empowerment and Reintegration.** This aspect is concerned with assisting returnees in achieving economic self-sufficiency upon their return. It encompasses, but is not limited to, facilitating access to and active participation in the formal labor market to secure decent employment, offering job placements, skills development, vocational and soft skills training, educational support, income-generating activities, business development support (including mentorship), and access to financial resources.
- ▶ **Social Empowerment and Reintegration.** This dimension focuses on ensuring access to quality public services, such as information related to returnee services and programs, education and training opportunities, social protection, healthcare services, personal documentation, housing, accommodation, legal services, and access to justice.
- ▶ **Psychosocial Support.** Depending on individual needs, this dimension involves making psychological support available to returnees.

1.3 Objective and outline of the report

This report examines reintegration of returnees in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The report provides insights into the dynamics of migration, its impact on individuals and communities, and the potential of migration to contribute to Bosnia and Herzegovina's development. Understanding the motivations, experiences, and challenges of returnees, this research offers policymakers and researchers a perspective on the returnee reintegration journeys in the specific country's (BiH) economic, social, and political context.



By examining return migration, the reintegration process, and the contributions returnees (can) make to Bosnia and Herzegovina, this study can inform more effective return policies and practices, and also in some form contribute to addressing the broader implications of migration in support of fostering sustainable development in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Section 2 offers a detailed assessment of the current landscape of return and reintegration, encompassing migration trends, relevant legislation, strategies, and the institutional structures that play a crucial role in the reintegration process; key organizations involved in these efforts, including donors, are identified and analyzed. **Section 3** focuses on the needs and priorities of returnees as they reintegrate into their home countries, with particular attention to their experiences when interacting with institutions and NGOs, gender-specific and age/youth considerations, and drivers for remigration. **Section 4** provides a comprehensive analysis of the existing services and structures aimed at facilitating the sustainable socio-economic reintegration of returnees, examining offerings from government, NGOs, and donor programs. **Section 5** delves into the coordination and cooperation mechanisms across different levels of governance, both within institutions and between institutions, including the role of donors in supporting reintegration efforts. **Section 6** identifies existing gaps and provides some recommendations to enhance the current system for returnees' socio-economic reintegration and service delivery. **Section 7** presents some examples derived from fieldwork, highlighting emerging good practices that can inform and enhance reintegration efforts.



2.1 Migration patterns

2.1.1 Historical perspective

To gain an understanding of the diversity of migration in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is essential to consider the various migration phases and patterns after World War II present in BiH.

Post-WWII Economic Migration (Pre-1990s). This period encompasses the post-World War II period when BiH was part of the former Yugoslavia until the early 1990s. During this time, migration was predominantly driven by economic motives.

Migration during the BiH War (1992–1995). This phase of migration corresponded with the outbreak of the war in BiH, lasting from 1992 to 1995. This period was marked with war-related displacement of more than 2 million people, consisting of both emigrants (1.2 million) and internally displaced individuals (1 million) (Kadušić and Suljić, 2018). Most of the migrants during this time sought refuge in neighboring states or former Yugoslav republics, with an estimated 40 percent of BiH population relocating to Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, and Slovenia between 1992 and 1995. These countries, along with Germany and Austria, hosted 75 percent of the displaced individuals from BiH (Kadušić and Suljić, 2018). The war reduced ethnic heterogeneity in most of localities, which has had negative impacts on business development of young companies, economic performance of individuals living in these municipalities, and pro-social engagement of citizens (see Efendic et al., 2015; Efendic and Pugh, 2018; Efendic, 2020 respectively).

Immediate Post-War Migration Period (1996–2000). From 1996 to 2000, the migration landscape was marked by the mass repatriation of refugees from abroad and the substantial return of internally displaced people to their homes. Approximately 40 percent of BiH refugees successfully repatriated during this period (MHRR, 2006). By 2010, almost half a million people had returned from abroad to BiH (Colville, 2004), which alongside internally displaced people, resulted in over one million individuals returning to their pre-war residences.



Migration Trends between 2000 and 2010. The 2000-2010 decade experienced less dynamism in terms of emigration than earlier periods. The conditions for migration to the Western Europe became more challenging and more costly, as BiH citizens were required visas to enter most EU countries, before the visa facilitation and readmission agreements between the EU and BiH were signed in 2008. Notwithstanding these migration conditions, the data from the German Institute for Employment Research (IAB, 2020) nevertheless suggest that there was already a steady increase in the number of total emigrants from Bosnia and Herzegovina to 20 OECD countries over the period 2000–2010.

Enhanced Mobility and Changing Migration Dynamics (Post-2008). The implementation of the visa facilitation and readmission agreement between the EU and BiH from 2008 streamlined travel to the EU, bolstering various forms of mobility, especially those where ties to the existing BiH diaspora were leveraged.⁴ Improved road infrastructure and new air travel options, including charter flights from various BiH airports to Western European destinations with substantial diaspora communities, further boosted general mobility. This facilitated family visits and provided direct access to information regarding job markets, housing, and professional opportunities abroad. These changes made emigration from BiH more predictable, tangible, and accessible, resulting in increased emigration during the second decade of the 2000s (de Zwager and Gressmann, 2010; Halilovich et al., 2018).

⁴ Official Gazette of BiH – Treaties 10/08. In addition to the readmission agreements with the EU, BiH signed bilateral readmission agreements and implementing protocols with the following countries: Moldova, Norway, Switzerland, Lichtenstein, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Turkey, and Albania (MHRR, 2015).



2.1.2 Recent migration trends

Transition to Pull Factors in the Second Decade of the 2000s. In the second decade of the 2000s, migration became more dynamic as the primary drivers shifted from the push factors of the 1990s to pull factors (Halilovich et al., 2018). Post-conflict challenges, particularly perceptions of the unfavorable political and economic condition combined with the pull factors such as increased demand for labor in the EU, became influential determinants of aspirations to migrate (Čičić, 2019; UNDP, UNICEF, 2022). Recent estimates, such as the 2021 ETF study based on Labor Force Survey (LFS) data, suggest that over 400,000 BiH citizens emigrated over the past decade, predominantly mid-vocational education (VET) individuals and younger populations (Efendic, 2020), while the total number of migrants from BiH in the EU estimated at around 1.7 million in 2020 (EC, 2023).

Temporary, Seasonal, and Circular Migration. Within the last decade, trends related to temporary, seasonal, and circular migration have emerged in BiH. Although organized data on these forms of migration are limited, short-term permits (lasting less than a year) issued in the EU to BiH citizens constitute roughly 40 percent of all permits and to some extent capture these shorter movements. This highlights that migration from BiH is not necessarily permanent, but rather characterized by dynamic trends and if managed strategically, this type of migration could potentially also bring some positive benefits to BiH. Temporary and/or circular movement of migrants is identified primarily towards Montenegro and Serbia in the region, and towards Croatia in the EU, in particular during the tourist season (summertime) (Efendic, 2021).

Geographical Focus of Temporary and Circular Migration. Evidence in BiH indicates that temporary and circular type of migration is prevalent with neighboring countries. Language barriers are not significant for less-educated workers, and historical networks dating back to the former Yugoslav period facilitate this temporary migration. Work permits issued by neighboring countries to workers from BiH reveal significant migration to former Yugoslav countries, with Slovenia and Croatia being the most popular destinations (Efendic, 2021). In Western BiH, particularly in Krajina, many individuals work in Slovenia and Austria, both within a few hours' drive from the western border of BiH. They return home almost every weekend, demonstrating a strong attachment to their places of origin.



Their migration status is complex, essentially living and working in two separate countries due to their proximity — a recent phenomenon noted by public officials working on diaspora issues (as highlighted in one of the qualitative interviews). In addition, given the fact that some BiH citizens (those of Croat and Serb ethnicity) can legally and often do hold dual citizenship with neighboring countries (Croatia and Serbia), this facilitates their integration in the Croatian or Serbian labour market.

2.1.3 Returnees' characteristics and data on returns

► Characteristics of returnees, all returns

Evidence from a tailor-made, representative, quantitative survey⁵ from 2015 shows that, on average, BiH returnees tend to be more educated, more urban, and more entrepreneurial than the domestic⁶ population (see table 1).⁶ It is important to highlight that this survey includes all types of returnees up to 2015, encompassing both voluntary and non-voluntary returns, as well as war-related and post-war (economic) migrants. One tenth of respondents reported living abroad for more than three months and subsequently returning to BiH, which classified them as returnees. While there are no significant deviation between returnees and the rest of the population, some differences are noteworthy. The age and gender structures of both groups are quite similar. However, returnees tend to have higher levels of education, particularly in terms of tertiary education. They also more frequently reside in urban and suburban areas compared to the domestic population. Notably, there is a slightly higher inclination toward entrepreneurship among returnees, despite entrepreneurship not being a strong aspect of Bosnia and Herzegovina's economy. Additionally, it's interesting to observe that while the majority of former external migrants return to areas where they represent the ethnic majority (60 percent), they are geographically more prevalent in ethnically mixed regions compared to the domicile population (respectively 36 and 30 percent).

⁵ Data are derived from a survey conducted in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2015, which involved 6,021 interviews conducted by a professional research agency. Respondents ranged in age from 16 to 65 years old. The interviews were carried out using computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI). To construct the survey sample, 40 participants were selected from each municipality, so as to result in a total of 6,000 participants. Within each municipality, participants were randomly chosen following the closest birthday rule, leading to an average of 44 interviews per municipality, and 6,021 individuals in the final dataset.

⁶ Capturing socioeconomic characteristics of returnees is challenging due to limited data availability, particularly regarding voluntary returnees who have spent significant time abroad and may not be registered with domestic institutions. This is mostly due to the current legal framework, as individuals who migrate, whether emigrating or returning, are not required to register with domestic institutions (as highlighted by one of the qualitative interviews).



Table 1: Individual Characteristics of Returnees in BiH Based on 2015 Survey Data

Variable	Description	Full Sample Mean	Mean for Returnees
Age	Age in years	47.0	48.5
Gender (males)	Male==1, Female==0	0.45	0.45
Education - Primary	Primary not completed==1	5.7	3.7
Education - Secondary	Primary completed==1	23.9	16.4
Education - tertiary	Secondary completed==1	54.4	53.7
Employment	tertiary completed==1	15.6	26.2
Unemployment	Formal employment==1	0.27	0.30
Urban area of living	Looking for a job=1	0.21	0.24
Rural area	Urban area==1	0.27	0.36
Entrepreneurs	Suburban area==	0.23	0.29
Established business	Rural area==1	0.50	0.35
Nascent entrepreneurs	Entrepreneur ==1	0.05	0.07
Ethnic minority	Established business=1	0.04	0.05
Ethnic majority	Nascent entrepreneurs=1	0.01	0.02
Ethnic mix	The area Where is minority ==1	0.06	0.04
	The area Where is majority ==1	0.64	0.60
	The area is Ethnically mixed=1	0.30	0.36

Source: RRPP, 2015. Full sample size includes 6,021 randomly selected individuals.

Based on labor market participation, one in four returnees may face economic vulnerability.

The 2015 survey data reveal indicative unemployment rates of approximately 24 percent among returnees in the sample, while the average for domestic population is 21 percent. This shows a slightly higher labor status vulnerability among returnees. Interestingly, returnees also hold more often formal jobs than domestic population (30 vs 27 percent), which implies their higher participation in the labor market.

Returnees are more engaged in informal jobs than domestic population, suggesting economic vulnerability from the least protected form of employment.

The 2015 survey data and according to Williams and Efendic (2020) approximately 26 percent of former migrants (i.e. returnees) are engaged in informal jobs, compared with 21 percent of domestic population on average. The empirical econometric model reveals that the participation of returnees in the undeclared economy is systematically higher, accounting for 7-8 percent more than the domestic population, holding other relevant factors constant. These findings indicate higher job insecurity among returnees, which may create more incentives for those returnees to emigrate again and lock them in a vicious circle of temporary/seasonal/circular migration centered around informal jobs. As highlighted by the qualitative fieldwork, these patterns are more prevalent among Roma.

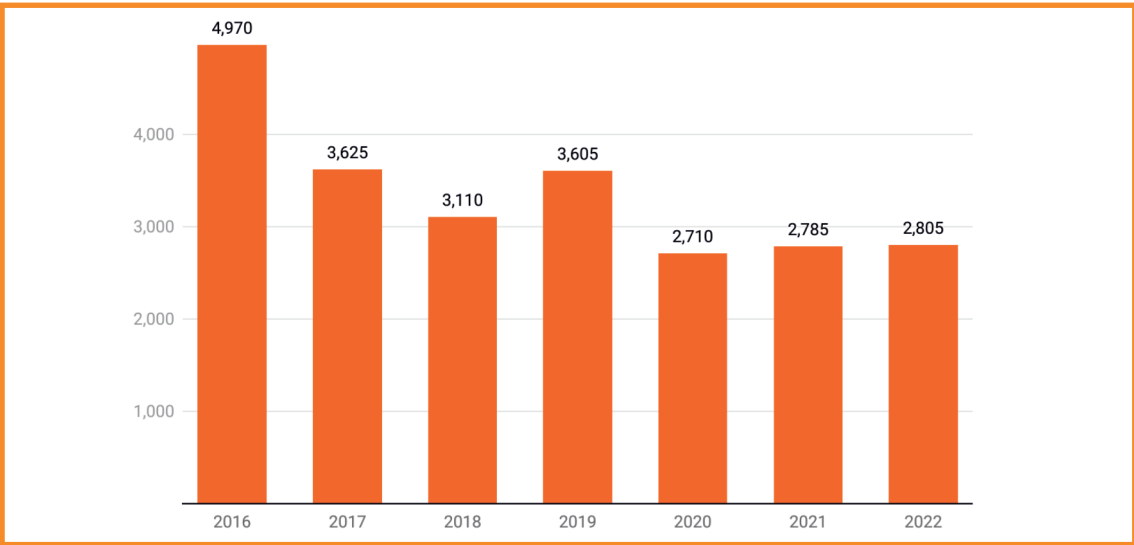


Returnees also exhibit systematically lower trust in public institutions, attributed to their experience with more developed institutional environments abroad. In post-conflict economies, institutional environments are typically characterized by weak formal institutions (Williams and Vorley, 2017) and the substitutive role of various informal practices used to address institutional deficiencies and everyday socio-economic challenges (Gordy and Efendic, 2019). Navigating such institutional frameworks is always challenging, and it becomes particularly complex for returnees who may have never lived in their home country, spent several years abroad, or have few connections in the country (Nielsen and Riddle, 2010). The difference in trust can arise from the fact that returnees have gained international experience and skills from exposure to more developed and stable Western European institutional environments. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, returnees seemingly compare the institutional performance of their former host countries with their current home country, leading to a more critical view and lower trust in public institutions (Williams and Efendic, 2019). This finding is also confirmed in the qualitative fieldwork where many interviewed returnees expressed distrust in the system, often being reluctant to approach institutions and use the services.

► Returns of BiH citizens ordered by EU authorities, including readmitted

In 2022, the number of BiH nationals ordered to leave the EU was 2,805 (see Figure 4), which represents a 27 percent decrease compared to 2019. Notwithstanding some changes, trends related to return decision and actual returns of BiH citizens from the EU have remained relatively stable over the past five years and reflect overall a declining trend compared to higher return figures in previous periods such as the 2014-2015 period (EC, 2023).

Figure 4 : BiH nationals ordered to leave the EU and returned to their country



Source: Eurostat (indicator: migr_eiord).

The structure of the readmitted returnees can be analyzed using the MHRR database on individuals who entered the readmission system in BiH, as obtained as part of research in this report. Data from the last five years, along with the calculated relative shares or percentages, are presented in Table 2. Male returnees represent two-thirds of re-admitted returnees over the past five years. Approximately 70 percent of readmitted returnees originate from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH), about 20 percent from the Republika Srpska (RS), and the Brčko District of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BDBiH) accounts for approximately 5 percent of returnees. Share of readmitted returnees in F BiH is slightly higher when compared to the F BiH's relative share in BiH population (close to 60 percent).

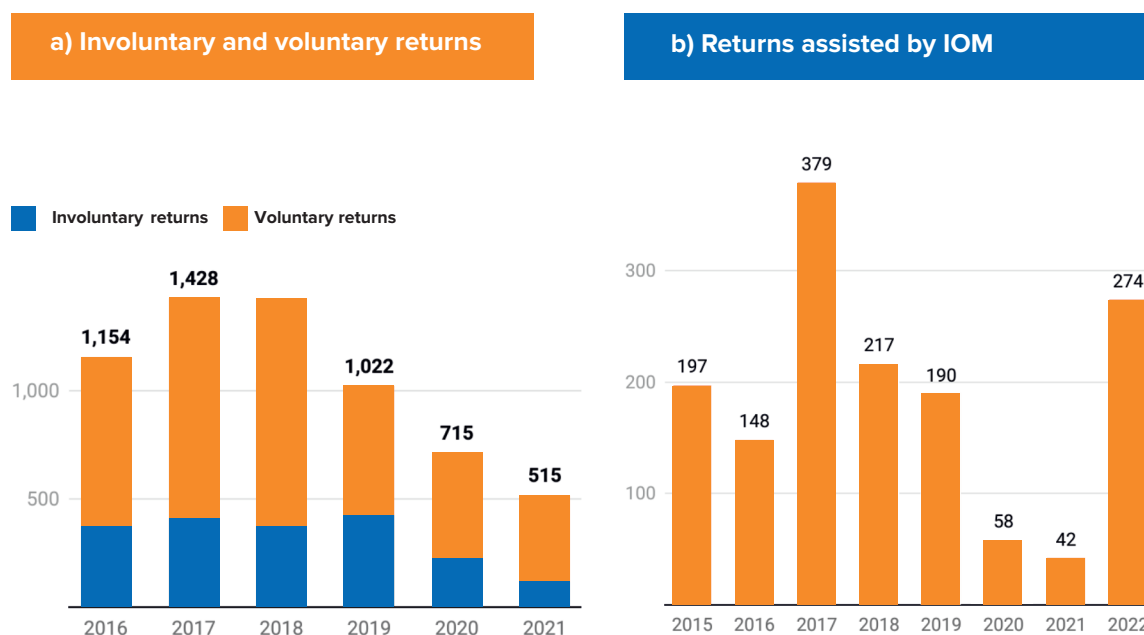
Table 2: Disaggregated data on returnees (readmissions)

Indicators	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Returnees (readmissions)	481	308	232	234	627
Returnees from FBiH	63%	76%	72%	71%	68%
Returnees from RS	21%	12%	18%	24%	24%
Returnees from DBBiH	7%	6%	5%	2%	6%
Male returnees	63%	65%	73%	75%	59%
Female Employment	37%	35%	27%	25%	41%

Note, the sum of three institutional levels is not necessarily 100 percent due to the fact that some returnees had other countries of origin. Source: MHRR, 2023. Data upon request.

Voluntary returns dominate and represent 78 percent of all registered readmitted returnees in 2021 (see Figure 5). Voluntary returns assisted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) substantially increased in 2022 as compared with 2015-2021, except for 2017 (MoS, 2023). Over 95 percent of voluntary returnees came from Germany, a trend that has dominated over the past ten years, accounting for 57 percent of returns from 2013 to 2022. While gender distribution is balanced, individuals under 35 years of age constitute the majority of returnees (88 percent).

Figure 5: Estimated number of returnees



Source: left panel, Eurostat (indicator: migr_eirt_vol), right panel, MoS (2023).

2.2 Development impact of migration

Bosnia and Herzegovina's economic performance in recent years has been marked by modest real economic growth of its gross domestic product (GDP), typically around 3 percent yearly (CBBiH, 2022). GDP per capita is 64 percent below the European Union's (EU) average. In 2020, there was a 3 percent negative GDP growth due to the COVID-19 outbreak, followed by a recovery with growth rates of 7.4 percent in 2021 and 4.1 percent in 2022 (CBBiH, 2022). BiH's currency, the BAM, is pegged to the Euro and known for its stability, including the operational framework of the Central Bank of Bosnia and Herzegovina, functioning as a currency board arrangement. BiH faces a persistently high but decreasing unemployment rate, estimated at around 17 percent (SEEJGD, 2023), and significant external sector deficits, with a trade deficit exceeding 20 percent of GDP and a current account deficit around 4 percent of GDP in 2022. These deficits have been partially offset by a substantial remittances, transfers, and pensions from abroad, estimated at over 10 percent of GDP annually (CBBiH, 2022). The current global inflationary pressures have affected BiH economy, with annual inflation exceeding 14 percent in 2022. This inflation has placed significant pressure on vulnerable families and individuals in Bosnia and Herzegovina, exacerbating their challenges (UNDP, UNICEF, 2022).

High outmigration rates from Bosnia and Herzegovina over the past few decades have had a profound impact on the country's demographic structure. The current demographics are characterized by a negative natural population change, trend that has persisted since 2009.

The natural change has shown an increasing negative trajectory, from -0.1 persons per 1,000 population in 2009 to -6.7 in 2022 (ASBiH, 2022). Negative demographic trends, coupled with net outmigration in post-war period have led to a cumulative decline of BiH population. According to the Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina (ASBiH, 2023), the population of BiH is estimated at 3.4 million in 2023 though population estimates vary across different sources and often goes much below this estimate.

High outmigration rates impact Bosnia and Herzegovina's labor market through changes in its demographic structure and stock of human capital. The working-age population is shrinking, while there is a growing number of pensioners. In this socioeconomic environment, the undeclared economy continues to play a significant role, while the efficiency of public institutions remains weak, contributing to the persisting high intentions to emigrate among the domestic population (Efendic, 2019). It remains unclear to what extent emigration has alleviated the declining unemployment in the country, but it is likely that it has contributed to its reduction to some degree, although not substantially. Caution in interpreting data is necessary because even the employed labor force participants are emigrating, potentially creating new employment opportunities for those who are unemployed. This migration (of those employed) also affects the size of the labor force and, consequently, the unemployment rate.

High outmigration rates are “shrinking” the labor market supply, but also causing certain professions to become scarce, and consequently rising wages in some sub-sectors in order to retain qualified professionals. Qualitative interviews also suggest that labor shortages and rising wages may attract the return of certain professions to BiH. In contrast to the labor market, the aggregate demand and household consumption indicators in BiH did not “shrink” (ASBiH, 2023), suggesting that the economic growth model based on domestic consumption may have absorbed (in short run) some of the negative impacts of outmigration of the labor force in BiH. However, the medium and long-term impacts of outmigration rates on growth rates and public revenues have not yet been modelled in BiH.

Outmigration from Bosnia and Herzegovina is quite selective and affects some professions disproportionately. Specialists in sectors such as medicine, information technology (IT), and science are more likely to have emigrated than individuals in other sectors (Čičić, 2019). Bosnia and Herzegovina is also disproportionately losing mid-VET (vocational education and training) specialists, including plumbers, electricians, construction workers, truck drivers, and nurses. Their services have become scarcer and more expensive in the local market (Efendic, 2020).

These findings are corroborated by the qualitative fieldwork: two interviewees, a plumber and an electrician, confirmed the high demand for their services in the EU, often facilitated through the BiH diaspora. These professionals can freely choose to work in Bosnia and Herzegovina, or abroad, or even combine both options.

Returnees in general can bring significant development potential, as they are generally more educated and entrepreneurial than the average domestic population (see Table 1). The primary positive outcome of various forms of education is increased labor productivity, as well as enhanced efficiency and effectiveness in companies led by more educated entrepreneurs (Bartel, 1994; Hurley & Hult, 1998; Mat & Razak, 2011). Williams and Efendic (2019) utilized representative survey data from BiH (Table 2) and found that returnees are represented more (by 9 percent) in the secondary and higher education categories when compared to the country's average population. Additionally, there are 40 percent more entrepreneurs among returnees compared to domestic population (7 percent among returnees versus 5 percent in the full sample). Based on the sample, it would appear that returnees bring higher educational skills and greater entrepreneurial activity to BiH society, contributing to long-term development potential of its economy and society. It's important to note that this represents the average effect in the sample of all returnees in BiH, and specific sub-types of returnees may not fit this conclusion. Specifically, it would be relevant to examine whether readmitted returnees exhibit different performance from the overall returnee sample, which is likely as documented in the qualitative research and interviews with vulnerable readmitted returnees that had limited skills and entrepreneurial potentials.

Returning entrepreneurs can and do play a significant role in Bosnia and Herzegovina's economy, running various businesses that contribute to employment and development.

These entrepreneurs, originally from Bosnia and Herzegovina, often relocate parts or entire businesses started in the EU, while maintaining strong ties to developed markets in Western Europe. Returning entrepreneurs can revitalize the local labor market, and sometimes offer competitive salaries similar to those offered in the EU, with evidence of several trans-local businesses in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Halilovich and Efendic, 2021). Such returnees experienced limited support from the relevant authorities due to their returnee status (Efendic et al., 2016) although numerous international projects and initiatives have supported diaspora investment and business establishment in Bosnia and Herzegovina, such as the current project “Diaspora Invest”, supported by USAID.

⁷ <https://diasporainvest.ba/ask-for-support-when-starting-a-business-b2b-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina/>



Bosnia and Herzegovina's diaspora contributes to BiH development also through remittances and spending when visiting home.

Firstly, BiH citizens settled in the EU send a substantial amount of remittances each year, supporting domestic consumption and contributing to the country's GDP, with an annual inflow of workers' remittances in 2023 being around 3.6 billion BAM (CBBiH, 2024). Secondly, BiH diaspora contributes to BiH economy when they visit family and friends back home, enjoy touristic destinations within BiH, and use specific services such as restaurants, dental care, healthcare-related services like spas, hairdressers, and automotive repair services. Moreover, there are various non-financial contributions to economic development by diaspora, such as enhanced access to business connections and networks facilitated to diaspora, joint ventures, exchange of knowledge and information and all these can play a vital role.



2.3 Policy and institutional framework

The complex institutional framework in BiH challenges formulation and implementation of effective migration policies in Bosnia and Herzegovina. BiH has a complex institutional and governance setup, encompassing two entities - the Federation of BiH (FBiH) and Republika Srpska (RS) - along with the Brčko District of BiH (BDBiH).⁸ In BiH, there are 14 governments at varying administrative levels: state-level government, two entity governments (FBiH and RS), ten cantonal governments (in FBiH), and one district government (BDBiH), including municipal structures in both entities, each with their legislative and executive structure. Numerous studies and reports, including the World Bank (2021), have highlighted considerable costs, inefficiencies, and decision-making challenges associated with complex governance and institutional structures, underscoring the pressing need for substantial institutional reforms.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's institutional framework for returnees and reintegration is complex and multi-layered, especially related to returns under readmission agreements. The institutional framework involves collaboration among multiple government bodies at the state and entity levels, cantons, and municipalities (MHRR, 2015). Bosnia and Herzegovina's Constitution delineates the authority and relationships between state-level and entity institutions in matters of migration, immigration, refugees, and asylum policies.

State-level institutions responsible for returnee policies include primary the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees (MHRR), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA), and the Ministry of Security (MoS). These institutions, along with bodies like the Border Police of Bosnia and Herzegovina, play pivotal roles in the readmission of returnees.

The government of Bosnia and Herzegovina has approved strategic documents to guide the admission and integration of returnees, emphasizing the importance of local communities in this process (World Bank, 2021), see Box 1 for overview). The Council of Ministers (CoM) and relevant ministries and institutions have issued strategic documents and regulations for managing readmission. These cover various aspects, including admission procedures, record-keeping, and statistics.⁹

⁸ The current institutional arrangement in Bosnia and Herzegovina was established in 1995 by the Dayton Peace Accord.

⁹ The "Instruction on the Temporary Provision of Care to BiH Nationals under the Readmission Agreements" from MHRR, which outlines the procedures for admission, temporary care, and actions by relevant authorities; the "Regulation on the Records of the BiH Nationals Returning under Readmission Agreements" from MoS, which designates the authority responsible for maintaining official records and their content; the "Decision on the Obligation to Submit Statistics on Migrations and International Protection to the Ministry of Security" from CoM, which establishes standards for the compilation of statistics on readmitted persons (World Bank, 2021).

The strategy has not been published in the Official Gazette but it is the official document accepted in BiH by relevant institutions. A working team is already nominated to start activities on developing new Action plan and strategy (Int_17).



Strategic policy framework in BiH

The strategic documents in this area are the "Reintegration Strategy for Returnees under the Readmission Agreements" approved by the Council of Ministers (CoM) in 2009. This adoption fulfilled an obligation set forth in the *"Roadmap towards a visa-free regime with the European Union"* and marked a significant step in BiH's overall migration policy. This strategy integrated the concept of readmission into the overall approach to migration. A subsequent strategic document is the *"Strategy for the Admission and Integration of the BiH Nationals Returning under Readmission Agreements and Action Plan for the period 2015-2018"* adopted in October 2015, this marked another strategic effort in this domain. Following this, the Council of Ministers (CoM) adopted the Readmission Strategy and Action Plan, for the period 2018-2023 in December 2020.¹⁰

The primary focus of Strategies for the Admission and Integration was to establish improved institutional support for effectively receiving and integrating individuals who were being readmitted to BiH under international agreements. These strategies also aimed to actively involve local communities as central participants in the process of reintegrating returnees.

MHRR manages the temporary care of returnees under the readmission agreement, including accommodation, food, hygiene supplies, medical exams, psycho-social support, and legal aid.

MHRR plays a vital role in the admission and care of Bosnian and Herzegovinian citizens returning under readmission agreements: according to Article 12 of the Law on Ministries and Other Administrative Bodies of Bosnia and Herzegovina, MHRR, particularly its Sector for Refugees, Displaced Persons, Readmission, and Housing Policy. MHRR is responsible for admission and care (up to 30 days since arrival); the Ministry provides transportation support for returnees and individuals involved in the admission process, in collaboration with MOS's Sector for Immigration for individuals with mental illness, severe medical conditions, the elderly, or those facing distressing situations; the Ministry manages and operates the Salakovac Readmission Center, which serves as a crucial facility for readmitted individuals, where they receive essential provisions, including accommodation, meals, hygiene supplies, medical examinations, psycho-social assistance, and legal aid. Finally, MHRR ensures proper collaboration at the local level (World Bank, 2021).

¹⁰The strategy has not been published in the Official Gazette but it is the official document accepted in BiH by relevant institutions. A working team is already nominated to start activities on developing new Action plan and strategy (Int_17).



The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) issues travel documents when needed. MFA has jurisdiction over a range of crucial areas, including nationality, citizen registration, records, residence registration, and the issuance of identification and travel documents. Additionally, the MFA assumes a pivotal role in coordinating efforts associated with social protection and welfare when readmitted individuals require specialized assistance or support.

The Ministry of Security (MoS) is responsible for implementing readmission agreements, while the Border Police conducts border checks and facilitates interviews and transfers during the admission process. This multifaceted role encompasses the repatriation of BiH citizens and includes tasks such as identity and citizenship verification, along with various admission-related duties. Working autonomously under the aegis of the BiH Ministry of Security, the BiH Border Police operates in compliance with the Law on Border Police and other pertinent legislation. Their primary mission is to conduct thorough border checks, determining whether individuals should be granted entry into or denied access to BiH. Upon receiving notification from the Ministry of Security regarding the transfer of a BiH citizen under a readmission agreement, the Border Police diligently initiates border checks. Following the procedures outlined in Article 2 of the "Protocol on cooperation in a more efficient implementation of readmission agreements on persons residing without authorization in other countries," the Border Police promptly notifies the Ministry upon the successful completion of the transfer process.

Throughout the admission process, the Border Police collaborates closely with MHRR. They assist by facilitating interviews at border crossings, providing designated interview rooms, and assigning border officers to oversee the interview and transfer procedures. Furthermore, the Border Police stands ready to provide supplementary assistance upon request from the MHRR, significantly contributing to the smooth reception of readmitted individuals. These supportive efforts align with the guidelines established in the "Instruction on the procedure of temporary provision of care to BiH nationals under readmission agreements" and are well within the purview of their responsibilities.

Entities (FBiH and RS) are responsible for supporting state-level institutions in meeting international obligations and safeguarding citizens' rights in line with established human rights standards. At the entity level, the Ministries of Interior in FBiH and RS, along with the cantonal Ministries of Interior (present in 10 cantons within FBiH), as well as Brcko District Police, bear the responsibility of confirming the identities and citizenships of individuals desiring to return. Furthermore, the entities (and cantons) are constitutionally mandated to guarantee access to economic opportunities, healthcare, social rights, and education.



Local teams, such as the cantonal readmission coordinators and local readmission teams (LRT), play a crucial role in providing direct support to readmitted individuals at the local level.

In FBiH, the coordination of measures and activities associated with the reception, assistance, and temporary care of readmitted individuals is overseen by the cantonal readmission coordinator. At the municipal level, local commissioners (LC) and LRTs, consisting of representatives from the municipality, the police, local health centers, social work centers, public schools, and employment offices, provide local support.¹¹ LRTs are operational in over 90 municipalities throughout BiH, while LCs manage this responsibility in smaller communities. These teams directly support readmitted individuals at the local level, providing a range of services tailored to individual cases.

Funding for the local support of readmitted individuals is primarily provided by MHRR, which allocates grants to municipalities based on the number of returnees in each area.

In conclusion, Bosnia and Herzegovina's readmission system is comprehensive, with strong data management and functional information systems that connect stakeholders across different levels of government.

MHHR administers a database for individuals who have been readmitted, actively collaborating with the Identification and Data Exchange Agency (IDDEA) to collect and update information related to their residence and birthplace. In order to streamline these procedures, the MHHR has issued a variety of regulations and official documents.¹² This database is continually evolving and, notably, is designed to be decentralized, ensuring that local readmission teams can access and utilize it effectively. In addition, MoS compiles statistical data related to migration and international protection to publish the Migration Profile of Bosnia and Herzegovina, mandated by the Roadmap for Visa Liberalization and Migration Management.

Ensuring the accuracy of migration data remains a challenge, particularly because individuals leaving Bosnia and Herzegovina are not legally required to register, making it impossible for migration statistics to encompass all migration patterns within the country. Nonetheless, the Migration profile database contains a wealth of migration statistics, including information on visas, entry denials, illegal border crossings, types of residence permits issued to foreigners, illegal migration, and the return of irregular migration.¹³ This annual report is a vital migration resource and a valuable collaborative effort among state institutions, organizations, and agencies.

¹¹ Composition obtained through the qualitative fieldwork from one readmission team (list of 10 individuals from the associated local institutions).

¹² Some examples include: "Decision on Establishment of the Readmission Centre in Mostar"; "Information Brochure for Returnees under Readmission Agreements"; "Information Sheet for Readmitted Persons" and "Family and Individual Questionnaires for Readmitted Persons." MHHR civil servants actively participate in the admission of returning BiH citizens, following the guidelines set out in the "Instruction on the Manner of Taking Care for BiH Citizens under the Readmission Agreements."

¹³ <http://www.msb.gov.ba/PDF/100720234.pdf>

3. NEEDS AND PRIORITIES OF RETURNEES

This section presents the findings of in-depth interviews with returnees in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The purpose of these interviews was to examine the vulnerability of returnees across three reintegration dimensions: economic, social, and psychological. The interviews sought to understand the level of awareness among returnees regarding their rights and obligations, as well as the services and opportunities provided. In addition, the interviews aimed to assess returnee's level of satisfaction with the reintegration process, their success in effective reintegration upon return and to understand possible drivers for remigration. Given their vulnerabilities prior to migration from Bosnia and Herzegovina, special attention was paid to Roma returnees (World Bank, 2019 and 2021).

Box 1 : Methodology

In-depth interviews with 17 returnees were conducted and included interviews with both involuntary and voluntary returnees in 6 municipalities across BiH: Sarajevo, Zavidovići, Žepče and Jajce in FBiH, and Srebrenica and Bratunac in RS. Returnees were identified primarily through a snowballing method, striving to create a diverse sample that best reflects the diversity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The interviews included voluntary returnees as well as individuals repatriated by foreign authorities; former asylum seekers and readmitted individuals who had lost their legal status abroad. The sample consisted of 11 men and 6 women interviewed, with a predominant secondary or mid-level vocational education background, 8 of returnees are from Roma communities (4 males and 4 females).

Given the existing information on the types of returnees coming back to Bosnia and Herzegovina, the sample for the qualitative research has encompassed multiple types of returnees, and although it cannot be considered representative for quantitative analysis, it does provide rich qualitative insights relevant for the report.

Most returnees came back to Bosnia and Herzegovina in the past decade. Given Bosnia and Herzegovina's history of war (1992-1995) and subsequent mass return in the post-war era (mainly up to 2000), the country underwent extensive migration flows in the later nineties and early 2000s. Our focus is on the most recent influx of returnees, those who came back to Bosnia and Herzegovina mostly after 2015.



In addition, eight interviews were conducted with migration policy stakeholders, including representatives from the relevant state-level Ministry, municipalities, and local service providers, such as centres for social work and public nursery schools. These interviews also included local coordinators and team members in the readmission system. The interviews focused on specific issues related to return and the challenges in reintegrating returnees within the institutional and policy context. In general, our informants were willing to provide relevant information, personal opinions, and primary data and evidence on the ground, which greatly contributed to shaping this report. More detailed information on the sample can be found in Annex 2.

3.1 Needs and priorities upon return

Poor living conditions¹⁴ in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and better economic prospects in the EU were identified as the two primary reasons for outmigration. This perspective aligns with academic research findings on intentions to emigrate from Bosnia and Herzegovina, as highlighted by Čičić et al. (2019): perceptions of the general political and economic situation were the main drivers of the likelihood to leave the country. In fact, most of those who migrated, even as asylum seekers (majority of which belong to local Roma communities in our sample, estimated to participate with 60 percent in overall readmitted population in BiH according to the World Bank, 2021), seemed to be primarily motivated by economic reasons, with some attempting to seek asylum multiple times. Most respondents were satisfied with their living conditions abroad (in certain instances, they found themselves in temporary accommodations alongside fellow asylum seekers), and most preferred their life abroad.

¹⁴Living conditions encompasses various dimensions, including economic, social, political, and security factors.



“It is much better in Germany. You can earn €50 per day by only collecting bottles. You can live there from (collecting) bottles only” – Int_11



“I tried to get asylum status in Germany twice and once in Sweden since 2012” – Int_5



“The first time we got white paper and returned voluntarily, ... and came by bus... while the second time we were deported and we travelled by plane over Belgrade... This was from Germany, from Berlin” – Int_10



“I had better living conditions in asylum than here. You collect 100 papers and still do not get almost anything here” – Int_7



“I was in a hotel for 6 months. I have got some money for food. None was touching us” – Int_10



“The way how we left, how it had been there is 10 times better than here. I would not go again but it is better place for the kids there. One of our children was even born in Berlin. Our older son has completed the first grade in the primary school” – Int_13

Most returnees were denied legal status in the EU on the basis that Bosnia and Herzegovina was designated a safe country of origin. Majority of asylum seekers (which were mainly Roma returnees) articulated that the primary rationale for the rejection of their asylum applications was the contention that living conditions in Bosnia and Herzegovina had improved and that they could now establish a semblance of normal life within its borders (Int_5, Int_6, Int_10, Int_11). It is noteworthy that all of our informants had embarked on asylum applications two decades or more after the end of war in BiH. Overall sentiment of returnees was one of dissatisfaction, primarily stemming from the explanations provided in reference to the historical context of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.



“They only said to us, it is not war in Bosnia now and you can go there and live back home” – Int_11

Most respondents accepted to return home voluntarily when they received a negative response to their asylum application. Consequently, they undertook their return journeys independently, without an escort, often traveling by bus. They did not encounter any significant impediments upon reentry into Bosnia and Herzegovina.

These voluntary returnees do not seem to appear in the government readmission statistics years ago, prevented these returnees from accessing the support provided by the readmission system (as mentioned by one respondent (Int_17)). However, an improved system of record has already been addressed by MHRR.

On the other hand, several individuals were involuntarily repatriated from the European Union by foreign authorities (Int_4, Int_10, Int_11). These returnees subsequently received entry bans to the EU, often extending for a period of three years. Their deportations were executed under the supervision of local law enforcement officers, with a police escort accompanying them during the return journey. While most of those who accepted to return voluntarily were not banned from reentering the EU, there are instances where voluntary returnees were also subject to EU entry bans without being informed.



“They have given us ban for three years, three years without going there. This was after our second trial to get asylum status when we were departed by plane, the first time we returned voluntarily by bus.... There was a man who was travelling with us all the time, he was going with us everywhere, even to bathroom...” – Int_11



“We have tried to reach Germany again. On the border with Slovenia, they asked us, where are you going. I said, I am going to asylum, I do not have anything to hide. The officer said, I am happy that you have responded honestly, but I am sorry, I am so sorry that I have to return you back home. He showed me his (computer) display and said, you do not have any limits to travel but your children have ban to enter the EU for the next three years. ...so, we returned and did not try again” – Int_5

All interviewed returnees settled in the municipality they emigrated from. This pattern reflects a profound attachment to returnees' hometown or municipality prior to their migration journey. For some, finding accommodation posed a challenge upon their return, as some didn't have their own house, particularly within the Roma community. However, none of the respondents went homeless upon their return: housing options were mainly addressed through the collaborative efforts of municipal authorities, often with support from donors, or through personal initiatives.

3.2 Returnees' experiences in interacting with institutions and NGOs

The majority of interviewees contend that they received insufficient institutional support upon their return, and many reported no contact at all with local authorities. While two respondents were contacted by local Centers for Social Welfare (CSW) for support, the general impression was that returnees, particularly those who returned voluntarily, often operate under the radar of local institutions and assert their rights as citizens of their home country rather than as vulnerable returnees (Int_5, Int_6, Int_7, Int_8, Int_9, Int_10, Int_11, Int_12, Int_13, Int_14, Int_15, Int_16).



"Everyone is supporting you to return, but once you get back, none is seeing you anymore" – Int_10



"You are noticed here locally only when the election time comes, or if you did not pay something (to public institutions or service provider) on time. They are quick in asking for what you owe to them" – Int_12

While many returnees express criticism toward public institutions, one couple, who had spent months organizing their return and had engaged with relevant institutions, such as schools for their children, to facilitate a smooth transition, which they found generally satisfactory, were less critical:



"You have to find relevant information, schedule a meeting online, and wait for services in Germany as well. You don't wait in front of the office for hours, but at home, waiting for your appointment" – Int_16

This example suggests that although returnees often hold critical views of domestic and local institutions, a more proactive engagement and collaboration between returnees and these institutions could facilitate the reintegration process.

Information asymmetry or a lack of relevant information can potentially render any returnee vulnerable upon their return.

For example, an interviewee who had voluntarily returned to Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2020 after working abroad for over two decades faced several challenges, despite not fitting the typical profile of a potentially vulnerable returnee (Int_4). Upon his return, he missed the registration deadline with the employment office, losing the right to regular health insurance. He only discovered this issue when he experienced severe health problems and required healthcare services. Lacking health insurance, he had to cover substantial healthcare costs, depleting his available financial resources. The incident prompted him to contemplate returning to the country he had migrated to, to access their healthcare services. Similarly, during the fieldwork two participants asked questions about their children born in Germany during their asylum status and whether these children were eligible to any entitlements, as these interviewees were uncertain where to seek such information (Int_7, Int_13).

The needs and priorities of returnees upon their return vary, and mirror the diversity of their experiences, whether they are vulnerable or non-vulnerable.

We encountered cases of those in need of shelter upon their return, some without health insurance, and the majority seeking employment (the most common need). Others required psychological support and treatment. Nonetheless, in our sample, we encountered individuals who asserted that they were in a better economic position after their return, with some even claiming an improved financial situation compared to before their migration. This is especially true for voluntary returnees, who often brought savings to support their livelihood or pursue business ventures.



“We needed a shelter so we were moving between different places, by staying with my grandfather, my cousins, then renting a flat, before we got eventually the house for living, which was a couple of years ago” – Int_5



“Let me tell you my friend. No one is looking at you when you return. It is like that we do not have municipality here, none. ...I have got only short-term support of BAM 150. There are 7 of us in this house and none is working” – Int_10



“Upon our return from asylum, economically, we were more stable than before the asylum” – Int_13



“I have brought some finances which I am using now to set-up a business. We have already started with buying necessary equipment and supplies” – Int_14



“We have situations that pensioners had been staying abroad for years but they were deported from the EU and their carrying houses. They had even pensions earned abroad but they were deported as they lost their family support and care, and we had to accept them and provide relevant institutional support according their needs in BiH” – Int_17

The reintegration of vulnerable returnees into BiH society remains a complex endeavor, with many still grappling with full reintegration even years after their return. Economic integration is predominantly cited as the most challenging and conspicuous obstacle by most respondents in our sample: many respondents were not working or unemployed, and as a consequence faced difficulties in obtaining health insurance (usually linked to employment status).

Consequently, numerous returnees opt for self-employment or engage in informal labor, placing them in a precarious situation. One returnee's transition from the formal economy abroad to an informal job upon returning to Bosnia and Herzegovina exemplifies this decline: having previously worked formally for a construction company and as a driver, the returnee attempted to establish a small construction business upon his return and planned to register business formally. However, after a year of difficulties, he found the business was underperforming. Consequently, the returnee shifted to undeclared self-employment, which presented challenges in securing financial assistance. Dissatisfied with his earnings and job prospects, he sought to obtain a truck driving license to improve his skills and access better-paying opportunities. Three years later, he is still looking for the right job, and still engaged in the informal labor market in the meantime. This instance illustrates the economic vulnerability faced by a voluntary returnee who, despite not fitting conventional vulnerability assessments and not being perceived as such by the community or public institutions, confronts significant economic challenges since his return, with uncertain outcomes.

Many respondents exhibit multilayered migration histories. These journeys often started with war-related displacement, either internally or externally, followed by a return to their pre-war locales (primarily between 2002 and 2007). Subsequently, they may have pursued emigration and sought asylum after 2015. Finally, they might have experienced voluntary or involuntary repatriation to their hometowns (Int_5, Int_6, Int_7, Int_8, Int_10, Int_11, Int_12, Int_13).

For instance, one interviewee currently resides in Slovenia, where he has secured a work visa and an official job, while his family remains in Bosnia and Herzegovina. During his holiday visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina, we had the opportunity to meet him as he was also working on his house: he was once an internally displaced person during the war, subsequently returned to his pre-war place, then sought asylum in the EU, followed by voluntary repatriation after his asylum application was rejected. At present, he enjoys legal economic migrant status in the EU, with his family residing in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This illustrates the diversity and intricacy of migration experiences in Bosnia and Herzegovina, often resulting in our respondents adopting multiple migration identities.

In fact, many returnees encounter challenges reminiscent of those faced by internally displaced persons, as acknowledged by relevant laws. These challenges pertain to issues surrounding identification documents, housing, healthcare, employment, and, to a lesser extent, education. Some interviewees contend that the integration of children into educational institutions and kindergartens is facilitated and supported through collaborative efforts of local institutions, including CSWs, nursery schools, and public schools.



Generally, educational institutions at all levels report a lower demand for their services and do not face overcapacity issues when it comes to integrating new children (Int_25).

However, most interviewees disregarded psychological vulnerabilities. Respondents typically expressed reluctance to discuss this topic. Their responses to questions in this regard were generally brief and negative (e.g., "No"), indicating that they did not experience psychological problems during reintegration or did not require any psychological support upon returning. This situation may be influenced by cultural stereotypes, but our available information is insufficient to delve further into this aspect. The single instance of psychological support for a returnee came to our attention through a local CSW, who discussed a returnee experiencing psychological issues that were the primary focus of their attention. This local CSW actively participated in arranging a professional psychological assessment for this individual and subsequently facilitated access to temporary healthcare services to acquire necessary and relatively costly medications for this woman (Int_1). We observed a notable display of empathy and intentions to assist this family in need, despite the interviewee's belief that legal options for support were somewhat limited.



“No, I did not need any psychological support, you know where you are with your life, and that is it” – Int_11



“Well, I went to psychologist to get medicine for my nerves... (smile). It was difficult time psychologically and physically” – Int_6

3.3 Challenges faced by local stakeholders

Local Centers for Social Work (CSW) are pivotal sources of support for vulnerable returnees, particularly those who do not enter the formal readmission system, such as voluntary returnees. CSWs, whether municipal or cantonal (in FBiH), serve as public institutions with a primary mandate to provide social assistance and protection to individuals and families within their respective communities. They extend support in various areas and, notably, offer legal guardianship and protection for unaccompanied and separated children. While CSWs do not explicitly categorize vulnerable returnees under specific criteria, they encounter returnees with diverse vulnerabilities as part of their regular services to BiH citizens. In many instances, they offer valuable guidance and information to returnees, addressing general paperwork, employment-related queries, and navigating health regulations.

CSW respondents shared instances where they successfully handled vulnerable returnees, including cases that were relatively straightforward to manage. For instance, a few years ago, a local CSW received information from MHRR regarding the deportation of a Roma woman with special needs who had been repatriated from Germany (Int_1).

This woman had been receiving a monthly subsidy from the Federal Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. The local CSW, following the Ministry's instructions, organized her return, including medical assistance, and ensured her return home since she already had accommodation and continued to receive social support. However, there were also cases, mostly from a more distant past (Int_10, Int_11), where returnees arriving by plane did not receive specific support upon their return. In such instances, their families came to pick them up and take them back to their local municipalities.



In contrast, CSW respondents shared more complex cases, where their own creativity was challenged. For instance, a CSW employee shared the case of a vulnerable family of three with a child, including a woman who was not a BiH citizen and who faced severe psychological issues (Int_2). The primary concern of the local CSW was the child's well-being. Therefore, they allowed active observation of the family and ensured temporary access to healthcare for the mother, who was not a citizen. Although the husband was a BiH citizen, obtaining healthcare for the wife was a complicated process due to the current legal framework, as the existing law does not immediately recognize cohabitation as a formal marriage, requiring a three-year cohabitation period and a specific procedure. The local CSW found creative ways to assist the mother, helping her obtain temporary identification, temporary residence, temporary healthcare coverage (with the possibility of extension), and regular therapy sessions.

Financial constraints and limited resources constitute the main challenges faced by local stakeholders. One of the main difficulties faced by CSWs is to secure financial support from local municipalities, despite regulations allowing for additional funding to cover the extra costs associated with fieldwork. Ultimately, local CSWs received part of the funding designated for their work, although it was significantly delayed. This scenario is consistent with previous reports and interviews (World Bank, 2020; Int_1; Int_20), which highlight the issue of well-informed competent institutions and service providers facing financial limitations, inadequate personnel, and equipment for their regular activities, including those related to readmission or vulnerable returnees.

An additional challenge concerns the need to improve relevant laws, particularly when addressing complex cases. In situations involving non-citizen spouses, the law does not offer swift legal avenues to provide healthcare to the wife based on her partner's rights. In such instances, CSWs have to navigate within the existing legal framework to find solutions that meet the family's needs while being constrained by the limitations of current legislation. Furthermore, the lack of recognition as readmitted persons or BiH citizens can also pose a challenge (Int_17).

The interviews with various stakeholders also revealed that there is considerable variation in the exchange of information on voluntary and involuntary return. Public institutions often do not make initial contact with returnees upon their return, particularly in cases of voluntary return or circular migration. Many informants, primarily voluntary returnees, reported not receiving any contact or specific information regarding their potential rights.



In fact, returnees initiate contact with local institutions when faced with challenges or when they need to access public services. On the other hand, there are instances of CSWs being informed by EU counterparts of the impending arrival of vulnerable returnees who did not fit the standard readmission process and could not receive financial support as per MHRR's instructions to municipalities. For example, a local CSW received a notification from Croatia in October 2022 and promptly contacted the returnee family. The family was already under the observation of a CSW in Croatia, and this formal notification allowed the BiH CSW to prepare for their arrival. This underscores the importance and advantages of information exchange and highlights the necessity for top-level engagement to ensure systematic support. This practice was particularly observed in Western Bosnia, leading MHRR to instruct local coordinators and teams on how to incorporate such cases into the readmission system, following prescribed procedures (Int_17).

3.4 Vulnerable groups

The reintegration of returnees with special needs presents additional significant challenges.

This is exemplified by the case of a woman in cohabitation with a BiH citizen who returned together (as discussed earlier). According to the social worker who observed this family (Int_1), this woman has never fully assimilated into the family they returned to (her husband's parents' house) or their neighborhood.

Some Roma returnees believe that their reintegration is even more challenging due to their Roma identity, a concern less pronounced during their asylum-seeking period abroad.

Being discriminated against in the labor market (based on interviews' personal experience and perceptions), a substantial number of Roma work informal jobs, often collecting scrap metal and selling second-hand items at local markets, which yields some income. While some manage to secure temporary healthcare protection (e.g., an elderly woman with diabetes, Int_8), children attending school receive healthcare, and those who find employment in the formal economy gain access to public healthcare services. This challenge is also observed among non-Roma returnees, although it is less frequent.



"I do not see my life here. I have been (officially) working in this municipality, in the neighbouring municipality as well, but I aim to apply for asylum again" – Int_4



"They are saying hello. They look at you somehow with a smile... They brought to me, when we were in Germany, school staff for my daughter who was going to the first grade at that time" – Int_6

One very fragile group of returnees is made of individuals who were trafficked or returning from war-torn zones.

One interview with a social worker and a local readmission team member (Int_1, Int_20) identified victims of human trafficking and returnees from war-affected zones as individuals with particular vulnerabilities in the readmission process, especially when women and children are involved. Such vulnerable returnees were not part of the sample, but stories were shared of women who could not dare to return to the families they had left, of children arriving without any supporting documents, often compounded by lack of education and language barriers.

3.5 Gender lens in analysis of returnees

Men are as likely as women to return home; however men are much more likely to be repatriated than women. The official data on readmitted returnees in BiH for the last five years (Table 1) show that for every readmitted female, there are two readmitted males. This difference does not exist if all category of returnees to BiH are observed (Table 3)

Table 3: Socio-economic differences of returnees in BiH based on gender categorization

Variable	Description	All	Female	Male
Returnees in BiH	Returnees to BiH, in %	9.0%	9.0%	8.95%
Formal employment BiH	Having formal employment in the	27.2%	20.0%	36.0%
Formal employment R	labor market, in %	29.9%	24.8%	36.1%
Informal income BiH	Participated in undeclared	33.5%	27.4%	39.8%
Informal income R	economy, in %	34.5%	29.1%	41.0%
Entrepreneurs BiH	Being established or nascent	5.3%	3.2%	8.0%
Entrepreneurs R	entrepreneur, in %	7.1%	4.4%	10.4%
Welfare BiH	Owning savings + house + car +	46.1%	42.2%	50.9%
Welfare R	computer + insurance=100%, 0% (nothing) 100% (all of them)	49.4%	45.9%	53.7%
Tertiary education BiH	Having completed tertiary	16.5%	13.4%	20.2%
Tertiary education R	education, in %	26.1%	21.4%	31.9%

*Note: BiH - refers to the full BiH sample, R – refers to the returnees subsample.
Source: Authors' calculations using RRPP survey data, 2015.*

Overall, women in BiH tend to exhibit lower economic performance than men, this also holds when returnees are considered as a separate category. Table 3, based on 2015 survey data, reveals that women in BiH are less frequently employed than men (a finding also supported by other studies, e.g., RCC (2021)), are less commonly entrepreneurs than men, have lower levels of welfare, and a smaller percentage have completed tertiary education compared to men.

Data from 2015 survey suggest that women-returnees to BiH tend to perform better in all observed socio-economic indicators compared to average women in the country. This can possibly suggest that their socio-economic empowerment is related to their experience from abroad. In general women-returnees are more educated, participate more in the labor market, are more often entrepreneurs, and achieve better economic outcomes in terms of their welfare when compared to women- domestic population.

However, it's essential to note that this represents an average effect in this representative sample of all returnees, and that more tailored data are necessary to examine the performance of specific categories of women returnees, such as those in readmission, which has been examined through qualitative research, detailed below.

Of particular relevance for future growth and development in BiH is the finding that women returnees are more likely to be entrepreneurs compared to the rest of the female population.

While women in BiH are generally less engaged in social, political, and economic aspects of life compared to men (Somun-Krupalija, 2011) and are less frequently entrepreneurs, those who do engage in entrepreneurship tend to have stronger aspirations for business growth than males (Efendic et al., 2015). This suggests that in an environment where obstacles to female entrepreneurship may be higher, only the most ambitious women succeed in becoming entrepreneurs. Female entrepreneurship in BiH, especially among returnees, is vital and contributes to economic prosperity with solid business ambitions.

The qualitative interviews revealed that there were both vulnerable and non-vulnerable female returnees, with the majority of female returnees interviewed potentially falling into the vulnerable category. Notably, the most vulnerable individuals in our sample are Roma women, as none of them held formal employment at the time of the interview, some lacked regular health insurance, one was a single mother in search of employment and living with her parents, and all of them had low levels of education. Some expressed a strong intention to emigrate again. On the other hand, in our sample there was only one female voluntary returnee who had formal employment, higher level of formal education, economic stability, and no intention to migrate again. It is challenging to establish a clear gender pattern in the relatively small qualitative sample of women we interviewed. Nonetheless, our conclusion from qualitative research aligns with the findings from quantitative analysis, indicating that women may be considered a potentially more vulnerable category among returnees in BiH compared to male returnees. This warrants additional research and attention in future policies and strategies, particularly concerning Roma women.

3.6 Drivers of returns

Drivers of return to BiH are diverse, including friends, family, social life, concerns about raising children in different cultures, or health reasons. Overall, our impression is that nostalgia dominates as a driving force among those who return voluntarily, even for some returnees who have been deported back to their home country.



"My life is much better here, I could not live abroad anymore"- Int_4



"There is no Bosnia anywhere in the world" – Int_10



"It is nice everywhere, we are behind others 600 years, but still I love to stay here" – Int_12



"Our quality of life is much better here than in Munich, in particular because we can raise our kids more easily and with less worries" – Int_15



"There are three reasons why I returned back home. The first one is that I could not find much economic advantage working in Germany. The second one is that I was missing my country, the third one is that I had worries how to raise three kids in a foreign environment" – Int_21

Successful returnees are usually voluntary returnees with valuable skills that are in demand within the domestic labor market. Consequently, they rapidly achieve economic self-sufficiency and, in turn, experience a sense of socio-economic integration into their homeland. While Bosnia and Herzegovina is experiencing a drain of mid-level VET specialists, as previously discussed in this report and noted in various other studies (ETF, 2020), labor market shortages have already become significant in some sectors and occupations.



“I left BiH in 2009 for economic reasons as I was unemployed. I have found a first job in Croatia, then I moved to Slovenia and, finally, I ended in Germany in 2015. I had a decent job in construction company and was responsible for managing a group of workers. After having some disputes with higher management, I decided to quit my job. In a day I got a job offer from another construction company in Germany, but this time I decided to return to BiH and to start my own business with experience and knowledge collected abroad. I have never quit my job so the biggest challenge after my return was psychological pressure of being unemployed again, but I feel better now. I have recognized a huge gap in BiH for the services which I can provide (construction sector) and I am at the end of completing registration of a business. My brother and one cousin who work in Germany are also returning back soon to join me, and we will try to run this business together, including three more workers that we have found here. We cannot envisage challenges which we will face but we want to give us a chance to start a business here and, hopefully, to reach a better quality of life through managing our working time and outcomes” – Int_14

Return of some individuals to Bosnia and Herzegovina can be attributed to a combination of labor shortages and a sense of longing for their homeland.

We conducted an interview with an electrician who had migrated to Germany in 2019, securing a well-paying job with a good salary. Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Sarajevo, he established his own small business specializing in air-conditioning and heating systems. His venture proved economically successful, enabling him to purchase a house and a car, attaining a comfortable standard of living within a few years. Most importantly, he finds contentment in living in Bosnia and Herzegovina and has no intention of migrating again. Similarly, one couple had spent about a decade in Germany, both employed, with two children enrolled in a Munich primary school. In 2022, they made the decision to return to their hometown in central Bosnia, driven by nostalgia and a general sense of insecurity about raising their children abroad. At the time of the interviews, both informants held stable jobs, enjoyed an organized life, exuded positivity, and expressed no intentions of leaving again.



“You do not feel happy, you do not feel as being at home, friends and family are not around you, I would say, nostalgia. But also, I feel more secure here and my quality of life is better. Germany is not as it used to be, the cost of living is much higher, standard of living is lower, and one of us needed to work only to cover the rent and costs of utilities, while we did not feel secure rising kids there. After being abroad for years we appreciate more what we have back home. If we would work that much as in Germany, we would have much more even here” – Int_15

Perceptions within communities of returnees that come back appear generally supportive.

Indeed, more often than not, return is met with a welcoming attitude (Int_17; Int_18; Int_23; Int_24; Int_25).



"I am happy when I hear that someone is returning, and I am sad when I hear that someone is leaving. But, there is no a lot of return, and interestingly, some of them are struggling with their finances, which I have noticed when they were coming to my shop" – Int_23



"It is good when people return to stay here...But it is interesting that some of them now live 6 months here and 6 months abroad. Many of those who do not return say that they would like to come back but their children do not want, that is why they stay there, but not that much because of economic advantages. They say that the life there is not as before, even those who moved to Germany decades ago" – Int_24

However, some returnees have encountered inquisitive attitudes expressing somewhat unexpected judgments about their return.

There exists a prevailing narrative in society that departing the country is considered a sound life strategy, often echoing sentiments such as,



"If you manage to relocate to Germany, you are successful" – Int_1

Some of our informants suggest that this perspective is partially fueled by the media's persistent coverage of emigration, which frequently emphasizes the sheer numbers of those leaving, while the act of returning receives less attention (Int_18). The couple we interviewed, who returned from Germany, expressed that they have encountered what they perceive as almost negative perceptions regarding their decision. They found this sentiment in the curiosity expressed by their neighbors, with questions such as *"Why have you returned from Germany? Did something go wrong? How could someone move back from Germany under normal circumstances?"* (Int_15). While they didn't dwell on these perceptions, they were taken aback by the unexpected nature of the questions.

Nevertheless, some voluntary returnees have faced challenges in reorganizing their lives in their home country.

In 2022, a family returned to Bosnia and Herzegovina with hopes of settling in the capital city. Their main motive for coming home was the desire to provide a different cultural environment for their children.

They had already acquired a suitable residence in a central area and had the essential living infrastructure in place, seemingly well-prepared for their return. Both members of the couple had completed their master's studies abroad and held decent jobs overseas. Their children were enrolled in a local primary school, and they had some savings to start their new life back home. However, after a year, they decided to leave Bosnia and Herzegovina once more. The primary reason for this failed return was their struggle to reintegrate economically. While the husband found employment, he was dissatisfied with a position that did not align with his skills and experience. Meanwhile, his wife could not secure a job. As a result, they departed from Bosnia and Herzegovina again in August 2023. This case reflects a recurring pattern where returnees face challenges in reintegration, ultimately leading to emigration.

"I obtained a job that did not align with my expertise, and it didn't fulfill the promises made by the employer before my return to BiH, so I was unhappy with my position. My wife applied for around 70 job openings during the 14 months she spent in Sarajevo. She was shortlisted three times and had one interview but did not secure a job. These job-related challenges were the primary drivers of our decision to emigrate again..., but I would also add our disappointment with healthcare services, both public and private" – Int_21



3.7 Drivers for remigration

The diversity of returnees' journeys reveals the nuanced nature of vulnerability, challenging our perceptions on both ends of this spectrum. However, it is evident that returnees, regardless of their status, warrant institutional attention and support. Migration and return are regarded as structural aspects of many individuals' lives. While BiH has a well-organized system of readmission, where vulnerable returns are almost expected (though not in all cases), our analysis indicates that there is more to consider beyond readmission. Vulnerable returnees can be found among various groups, including those who voluntarily return for economic reasons, and they should be the focus of institutional scrutiny in the future. Strategic documents and policies should target the substantial pool of potential returnees living abroad. Many former migrants describe life back home as challenging, and they welcome institutional support. The readmission system can serve as a model for extending diverse services to all potential returnees at the local level, which often means providing better access to the information they need upon their return. This, in turn, can significantly ease their reintegration and make a notable difference to their overall experience.



The analysis also emphasizes that the primary driver of vulnerability is the economic situation and the position of returnees in the domestic labor market. This highlights the need for policymakers to prioritize and focus on this dimension. Within our sample, repeated returns only occurred among those who did not achieve economic integration. While nostalgia and family reunions often serve as reasons for returning to BiH, our interviews have revealed that repeated migration and circular migration also occur due to family reunions in the Bosnian diaspora. Many elderly returnees or potential returnees to BiH express a preference to stay in the country and spend a significant portion of their time there. However, most of them have children or grandchildren living abroad, and the desire to be close to them often overrides their persistence in staying in BiH. As a result, some decide to migrate again or move between the two locations, becoming a specific category of circular migrants.

4.1 Institutional context

Bosnia and Herzegovina has an organized institutional framework for readmission of its citizens and those from third countries in place. This framework aligns with the readmission agreements established with the European Union and its associated protocols. Notwithstanding this positive assessment of the readmission framework in BiH, there is generally absence of government responsibility and coordination for the integration of broader categories of vulnerable returnees (beyond the readmitted-returnee category) and this remains a challenge in BiH. Inadequate cooperation and information exchange between Western European countries and Bosnia and Herzegovina impede the establishment of accurate registration of broader categories of returnees beyond those readmitted. Furthermore, not all local development strategies adequately address the needs of returnees, hindering development of effective solutions. However, the readmission system excels in registering and collaborating with repatriated returnees.

Public structures have essential capacity to provide services to returnees, both at the central and local levels. Institutional structures are present, primarily for addressing readmitted returnees, with established data management and communication systems. Notwithstanding this, weaknesses can be observed in terms of institutional solutions and the operationalization of support for vulnerable returnees in general (those not part of the readmission system). These limitations are often linked to financial and human capital constraints of different public providers, in addition to previously discussed legal weaknesses. While the available data for readmission on an annual basis might suffice to facilitate return, comprehensive reintegration into society demands more resources, including new training and pre-qualifications.

Local readmission teams, equipped to support reintegration, have been established in most municipalities, or at the very least, local coordinators are present in smaller municipalities facing less frequent readmissions. Vertical and horizontal communication is well-organized and systematically updated with ongoing improvements. However, the local readmission teams face general challenges in their everyday functioning, including human capital constraints due to regular work overload, budgetary limitations for unforeseen costs, and sometimes limitations in available workspace for delivering relevant services.

Centers for social work, vital for social protection, appear to lack the capacity to provide robust support to vulnerable returnees, often tied to the current legal framework. Readmission teams that include municipal representatives, police, health sector employees, employment offices, and educational institutions seem to face fewer difficulties in delivering the services they are supposed to provide.

4.2 Extra-territorial and non-governmental bodies

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play an important role as intermediaries between local communities and higher government levels. Organizations like "Vaša prava" (*your rights*) and "Bosnia and Herzegovina Women's Initiative (BHWI)," based on agreements with the relevant ministry, actively offer legal and social assistance to readmitted individuals. These services extend to support during their reception at the airport and at the Readmission Centre "Salakovac," as well as arranging transportation to their designated residences (World Bank, 2021).

Opportunities, programs, and services geared toward enhancing the employability and employment of returnees appear prominently championed by international organizations and embassies. The embassies of Switzerland, Sweden, USA, along with the German Agency for Cooperation (GIZ), Catholic Relief Service (CRS), and others are actively involved in migration and diaspora issues, with non-governmental organizations like UNDP, Naša Perspektiva (our perspective), and BHWI also playing a role. Notably, the "Diaspora Invest" project supports investment and employment for members of the BiH diaspora. "Naša Perspektiva" manages the BH Business Center of the BiH Diaspora, acting as a one-stop shop for the business diaspora and employing web tools developed as part of the USAID Diaspora Invest project.¹⁵ Furthermore, Naša Perspektiva collaborates closely with over 30 local self-government units throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina, aligning with the common approach to support local governments in meeting the needs of returnees effectively. A substantial project that established local readmission centers for repatriated returnees received financing from the Federal Government of Switzerland, CRS, and GIZ, in addition to MHRR. This pilot project was implemented in 32 municipalities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, setting a positive precedent with broader outcomes for the readmission system managed by public institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹⁶

¹⁵<https://diasporainvest.ba/about-us/>

¹⁶This was part of the project "Integrated Support Programme for Reintegration of Returnees Under the Readmission Agreement" which was initiated by the MHRR.

The government of Brčko District has adopted a strategy of cooperation with its diaspora (2020-2024), with support from IOM, UNDP, and USAID Diaspora Invest. As a result of this project, the government's website now includes a Register of BDBIH diaspora, which is fully functional. Regular news updates are published for diaspora members, including invitations and tailored calls for both individuals and legal entities. This serves as an example of improved communication that can be beneficial not only to the current diaspora but also to potential future returnees.

5. COORDINATION AND COOPERATION

Bosnia and Herzegovina has taken substantial steps in the establishment of a coordination and cooperation system among its institutions and organizations to manage the return and integration of its citizens under readmission agreements. This system revolves around the collaboration between various governmental bodies and local communities, fostering a comprehensive approach to the process. However, the challenge persists in expanding and reinforcing participation and support for local communities, social welfare centers, and other critical service providers to enhance inclusivity and effectiveness. This is especially crucial for addressing the needs of voluntary returnees, as previously emphasized.

To exemplify institutional coordination for returnees under readmission agreements, active cooperation has been established between ministries, such as MHRR, MoS, MFA, the Ministry of Displaced Persons of FBiH, and the Ministry of Refugees and Displaced Persons of RS. These entities play an essential role in developing strategic documents, regulations, and activities related to the readmission of BiH citizens. Furthermore, cooperation extends to cantonal coordinators, Local Reintegration Teams (LRTs), and local governments, collectively assisting readmitted individuals with critical requirements, including identification, healthcare, and border crossing support (World Bank, 2021).

The coordination involves institutions at all levels overseeing integration measures, guaranteeing sustainable support throughout the readmission process.

The operational system for admitting and integrating BiH citizens returning under readmission agreements encompasses over 90 local communities in both FBiH and RS, as well as BD BiH. These communities house Local Reintegration Teams (LRTs) and Local Governments (LGs) dedicated to facilitating housing and assistance for readmitted individuals. Additionally, Local Action Plans (LAPs) related to readmission for the 2019-2022 period have been adopted by municipal and city councils. This has resulted in the reconstruction of numerous housing units across different municipalities, equipped with essential amenities for the temporary housing of readmitted individuals and socially vulnerable groups (World Bank, 2021).



The coordination is guided by various acts, including protocols for temporary care, records, and cooperation agreements. For instance, these agreements ensure the proper management and utilization of housing, with local governments seeking approval for the temporary accommodation of socially vulnerable individuals. MHRR plays a central role, hosting regional meetings and offering grant funds to municipalities involved in the readmission and integration system. At the state-level, a Coordination Committee has been established through the "Integrated Support Program for Reintegration of Returnees under the Readmission Agreement," facilitating implementation and decision-making (MHRR, 2015).

To address challenges and enhance cooperation, meetings and workshops are organized to refine coordination duties and promote communication among institutions. A key focus of relevant project activities is the integration of readmitted individuals into local communities. To enhance efficiency, an "Information System for Readmission Data Management" has been developed, connecting involved stakeholders and facilitating access to vital data (World Bank, 2021). The World Bank's support has been instrumental in developing the "Strategy for Admission and Integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina citizens returning to Bosnia and Herzegovina under the Readmission Agreement" and the "Readmission Data Management System."

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), international organizations, and donors in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region have, to some extent, bridged service delivery gaps stemming from the limited implementation of specific reintegration policies. However, there are no formal mechanisms in place to facilitate communication or coordination of service delivery among governmental and non-governmental stakeholders. As a result, the full potential of these organizations' capacities is not consistently optimized (World Bank, 2019), highlighting the importance of coordinating this support with relevant institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Int_17).

Moreover, the fragmented legal and institutional framework in BiH underscores an important role of the NGO sector as a mediator between the local community and higher levels of government. In their efforts to protect the rights of returnees, NGOs can actively engage in informing returnees about critical aspects of reintegration, encompassing healthcare, education, employment opportunities, social protection, and more. Additionally, NGOs can assist in identifying the root causes of emigration, enabling state-level institutions to address and rectify these issues (MHRR, 2015).

6. GAPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The return to Bosnia and Herzegovina encompasses a diverse range of migrant categories, encompassing both voluntary and involuntary returnees, and involving vulnerable as well as less vulnerable migrants. This report acknowledges that vulnerability among returnees is a multifaceted concept, as many migrants who may not be conventionally categorized as vulnerable are, in fact, vulnerable returnees. In this context, the report identifies readmitted individuals, particularly within the Roma population, as a group that should be considered as vulnerable. However, it is important to note that vulnerability extends beyond this category and is present among other returnees.

This study reveals that all types of returnees can encounter various challenges in their societal reintegration, which may lead to distinct forms of vulnerability, including economic, social, and psychological challenges. While the readmitted category of returnees receives institutional focus, other potential returns of the large BiH's population living abroad may become a pressing issue in the near future. Thus, all returnees warrant the attention of domestic institutions and policies.



Bosnia and Herzegovina is an economically less developed country, distant from the European Union's standard of living. The labor market in BiH with limited job opportunities presents particular challenge for returnees, some of whom end up in the informal economy to secure minimal income. This economic vulnerability, in turn, leads to psychological and integration challenges.

Institutional support to returnees is complicated by the fact that returnees are not legally a specific category in the legal framework, distinguished from other BiH citizens. It is evident that domestic institutions are navigating within the existing institutional framework to support various returnees, especially those with special needs. However, service providers acknowledge the need to enhance the institutional framework to facilitate their work, including better resource planning for vulnerable returnees. Developing or improving relevant laws with stronger budgetary commitments for vulnerable returnees should be a priority, as financial support is currently offered through grants and with limited possibilities.

Information gaps between the various institutions and returnees should be addressed and improved in the future. Evidence indicates that domestic institutions face challenges in sharing relevant information with returnees, particularly in cases of voluntary return that do not require registration with authorities. A more comprehensive system for sharing information that raises awareness among all returnees and potential returnees on the need to collaborate with relevant institutions in a timely manner would be advantageous. Additionally, the legal framework should be adapted to recognize returnees as a potentially vulnerable category, similar to the provisions for readmitted individuals.

At the local level, establishing one-stop “shops” for returnees in municipalities with a significant number of returning migrants can be a sound approach. This approach should encompass not only readmitted individuals, for which such a system already exists and has proven to be functional, but all types of voluntary and involuntary returnees who could use these offices to access initial information for their smoother integration. Given the number of municipalities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is feasible to organize such “one-stop shops” or municipal departments in the near future, in line with activities already implemented in this area, and with similar examples already identified on the ground.

Ensuring active involvement of the NGO sector is important in addressing specific issues faced by diverse returnees. This also establishes a platform for partnership between the government, the non-governmental sector, and the wider international community in addressing these issues. Positive examples of projects and programs supported by international donors can serve as a model for future initiatives, especially when institutional solutions may be slow and inadequate, primarily in terms of organizing the necessary resources. This support should occur through an organized institutional system.

Starting a business or finding employment in Bosnia and Herzegovina remains a challenge, despite evidence of returnees interested in launching new businesses or self-employment. Many returnees may not be familiar with institutional and administrative procedures, or the opportunities provided by the international community through various projects, such as the ongoing USAID Diaspora Invest program. Support for these ventures should be provided through one-stop departments or specific local-level initiatives, tapping into the economic potential returnees bring from abroad. With assistance, the risk of returnees being trapped in the informal economy may be reduced, ultimately leading to positive long-term effects on BiH's economy. Returnees often come with fresh ideas and entrepreneurial spirit that can contribute to economic growth.

Numerous reports emphasize the need for particular attention to Roma, who are identified as one of the most vulnerable returnee groups in the Western Balkans and in Bosnia and Herzegovina (World Bank 2019, 2020). Due to their economic and social status, they frequently travel to EU countries for short periods of work and then return to Bosnia and Herzegovina, or they may make repeated attempts at seeking residence/asylum in the EU. As a result, coordinated bodies at the local level are essential to address Roma issues in municipalities with a significant Roma presence. While there have been some positive policies and outcomes in the areas of housing, healthcare, education, and, to some extent, employment for Roma, the report underscores that Roma returnees remain the most vulnerable category, in particular Roma women, and addressing Roma issues should remain a priority in reintegration efforts for all returnees.

7. EMERGING GOOD PRACTICES

Several good practices were identified within the current institutional setup that have proven effective in facilitating the reintegration of vulnerable returnees.

One noteworthy practice is the readmission system, which appears to be well-organized, efficiently coordinated across various institutional levels, and continually improved with the support of international projects. Establishing functional systems is particularly challenging in the complex institutional landscape of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the integration of vulnerable individuals into society still requires significant institutional attention, particularly at the local level.

The report also highlighted a few international projects focused on supporting the readmission system in BiH and enhancing the reintegration of various vulnerable returnee groups, such as the Roma community. These collaborations have yielded visible, functional, and enduring positive outcomes, particularly when implemented through the joint efforts of public and international institutions.

The report also highlighted efforts to enhance cooperation with the Bosnian diaspora, exemplified by initiatives like Diaspora Invest USAID, aimed at improving information flow, stimulating investments, and fostering joint projects.

These good practices can be tailored for returnees, who can serve as future development agents, and should be further encouraged in the future.

Returnees in general tend to be critical of the institutional environment in BiH.

However, this report found that those returnees who took a proactive approach by establishing connections with relevant local institutions and job markets before their actual return expressed greater satisfaction with the return process and outcomes. Their integration into society also appeared to be more efficient. This highlights the importance of proactive engagement with local institutions and job markets for potential returnees, particularly those planning a voluntary return. Making an effort to establish these connections before returning can significantly ease the return process and subsequent integration into society.



Finally, qualitative research highlighted cases where local institutions have been involved and effective in rather complex cases, offering assistance to vulnerable returnees within the existing institutional rules and procedures. They have often demonstrated creativity in navigating the institutional environment to help returnees with special needs promptly and effectively. This practice among local public servants underscores the significance of training for these officials, including focusing on enabling their creativity to find solutions within the institutional framework. It is important to acknowledge the complementary role of the international and NGO community in bridging (training) gaps where they exist.



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Annexes

Annex 1: Key concepts

Box 2 : Definition of concepts used: migration and returnees

MIGRATION

Regular Migration: This refers to planned and lawful movement between countries. People who migrate regularly often have proper visas, permits, or other required documentation to enter their destination country.

Irregular Migration: Irregular migration, also known as undocumented or illegal migration, involves people moving to a destination country without the necessary legal documentation or authorization. This type of migration often poses challenges and risks for migrants and can lead to legal issues.

Circular or Seasonal Migration: Circular migration involves people moving back and forth between their home country and a destination country. Seasonal migration is a specific form of circular migration, where individuals temporarily move to another location for a particular season or job, such as agricultural workers moving for a harvest season.

Return Migration: Return migration refers to individuals moving back to their home country after living or working in another country. This can be a permanent return or a temporary one, depending on the circumstances.

RETURNEES

Voluntary Returnees: These individuals choose to return to their home country. It might be motivated by personal or economic reasons.

Involuntary Returnees: Involuntary returnees are individuals who are compelled to return to their home country due to deportation, forced removal, or other external factors. Their return is often against their will.

Self-Organized Returnees: These returnees make their own arrangements and decisions regarding their return. They may secure their transportation and logistics independently.

Assisted Returnees: Assisted returnees receive support and assistance, often from international organizations or governments, to facilitate their return. This support can include travel arrangements, reintegration assistance, and more.

Deported Returnees: Deported returnees are individuals who are forcibly returned to their home country due to violations of immigration laws in the destination country.



INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS (IDPs)

Persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border.

Box 3 : Select key dimensions of vulnerability related to migration

Vulnerability in the context of migration encompasses various dimensions that affect different groups of people. These dimensions often intersect and compound each other, leading to increased challenges and hardships for individuals and communities.

GENDER-BASED VULNERABILITY

Women migrants often face unique challenges such as gender-based violence, discrimination, and exploitation. They might have limited access to education and employment opportunities. Female migrants are also vulnerable to human trafficking and sexual exploitation.

AGE-RELATED VULNERABILITY

Young migrants may lack experience and resources, making them more susceptible to exploitation and abuse. They often face challenges in accessing education and finding stable employment.

Older migrants may struggle with health issues and social isolation. They often have specific healthcare needs and may require support with daily activities.

DISABILITY-RELATED VULNERABILITY

Migrants with disabilities face accessibility barriers and discrimination, making it challenging to access services and employment opportunities. They may need specific accommodations and support.

EDUCATION LEVEL-RELATED VULNERABILITY

Low-educated migrants often find it difficult to secure well-paying jobs and may be limited in their ability to navigate complex immigration systems or advocate for their rights.

ECONOMIC VULNERABILITY

Low-Income Migrants: Migrants from impoverished backgrounds may lack financial resources and social safety nets, making them more vulnerable to exploitation and poverty. They often seek migration as a means to escape economic hardship.



Annex 2: List of interviewees

No	Code	Municipality	Institution/individual	Informant	Gender	Age	Month of interview
1	Int_1	Jaice	CSW	Employee	F	62	August 2023
2	Int_2	Zepce	CSW	Employee	F	38	August 2023
3	Int_3	Zavidovici	CSW	Director	M	42	August 2023
4	Int_4	Zavidovici	Individual	Returnee	M	42	August 2023
5	Int_5	Zavidovici	Individual	Returnee	M	35	August 2023
6	Int_6	Zavidovici	Individual	Returnee	F	32	August 2023
7	Int_7	Zavidovici	Individual	Returnee	M	28	August 2023
8	Int_8	Zavidovici	Individual	Returnee	F	67	August 2023
9	Int_9	Zavidovici	Individual	Returnee	F	47	August 2023
10	Int_10	Srebrenica	Individual	Returnee	M	56	August 2023
11	Int_11	Srebrenica	Individual	Returnee	F	57	August 2023
12	Int_12	Srebrenica	Individual	Returnee	M	36	August 2023
13	Int_13	Srebrenica	Individual	Returnee	M	36	September 2023
14	Int_14	Jaice	Individual	Returnee	M	X	September 2023
15	Int_15	Jaice	Individual	Returnee	F	35	September 2023
16	Int_16	Jaice	Individual	Returnee	M	39	September 2023
17	Int_17	Sarajevo	MHRR	Employee	M	X	September 2023
18	Int_18	Sarajevo	MHRR	Employee	M	X	September 2023
19	Int_19	Žepče	Municipal LC	Municipal official	M	X	September 2023
20	Int_20	Zavidovici	Municipal LRT	Local team	M	42	September 2023
21	Int_21	Sarajevo	Individual	Repeated emigrant	M	43	September 2023
22	Int_22	Sarajevo	Individual	Returnee	M	X	September 2023
23	Int_23	Bratunac	Municipal LC	Internal migrant	M	48	September 2023
24	Int_24	Bratunac	Municipal LC	Non-migrant	M	45	September 2023
25	Int_25	Srebrenica	Municipal service	Public nursery school	F	41	September 2023



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