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



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

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## DISCLAIMER

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## ACRONYMS

<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>ETF</b>	European Training Foundation
<b>EURA</b>	EU Readmission Agreement
<b>IOM</b>	International Office for Migration
<b>M&amp;E</b>	Monitoring and Evaluation
<b>MoI</b>	Ministry of Interior
<b>MS</b>	Member States
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organization
<b>OMSA</b>	Organization of Montenegrins Studying Abroad
<b>EAM</b>	Employment Agency of Montenegro
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Program
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>WB</b>	Western Balkans



## 1.1 Rationale

**Migration is an important development issue for the six Western Balkans (WB) countries.** Over the past several decades, the WB have experienced sizeable emigration from the region, with (significant) impact on 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 Kosovo<sup>1</sup> 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.

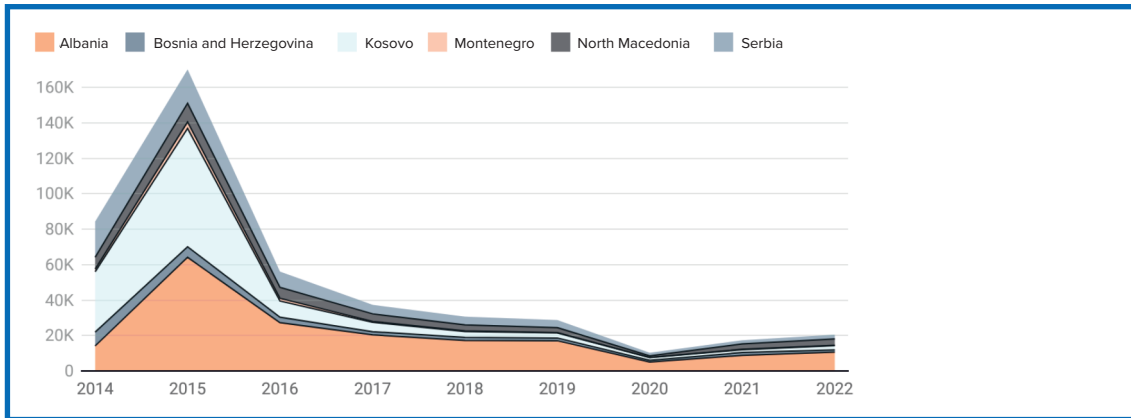
**Migration trends in the WB shifted from late 2015 onwards, with regular migration increasing and irregular emigration decreasing.** Prior to 2015, the European Union (EU) recorded an increasing number of asylum applications from the WB, which reached its peak level in 2015 since then, however, there 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.

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



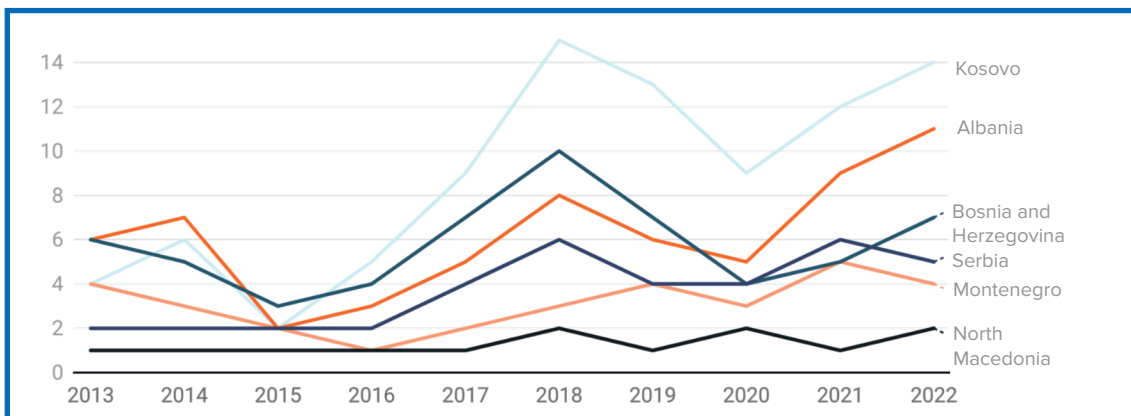
**Figure 1 : First-time asylum applications from the Western Balkans - 2014 to 2022**



Source: Eurostat. Indicator: migr\_asyappctza.

**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 Kosovo and Albania, which saw respectively a 10 and 5 percentage point increase from 2013 to 2022.

**Figure 2 : First-instance decisions on asylum applications from the Western Balkans - 2014 to 2022**



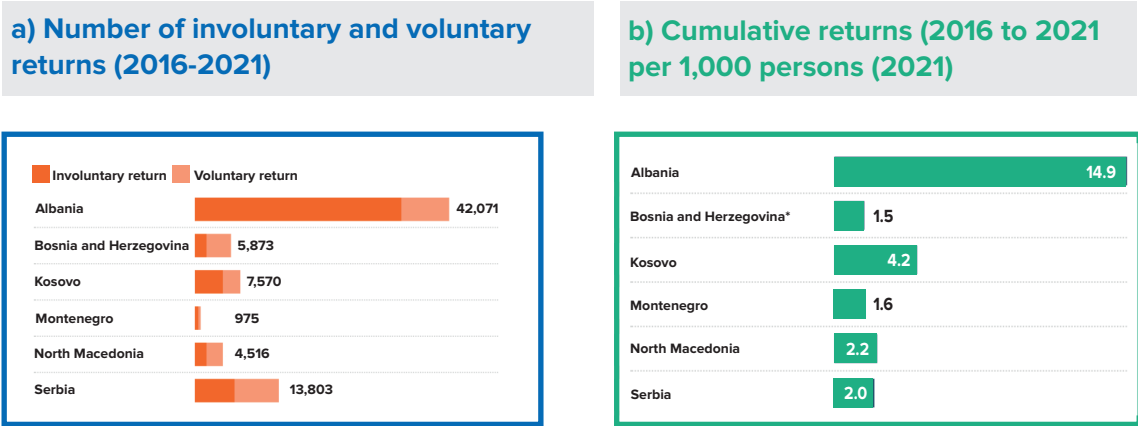
Source: Eurostat. Indicator: migr\_asydcfstz.

**There are significant push and pull factors at play that influence these trends.** Among the push factors are relatively high youth unemployment rate and general unemployment (youth unemployment exceeding 30 percent in WB countries in 2021, with Montenegro 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 labor 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. In addition, citizens of some WB countries do not need visas to enter EU countries and this is often used to travel and stay in EU countries, often also to work unregistered.

**Between 2016 and 2021, approximately 1,000 individuals returned to Montenegro**, which translates to 1.6 persons per 1,000 inhabitants, one of the lowest rates in the region (see Figure 3). The number of Montenegrin nationals ordered to leave the EU has been quite steady over the last couple of years (around 500), with the return rate at around 67 percent in 2022, and around 55 percent in 2020-2021. While these numbers may not be high, returnees face different vulnerabilities upon their return and as such the return journeys deserve attention. Understanding the profile of returning migrants, their journeys, aspirations, and interactions with various institutions in depth is fundamental to improve their reintegration in Montenegro.

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



Note: \* Latest population estimates available for Bosnia and Herzegovina are from 2012.  
 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 enduring reintegration. This approach encompasses multiple facets encompassing economic, social, and psychological integration and support.



This report has built on existing knowledge and research conducted on outmigration from and return migration to Montenegro: it used desk research, quantitative and qualitative data to shed light on returnees' journeys.

**Literature Review.** This study incorporated pertinent research findings from various sources, including the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme, the European Training Foundation, the International Organization for Migration, and other international organizations. Additionally, it drew insights from studies on labor migration, return migration, and the role of diaspora conducted by research institutes, and various ministries and agencies from Montenegro. The literature review also encompassed best practices from Montenegro.

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

- ▶ Migration data collected in collaboration the Ministry of Interior (Mol), and ministries or agencies involved with migration to and from Montenegro (this database is not available publicly and was made available in support of this research)
- ▶ Eurostat Migration and Migrant Population Database
- ▶ UN database on International Migrant Stock

**Qualitative data on returnees.** Between August and September 2023, qualitative data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with 12 returnees in Montenegro.<sup>2</sup> These in-depth interviews were instrumental in capturing the first-hand experiences and perceptions of various types of returnees. Interviews took place in 3 municipalities. Valuable information was obtained on returnees' journey from the EU back to Montenegro. In organizing the initial interviews, we enlisted the assistance of 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 Roundtables.** Between August and September 2023, qualitative data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 8 persons. These interviews convened key migration policy stakeholders, including policymakers, local representatives from municipalities, implementation agencies (employment bureaus and centers for social work) and non-governmental organizations, and international organizations.

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<sup>2</sup> Given the existing information on the types of returnees coming back to Montenegro, 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.



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. These interviews also facilitated identification of effective practices and can enable mutual peer learning within 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 provides examination of the reintegration of returnees in Montenegro.** The report provides valuable insights into the dynamics of migration, its impact on individuals and communities, and the potential of migration to contribute to Montenegro's development. Understanding motivations, experiences and challenges of returnees offers policymakers and researchers a perspective on the returnee reintegration journeys in the specific country's (Montenegro) economic, social, and political context. By examining the factors that drive return migration, the reintegration process, and the contributions returnees (can) make to Montenegro, 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 Montenegro.



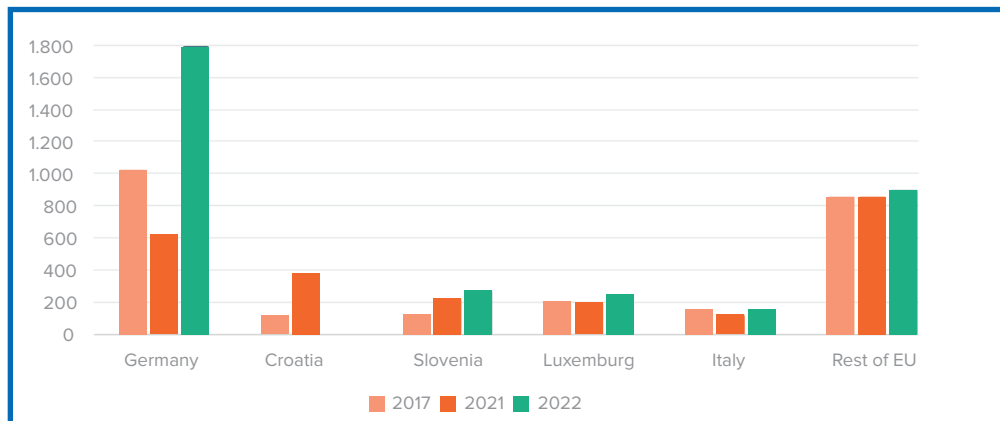
**Section 2** offers a detailed assessment of the current landscape of return and reintegration, encompassing migration trends, relevant legislation, strategies and the institutional structures that play a crucial role in the reintegration process; key organizations involved in these efforts, including 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, emphasizing the role of donors in supporting reintegration efforts. **Section 6** identifies existing gaps and provides recommendations to enhance the current system for returnees' socio-economic reintegration and service delivery. **Section 7** presents ideas, suggestions, and examples derived from fieldwork and other examples from literature, showcasing emerging good practices that can inform and enhance reintegration efforts.



## 2.1 Migration patterns

In 2022, over 3,200 residence permits were issued to Montenegrin citizens in the European Union (EU), most of which were granted by Germany (see Figure 4). Germany issued more than 50 percent of all residence permits granted in the EU to Montenegrin citizens, due to factors such as strong social safety nets, employment opportunities, and liberalized pathways to citizenship (ETF, 2022; Golubović, 2021). In 2021, relatively lower number of permits were granted, likely due to the pandemic, but as of 2022, the number of permits issued by Germany to Montenegrin citizens was twice as high as the pre-pandemic level of 2017. In addition to Germany, Croatia and Slovenia attract Montenegrins, mostly due to linguistic similarities, while Luxembourg also boasts substantial diaspora communities.

**Figure 4 :Total number of first-time permits issued to citizens of Montenegro by EU countries**



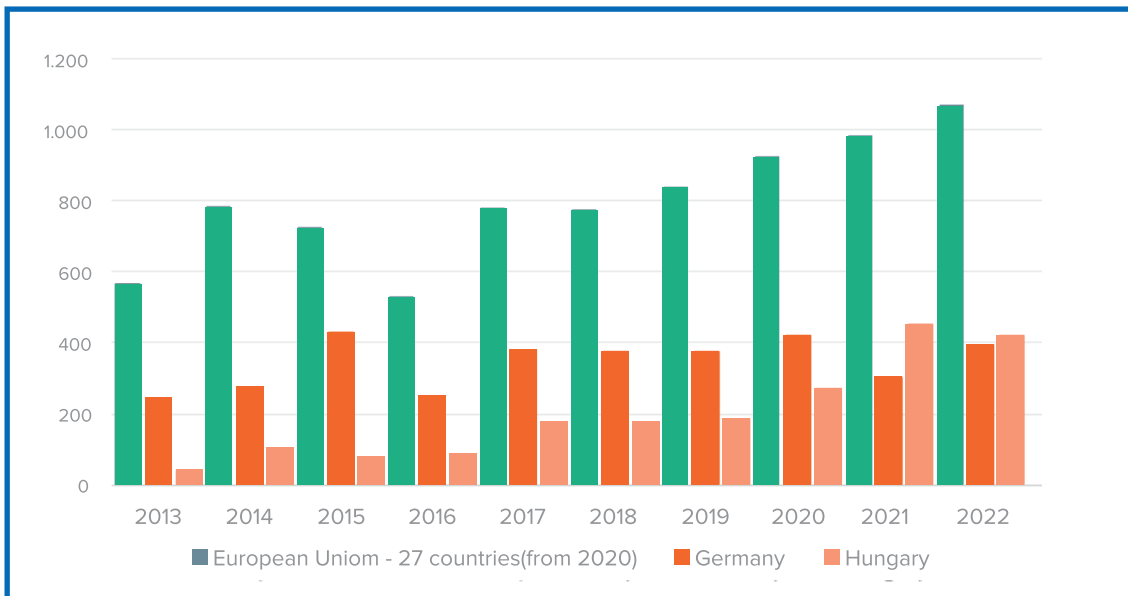
Source: Eurostat (indicator: migr\_resfirst).

**Opportunities for paid work and family reunification are primary reasons for leaving Montenegro.** In 2021, 35 percent of permits were issued for remunerated activities, same percentage refers to family reunification, 17 percent of permits were granted for “other reasons”, and 13 percent were granted for educational purposes. In the case of Germany, work opportunities and family reunification make up an even stronger share of the total permits: in 2022, 42 percent of all permits were linked to remunerated activities, and an additional 40 percent were associated with family reunification (Eurostat, indicator: migr\_resfirst).

**Significant number of permits issued are for durations of 12 months or longer, indicating a trend toward long-term emigration.** In 2022, over half of resident permits were valid for 12 months or more, suggesting a trend towards more long-term, even permanent emigration from Montenegro to EU countries. This contrasts with 26 percent of permits being issued for 6 to 12 months, and 13 percent for 3 to 5 months (Eurostat, indicator: migr\_resfirst).

**In 2022, some 1,000 Montenegrin citizens were found to be illegally present in the EU in, mostly young individuals (see Figure 5).** Hungary and Germany boast the highest numbers, with respectively 420 and 395 individuals in 2022. Most illegal migrants in Hungary are apprehended around the border (“in the external border area” or “at the border crossing point”), suggesting that many attempts illegal migrants from Montenegro are intercepted before migrants reach their intended destinations. In contrast, almost all Montenegrin citizens illegally present in Germany were identified within the inland areas, and a similar pattern is observed in Switzerland and Luxembourg, indicating that migrants resided in these countries for a certain period before they are identified. Most Montenegrins illegally present in the EU are young: in 2022, 52 percent were at most 34 years old (Eurostat, indicator: migr\_eipre).

**Figure 5 :Montenegrin nationals found to be illegally present in EU countries**



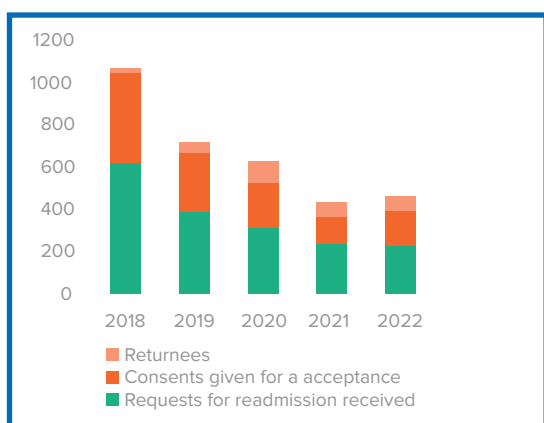
Source: Eurostat (indicator: migr\_eipre).

The total number of Montenegrin returnees has decreased over the past decade, and most recent estimates range from 105 to 181 for the period 2018-2022 (see Figure 6). According to Montenegro's Ministry of Interior (Mol), in 2022, 146 readmission requests were received from EU countries, these correspond to requests to accept 231 persons given that one EU request can relate to more than one person (this is the case with returnee-families, where one EU request is received for the family, while multiple family members are covered by the request). Of the total number EU requests received in 2022 (146), 84 requests were positively resolved by Montenegro authorities (rate of 58%), resulting in Montenegro authorities gave a positive response to accept 153 persons in 2022. On the other hand, the total number of persons who were returned in the readmission procedure during 2022 was 71. Similar trends can be observed for the period 2018-2021 (see Figure 6).

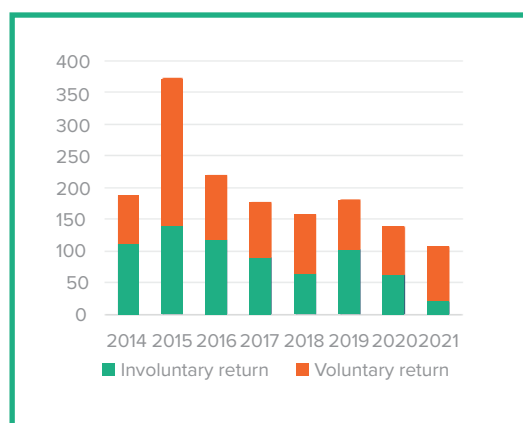
The Eurostat data (Figure 6 b.) includes both voluntary and involuntary returns and highlight similar trends as the Mol data (Figure 6a.), though there are some slight differences in the actual number of reported returns when compared to the Mol data. According to Eurostat data, in 2021 105 persons returned to Montenegro, most of them under EU Readmission Agreement (EURA). The share of voluntary returns varies from 40 percent in 2014 to 81 percent in 2021 (see right panel).

**Figure 6 : Estimated number of returnees**

**a) Readmissions, approvals and returnees**



**b) Involuntary and voluntary returns**

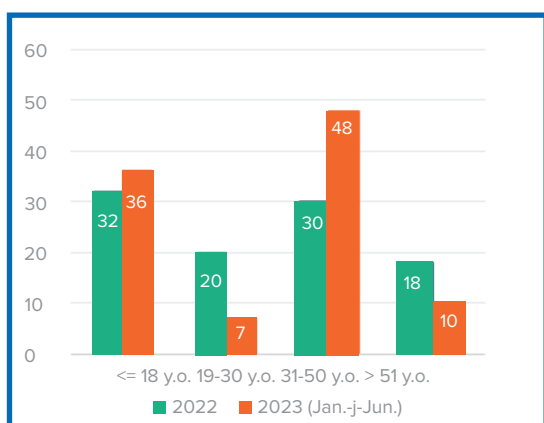


Source: left panel, Ministry of Interior; right panel, Eurostat (indicator: migr\_eirtn).

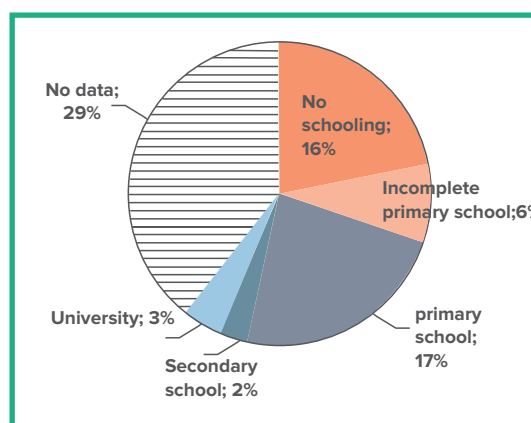
The majority of involuntary returnees are young, male, low-educated Roma, some coming back with children. According to the Mol database, men made up about two-thirds of returnees in 2022 and in the first half of 2023. Children (i.e. younger than 18-year-olds) make up about one third of returnees, and an additional half is made up of individuals between 18 and 50 years of age. The educational attainment of returnees<sup>3</sup> is very low and almost one in four returnees do not have elementary schooling completed, while only a tiny fraction (3%) have university-level education (see Figure 7). A third of returnees are registered with Mol as households, suggesting that some returnees leave with their families to seek work opportunities and also to provide their dependents with better living. Over two-thirds of all returnees identify as Roma.

**Figure 7 : Age structure and educational attainment of returnees**

**a) Age distribution**



**b) Educational attainment (>18 y.o.)**



Source: Ministry of Interior (2022, January to June 2023).

Returnees primarily return to their municipalities of origin, often to the same municipalities where they were born. One third of all returnees settled in the capital city of Podgorica including in the newly-established municipality of Zeta (38 individuals in 2022 and in the first half of 2023), followed by Nikšić with 25 returnees. Significant number of returnees are from municipalities that belong to the least developed Northern region of Montenegro, such as Bijelo Polje, Berane and Rožaje (17 in total).

Most returnees stay with close relatives. Over half of the returnees do not report information on their accommodation status, but those for whom such data is available are predominantly residing with friends and family (57 percent). 41 percent of returnees have their own house or apartment, and a negligible share of returnees live in accommodation provided through paid rent (2 percent).

<sup>3</sup> This is based on returnees that do provide information on their education, some 30% do not provide this information at all.



## 2.2 Socioeconomic situation of returnees across different time intervals

The socioeconomic situation of returnees varies based on a number of factors, including their demographic, family status, return timeframe, education and skill levels. The conditions returnees experienced during migration and benefits accessed in the source country (the EU) as well as the rights they were able to realize upon returning to Montenegro all play a role in socioeconomic situation of returnees.

**Most returnees were not satisfied with their economic and social situation before going abroad,** as confirmed by interviews. Some were also unhappy with their social standing and the treatment they received upon return, especially Roma returnees.

**Overall, majority of returnees found themselves in an unfavorable socioeconomic situation after their return,** some depleting their savings on basic needs due to limited social assistance, including sometimes on rent. Limited employment opportunities impact returnees, particularly singles and single mothers without family connections in Montenegro. Generally, greater satisfaction with reintegration upon return is among those returnees who return to host families, particularly this holds for families with young children. When referring to their time abroad, especially returnees from Germany, with its robust social protection system, consider that they have had economic security during their stay abroad, regardless of where they stayed, including in camps.

**The longer the time spent in the EU, the better socioeconomic position upon return.** Longer stays enabled some returnees to save money, providing for some financial security upon their return. Those with shorter stays lacked this opportunity. Although longer stays sometimes led to lost connections in Montenegro, this did not significantly affect returnee position due to their already unfavorable socioeconomic situation before going abroad.

**Returnees do not perceive that there are sufficient opportunities for sustainable improvement of their socio-economic status, and some feel social isolation.** While the 2022 OECD report on labor migration from WB highlights that migrants' experience gained abroad and their increased language, entrepreneurial and technical skills can benefit the WB economies, this was not the case with returnees in Montenegro, interviews support this conclusion. Due to their low levels of education and skills, returnees did not gain valuable work experience abroad, making employment upon return even more challenging. Many returnees acquired some knowledge of German language, albeit with limited prospects for use in Montenegro. Returnees' perception of inadequate employment prospects may further explain their limited participation in skill acquisition programs.



Also, returnees, due to their limited skills, education and start-up capital, do not consider starting their own businesses, reducing their chances of improved status upon their return.

**Among returnees and especially those from Roma community, the need for social adjustment is evident, with some experiencing feelings of social alienation and isolation.** Although all returnees have the right to healthcare, some realized these rights later due to their lack of awareness or legal barriers, making their initial days and months after return challenging.

## 2.3 Development impact of migration

**Montenegro experiences both internal and external migration.** Internal migration is particularly prominent, with a significant number of inhabitants relocating from the less developed Northern region to the capital city of Podgorica or cities in the Southern region. This substantial population shift between regions has repercussions on the demographic structure, labor market dynamics, and labor availability. Internal migrations further compound the existing regional disparities in terms of development and may also serve as a precursor to external migration.

**Outmigration has substantial implications on demographic structure and stock of human capital.** Montenegro has lost its younger population, especially those between the ages of 25 and 29, leaving behind an aging population (Golubović, 2021). Data on demographic trends indicate an aging population. According to MONSTAT, the birth rate has decreased from 12‰ to 11‰ over the last ten years, while the rate of natural increase was 2.5‰ in 2012 but became negative between 2020 and 2022. In addition, the share of people over 65 in the total population has increased from 13.2 percent in 2013 to 16.2 percent in 2022. The departure of highly educated personnel (brain drain) has led to skill shortages in some sectors: for example, between 2016 and 2021, over 7 percent of licensed doctors left the country. However, between 2012 and 2019, there has been a return of young individuals (15-to-24-year-olds) with higher education who studied abroad, suggesting that the country is attracting back highly educated individuals, and that the risk of brain drain can be mitigated in Montenegro (Golubović, 2021). Notwithstanding some of the positive emerging signals and trends on returns, surveys conducted among young people indicate that a significant portion of youth wants to leave Montenegro. Slightly more than a quarter of young people express a strong or very strong desire to emigrate from Montenegro, which may suggest that the risk of brain drain is real (Đukanović, 2019).

**Outmigration has impact on domestic growth through remittances.** Growth of remittances has been noticeable in recent years. In 2022, remittances amounted to € 711 million, representing a 17 percent increase compared to 2021. Remittances constituted 14 percent of GDP in 2022, up from slightly more than 11 percent before 2020 (Central Bank of Montenegro).



While remittances contribute to household income and personal consumption, their impact on the economy could be more significant if a larger portion were directed toward investments rather than consumption.

**Diaspora and returning migrants (can) have a positive effect on development by facilitating transfers of new knowledge, skills and work methods and also by facilitating access to international networks.** According to the 2022 survey conducted by the Organization of Montenegrins Studying Abroad (OMSA), Montenegro citizens living abroad believe their contribution to the development of their home country can be in sharing their knowledge, skills, and experience. This contribution is already evident through diaspora expert advice and services, support to the business community, financial support to individuals and organizations, transfers of international experience, and in actively diaspora promoting Montenegro abroad, which can lead to new international partnerships and joint projects. Specifically, diaspora and returnees (can) play a significant role in the country's development by sharing knowledge and experience acquired abroad and by facilitating access to international networks.

**Migration impacts Montenegro's labor market and economy and labor market gaps are addressed with inflow of foreign labor.** Montenegro faces labor shortages during the summer tourist season, and foreign labor helps fill these job vacancies. The majority of foreign laborers during the summer season hold secondary education and work in the tourism, hospitality, and construction sectors. Business associations' analyses and research indicate that labor shortages are one of the primary barriers to businesses in Montenegro. Immigration, as a solution to the labor shortage issue, aids Montenegrin companies in maintaining smooth operations. In Montenegro, foreign labor is regulated by the Law on Foreigners, and the Regulation on criteria and procedures determines the annual number of permits for temporary residence and foreign labor, establishing quotas for the number of work permits.

## 2.4 Policy and institutional framework

**There is no one specific law regulating the rights and obligations of returnees and institutions involved in their reintegration process.** Instead, different aspects of reintegration are defined in various laws including those in the domain of social protection and employment. Returnees (including those under readmission agreements) are not a specific legal category recognized by law and are not provided special rights in Montenegro. Granting returnees greater rights than those given to all Montenegrin citizens would be considered discriminatory.

In the last decade, various strategies were adopted with the aim of more effective reintegration of returnees and several programs<sup>4</sup> were implemented. A comprehensive strategic framework was adopted in Montenegro, encompassing Strategies for Reintegration of Persons Returned on the Basis of the Readmission Agreement for the period for 2011-2015 and 2016-2020, Strategies for integrated migration management in Montenegro for 2011-2016 and 2015-2020, and the current Strategy on Migration and Reintegration of Returnees in Montenegro for the 2021-2025 period. These strategic documents primarily focused on activities related to enhancing legislation, aligning it with the EU legislative framework, improving the institutional framework, strengthening institutional capacity, and fostering inter-institutional cooperation and coordination. Notwithstanding the positive aspects of the comprehensive strategic framework, it is important to highlight that formal independent evaluations of implemented strategies have not been conducted, leaving the actual impact of strategies and activities unclear. Also, comprehensive assessment of actual financial resources allocated to activities outlined in strategic documents has not been performed. According to the new methodology for strategic documents in Montenegro, evaluations are required for each adopted strategy and thus an evaluation is expected to be carried out after the expiration of the current 2021-2025 Strategy.

**The "Strategy on Migration and Reintegration of Returnees in Montenegro 2021–2025" (Strategy) provides the current strategic framework for policies related to migration monitoring, migration management and reintegration of returnees.** This Strategy followed the "*Strategy for Integrated Migration Management in Montenegro 2017–2020*," which primarily aimed to align Montenegrin policies with EU legislation, enhance the institutional framework, and establish a monitoring system for implementing the strategy and action plans.

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<sup>4</sup>Multiple projects were executed in partnership with the IOM to manage the migration process more effectively, including the "Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration from the Western Balkans" project, funded by the German government. IOM conducted various programs for the reintegration of voluntary returnees, encompassing assistance provision and case management. Efforts were also made to enhance the capacity of officials involved in the migration process, indirectly benefiting returnee reintegration.



Although the Strategy-2017-2020 did not specifically concentrate on reintegration of returnees, this Strategy was nonetheless instrumental in addressing reintegration issues through improved communication, coordination, and data exchange. Certain activities, such as strengthening of the institutional framework, building administrative capacities and establishing cooperation with international and domestic organizations were undertaken as part of this Strategy.

**The "Strategy on Migration and Reintegration of Returnees in Montenegro 2021-2025" is more specific in terms of addressing returnee needs, with a greater focus on activities related to reintegration of returnees.** Following its adoption, two-year Action Plans were adopted for 2021-2022 and 2023-2024 periods. According to the Report on Strategy implementation for 2021 and 2022, progress has been achieved in terms of improving the relevant legislative framework with adoption of several legal acts. According to the internal report of the World Bank, adopted Action Plans are realistic and implementable. However, given limited financial resources, the Action Plans are likely insufficiently ambitious considering the needs on the ground. Most of the measures outlined in the two-year Action Plan for 2021-2022 were implemented, compared to earlier action plans that spanned four years. The new approach, with introduction of two-year action plans, has simplified reporting and allowed for identification of new measures (World Bank, 2021). These Action Plans include more specific reintegration activities, such as providing transportation to returnees' residences, forming local teams to support their reintegration, offering assistance upon readmission, information exchange between relevant institutions and actors, local community training, and the production, printing, and distribution of materials regarding referral and reintegration assistance. The 2023-2024 Action Plan was developed based on the recommendations of relevant international reports, ensuring that planned activities align with these recommendations to improve outcomes in problematic areas. In addition, activities from the 2021-2022 Action Plan that were not implemented, as well as activities that were only partially-implemented were incorporated into the new Action Plan, with result indicators and new deadlines assigned. The 2023-2024 Action Plan emphasizes continuation of strengthening administrative capacities through training, improving the returnee database, conducting regular visits to local reintegration teams, and promoting exchanges of experiences and best practices, the Plan also focuses on enhancing policies for employment of returnees.



The "*Strategy for Reintegration of Persons Returned on the Basis of Readmission Agreements 2016–2020*" (Reintegration Strategy 2016-2020) has been pertinent to policies and activities related to the reintegration of returnees. The primary goal of this Strategy was to create the conditions necessary for a comprehensive approach to the return and reintegration process at all levels. This involved strengthening the institutional framework and establishing a monitoring system to oversee implementation of this Reintegration Strategy. Implementation of the Reintegration Strategy 2016-2020 was based on action plans that detailed primary measures, timeframes, responsible authorities, and funding sources. Efforts were also focused on signing new readmission agreements, concluding implementation protocols with EU member states, and assigning responsibilities to institutions for reintegration of returnees. Normative and institutional frameworks were also reinforced. The Report on the Implementation of the *Strategy for the Reintegration of Persons Returned Based on the Agreement on Readmission 2016-2020* highlights that most activities aimed at improving the reintegration process were implemented (Mol, 2020a). Notwithstanding positive assessment, it has been recognized that Montenegro needed to continue its efforts to address migration pressures, further develop international cooperation on readmission, and support successful reintegration of returnees.

Finally, a number of thematic strategic documents such as the "*Strategy for the Development of the Social and Child Protection System for the period from 2018 to 2022*," the "National Employment Strategy 2021-2025," the "*Strategy for the Social Inclusion of Roma and Egyptians 2021-2025*," and similar strategic documents hold significance in terms of resource utilization and complementarity with the goals and activities outlined in the "*Strategy on Migration and Reintegration of Returnees in Montenegro 2021–2025*" (World Bank, 2021).

#### **2.4.1 Institutional framework**

The aforementioned strategic documents have established a system of coordination between institutions involved in the reception and reintegration of returnees upon readmission, both at the central and local levels. Significant efforts were invested to enhance institutional and administrative capacities, ensuring appropriate assistance for returnees and facilitating their access to rights.

**In 2018, the Government of Montenegro issued a decree transferring responsibilities for providing assistance to returnees from the Ministry of Labor to the Ministry of Interior.** The Ministry of Interior is the key institution at the central-level, overseeing a range of administrative tasks, including but not limited to drafting regulations in migration, international and temporary protection of foreigners, readmission, immigration, approval of international and temporary protection of foreigners, residency of Montenegrin citizens, maintaining the residence register, processing national, regional, and international documents for addressing refugee issues, and facilitating the exercise of rights by Montenegrin citizens returning to the country based on the obligations of the readmission agreement. Within the Ministry of Interior, the Directorate for Integration of Returnees with Approved International Protection and Reintegration of Returnees Upon Readmission were established, housing the Department for Reintegration of Returnees Upon Readmission. Notably, there have been frequent changes within these organizational units over the past few years.

**In 2018, the Interdepartmental Operational Team has been formed at the central-level providing assistance to returnees, monitoring their status, and facilitating information exchange among entities involved in the reintegration process.** This team comprises representatives from various institutions, including the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Police Administration, the Human Resources Administration, Centers for Social Work, the Employment Agency of Montenegro, Red Cross units in local self-governments, IOM, the NGO sector, and representatives of returnees upon readmission. The last Interdepartmental Operational Team was formed in 2021. There is also an Interdepartmental Working Group composed of representatives of the same authorities, which monitors the implementation of the "Strategy on Migration and Reintegration of Returnees in Montenegro 2021-2025". This body is responsible for preparing reports on the implementation of Action plans for the implementation of the strategy.

**Operational teams have been established at the local level in all Montenegrin municipalities.** At the local level, local teams consisting of representatives from municipalities, centers for social work, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, local Employment Bureaus, the Police Directorate, the Red Cross of Montenegro, and NGO representatives have been established. The information of local teams has aimed to decentralize responsibilities and enhance coordination of the reintegration process. The objective was to strengthen the coordination system between institutions addressing reception and reintegration issues at both central and local levels.

Local teams are responsible for aiding returnees in exercising their rights, including temporary accommodation, identity documentation, education, healthcare, social support, vocational training, employment opportunities, free legal assistance, humanitarian aid, and psychosocial support. Local teams also monitor the status of returnees and facilitate information exchange between state bodies, local government entities, public institutions, the Red Cross, and the NGO sector. Notwithstanding these positive developments, Montenegrin municipalities still lack well-established systems for identifying returnees and proactively addressing their rights, unless returnees themselves seek assistance from municipal institutions and local Centers for Social Work (World Bank, 2021).

# 3. NEEDS AND PRIORITIES OF RETURNEES

This section presents the findings of in-depth interviews with returnees in Montenegro. The purpose of these interviews was to understand the level of awareness among returnees regarding their rights and obligations, as well as the services and opportunities provided. Additionally, the interviews aimed to assess returnees' level of satisfaction with the reintegration process, their success in reestablishing life upon return, and drivers for remigration. The interviews also sought to identify gender-specific and age-specific perspectives.

## Box 1 : Methodology

For the purpose of analysis, twelve in-depth interviews were conducted with returnees in municipalities of Nikšić and Bijelo Polje, as well as the capital city of Podgorica. Among the interviewed returnees, eight were women and four were men, while ten individuals identified as Roma. Interviews were conducted between August 25th and September 14th 2023, and consisted of in-depth semi-structured interviews.

Given the existing information on the types of returnees coming back to Montenegro, 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.

### 3.1 Needs and priorities upon return

**Majority of returnees were asylum seekers in the EU whose applications were rejected.** Returnee needs and priorities upon return mirror factors that initially compelled them to leave. Many continue to grapple with similar challenges, residing in impoverished conditions, facing unemployment and relying on social assistance. Most returnees belong to the working-age group, 15 to 64 years old.

**Returnees can be broadly categorized into two groups, Roma and individuals from impoverished Northern municipalities, both of which were already at-risk of poverty and social exclusion prior to emigrating.** The first group consists of Roma individuals, confronting extreme vulnerability due to poverty, sub-standard living conditions, and difficulty accessing the job market. The second group comprises of those who emigrated from lagging Northern municipalities in pursuit of improved living standards and greater opportunities.



One common factor among both groups of returnees is their dissatisfaction with their economic situation, both before going abroad and after returning. Many returnees also expressed dissatisfaction with their social status and the way Montenegrin society has treated them, particularly Roma returnees.

**Returnees tend to rely on friends and relatives on both ends of their migration journey, rather than existing institutions.** Returnees often count on close family to find accommodation upon their return and sometimes also rely on their relatives abroad (diaspora in Germany for instance) to continue providing financial support or remittances if they face challenges upon their return to Montenegro.



*“My aunt has welcomed me to her home after I returned to Montenegro. She was there to support me financially as well, and my family members who live in Germany.” – 26-year-old single mother*

**Temporary accommodation upon return can be difficult to secure and some returnees find themselves in precarious situations upon return.** For example, those who sold their homes before emigrating face housing challenges, with no place to call home. This situation is likely the consequence of the assumption that there is no uncertainty abroad and that everything will be fine once they leave Montenegro. Others who previously lived in subpar housing conditions return to similar environments without financial means for repairs. The Center for Social Work provides initial accommodation for up to three days, while the local self-government units typically take over after this period. However, these municipal units often lack the capacity to provide accommodation effectively to returnees.



*“When we came back, my mum accepted us in her home. I don't know what we would do if we didn't have her.” – Family with a baby*

**While some returnees took part in activities and programs organized by the Employment Agency of Montenegro, many are unaware of programs that could help them access income-generating opportunities and rely on social assistance.** Education levels among returnees are typically low and their limited qualifications make securing employment upon return challenging. On-the-job training is more common but subsequent employment, primarily within the service sector, comes with demanding hours, requiring a balancing act for those with families and single parents. On the other hand, entrepreneurship programs are often disregarded and discarded, as the prospect of obtaining grants and loans to start their own businesses is met with unpreparedness, lack of confidence, and a perception of needing more capacity, creativity, and skills than returnees believe they have. Consequently, many returnees choose to rely on social assistance.

**Foreign qualifications may not be recognized in Montenegro.** This is the case for adults, but also for children who have spent extended periods abroad and attended foreign schools. The latter may face challenges in having their foreign diplomas recognized within Montenegro's education system, or even follow classes in a different educational setting.

**Returns, particularly from vulnerable groups like Roma, often face discrimination, resulting in denied work opportunities.** Those who do secure employment may encounter issues such as job seasonality, low wages, unregistered employment, and mistreatment by employers. These challenges contribute to a strong desire for remigration whenever the opportunity arises. In light of these factors, returnees, especially Roma, maintain a pessimistic outlook on improving their situation.



*“Only the toughest jobs are reserved for us, we can only get a job in the communal sector or work for a living wage, no insurance... my son has finished high school and has no other job, that's the only thing offered to him...” – 48 Roma man*

**Sustainable reintegration of returnees, based on readmission agreements, hinges on creating conditions for decent work and a good quality of life.** Addressing the root cause of emigration, namely poor economic conditions, is crucial.

In summary, Montenegro's returnees face substantial challenges upon their return, including low education levels, employment struggles, discrimination, and limited awareness of business opportunities. Addressing economic conditions, implementing specialized projects for returnees, recognizing foreign degrees, and improving temporary accommodation support are critical for their successful reintegration into Montenegrin society and the economy.

### **3.2 Returnees' experiences in interacting with institutions and NGOs.**

**As most returnees are former asylum seekers, their interaction with Montenegro's institutions begins at the country's border,** where they receive informative brochures detailing the necessary steps and contact information for accessing essential services (as discussed in previous chapters). However, as our interviews with service providers have indicated, implementation and success of reintegration procedures raise concerns. These issues, from returnees' experiences, include incomplete understanding of available services, challenging procedures, inadequate social assistance, limited capacities of NGO sector in this area, and unreliable service providers.

**Returnees' Hesitation and Disinterest.** Returnees are often not interested in help as they see themselves staying only temporarily in Montenegro and plan to return to the country from where they were deported. To some extent, returnees themselves avoid support programs or do not report as returnees because they feel they are in violation of the law, especially Roma. Because of this reason even when using services, i.e., registering at the local employment office they do not mention they are returnees. This observation was noted from the service provider's side as well. A system that informs relevant entities and returnees on all aspects of reintegration is thus needed, beyond existing information material.

**Challenges in Understanding and Accessing Services.** Returnees exhibit hesitancy and lack of understanding when it comes to evaluating institutions and the assistance they have received. Part of this hesitancy stems from their incomplete understanding of all the services available to them. This knowledge gap can be attributed in part to incomplete or unclear information dissemination. However, another contributing factor could be their lack of interest, as many of these individuals have not returned voluntarily and still harbor hopes of remigrating in the future.

**Dissatisfaction with Procedures.** Some returnees express dissatisfaction with certain aspects of their experience. Specifically, these returnees have raised concerns about the clarity of information provided and the protracted procedures involved. Throughout the process of accessing social security assistance and asserting their rights, these returnees have encountered outdated and incomplete information, as well as unexpectedly lengthy procedures, which have posed significant challenges. Besides being quite lengthy, getting certain documents or applying for services often means making several trips, and sometimes even traveling to a different town or city. This can be tough on returnees because they usually don't have much money to spare. Given their already difficult circumstances, there is a need for more accessible services and assistance.



*"It has been quite challenging, and we didn't feel adequately supported upon our return. I regularly visit the local employment agency office, but I have yet to secure a job." – 51-year-old man with four kids*

**Financial support is low.** Returnees with families openly acknowledge that social security assistance falls short of providing a decent standard of living, which prompts them to actively seek employment. However, they describe this pursuit as exceedingly challenging due to the limited availability of opportunities. This represents a significant obstacle and a recurring push factor that initially led to their migration. Now, faced with a similar predicament, they express deep pessimism regarding their future prospects and fear being compelled to emigrate again.



*"I am definitely planning on emigrating again. If I had a job, I would never go abroad. However, given my situation, I don't have a choice. I've been discriminated against on multiple occasions when trying to find employment. That's when I reached out to NGOs, but they only offered me empty promises." – 37-year-old single mother*

**Role of Service Providers and NGOs.** Many returnees find the whole process confusing, so they tend to avoid digging into it. Instead, returnees usually just do what they're told, either by service providers or their family and friends. This confirms what has been documented before – returnees often take a passive approach and only do what is absolutely necessary to secure financial or housing assistance. Many returnees do not perceive the NGO sector as a helpful resource. Those who participated in NGO programs have often found NGOs to provide temporary solutions for the duration of the project, rather than long-term, sustainable options. This highlights the need to enhance the capacity of NGOs in addressing these issues and to establish long-term funded programs that would genuinely improve the position of returnees and facilitate their reintegration.

**Legal and Legislative Challenges.** In certain cases, returnees faced challenges due to legislative shortcomings. Specifically, the law does not permit the provision of one-time social assistance immediately before elections. This resulted in some returnees experiencing the inconvenience of having to wait until the election period was over to apply for assistance, leaving them without support during that time. Hence, an amendment to the law that would make returnees an exception due to their vulnerable position should be considered.

**Need for Psychosocial Support.** Psychosocial support, although often deemed undesirable and stigmatized by adults, should be regarded as a valuable resource for the reintegration of returnees. In many cases, adults may not recognize the need for such support. It is important to highlight that children also can benefit from psychosocial assistance due to changes and adaptation challenges. A family-centered approach is recommended, considering the needs of the entire family. Therefore, it would be beneficial to provide information and resources available for the provision of psychosocial support and counseling to facilitate the reintegration of returnees into their community.

### 3.3 Gender lens applied to returnee journeys

#### Box 2 : Gender lens applied to returnee journeys

Women returnees, particularly single mothers, bear the brunt of numerous challenges. They grapple with the dual responsibility of providing for their children while facing unemployment and relying on social assistance. Often, they return to conditions that resemble the circumstances that initially compelled them to leave. Single mothers, especially among the Roma community, find it difficult to secure stable employment due to their limited qualifications and the demanding hours associated with available jobs.

Single mother returnees carry the responsibilities of caring for their children while struggling with limited education, restricted skill sets, and economic hardships. Balancing household responsibilities with work is a constant challenge for single mothers. Roma single mothers face even greater limitations, including limited literacy and limited access to skill-building opportunities. Access to training programs and workshops is often challenging due to practical constraints, making it difficult for them to enter the labor market. They heavily rely on social assistance, which puts them at risk of poverty. For many Roma single mother returnees, the prospect of remigration is seen as the only viable solution.

Lack of recognition of foreign qualifications, both for mothers and children, further exacerbates the challenges faced by women returnees. The economic conditions, low education levels, and limited awareness of business opportunities among single mothers underscore the need for tailored programs and support.

The journey through the reintegration system for women returnees is rife with challenges. They often lack the necessary social and psychosocial support, leaving them disoriented about their rights and available assistance. Local Child Welfare Services provide economic and social assistance, but single mother returnees have concerns about the limited welfare benefits. The local Employment and Business Development Agencies offer assistance in accessing the labor market but often place these women into the general job-seeking pool, resulting in extended waiting periods. Educational institutions also play a pivotal role, but recognition issues for foreign diplomas and the need for children to repeat grades upon return create setbacks.

Therefore, the challenges faced by women returnees in Montenegro, including single mothers and Roma single mothers, underscore the need for gender-specific and tailored support programs. Economic difficulties, discrimination, limited awareness of business opportunities, passivity, bureaucratic challenges, perceptions of institutional unreliability, and family separation are all interconnected factors that drive remigration among women returnees. To prevent further emigration and promote sustainable reintegration, a comprehensive approach addressing these challenges is essential.

### 3.3.1 Single mothers

**Single mothers face a unique set of vulnerabilities as they bear the responsibilities of taking care of children.** Single mothers share many of the challenges outlined earlier, including limited education, a restricted skill set, economic hardships, and reliance on public assistance or family support. Yet, they confront an additional layer of complexity as they balance caring for their children alongside these challenges.



*“I have nowhere to live, no way to raise my family here...” – 20-year-old single mother with two kids.*

**For single mothers, the challenge of covering basic living expenses is a constant struggle.** Limited job opportunities or low-quality employment options in the market exacerbate unemployment rates. Even those who are employed emphasize the difficulty of managing the household with a single source of income. Receiving alimony regularly and on time has consistently been a challenge for single parents, forcing them to work extra hours or take on multiple jobs, which takes them away from their responsibilities at home, caring for their children and maintaining their households.



*“The alimony is very little compared to the living costs... if you have rent to pay each month, one job is not enough, you need to have two jobs!”*



*“Single parents have to take on more than one job, ultimately it will result in their absence from home and less time with the children. Those same children need attention and monitoring especially in adolescent years – we have to be aware of where they spend their time, who are their friends, have they gone to school or “around the school”, take them to music/language classes etc. And all of it also requires funds. It’s like an unsolvable puzzle...” – 20-year-old single mother with two kids.*

### 3.3.2 Roma single mothers

**Roma single mothers encounter additional challenges, making their reintegration journey even more demanding.** Many of them have limited literacy due to dropping out of school at a young age, often under family pressure. Access to skill-building opportunities is another significant challenge, limiting their transition to the labor market. While returnee-women may desire to participate in training programs and workshops to acquire new skills, most of these programs are exclusively organized in Podgorica, making it practically unfeasible for returnees to attend due to time and financial constraints.



*“I cried day and night upon my return, still to this day. It is too hard, I am alone, with no support and four kids.” – 22-year-old Roma single mother with four kids.*

Roma single mothers rely heavily on social assistance with limited prospects for employment, leaving them in constant danger of falling into poverty. These young mothers started their families as teenagers and are now returnees, struggling to adapt to the difficulties of returning with their children, without a partner, and with little family support. Their living conditions are extremely challenging, making it difficult to afford even basic necessities, and their housing conditions are notably subpar. For many of these returnees, the prospect of remigration is seen as the only viable solution. They believe they received better treatment in foreign countries, something they deem unattainable in their home country.



*“I will go back to Germany. Everything is different there... even if I found a job here, how could a family of five live on 300/400 euros.” - 22-year-old Roma single mother with four kids.*

**As a result, Roma single mother returnees harbor significant pessimism regarding their future prospects in Montenegro.** Many of them have limited or no prior work experience, and now, when circumstances require them to enter the labor market, they find themselves lacking the necessary skills. Frequent rejections and unfulfilled promises have intensified their sense of discrimination. They often witness employers hiring but are met with responses like “we don't need workers” when they seek employment. Even the support they anticipated from organizations, such as Roma NGOs, has been minimal or nonexistent.

**One of the most pressing challenges faced by Roma single mothers is the realization of their rights.** With limited or no literacy, navigating the system and comprehending their rights becomes an arduous task. Frequently, these returnees are accompanied by their parents or older family members upon their return, who assume the role of intermediaries in communicating with officials on their behalf. Many encounters underscore the difficulties in securing alimony rights, as returnees often lack the understanding and receive insufficient information about the status and likelihood of success in the process. These experiences highlight the substantial barriers and the extensive journey required to empower this group of returnees to assert their rights, become self-sufficient, and achieve sustainable reintegration.

**Another significant challenge pertains to situations where their partners remain abroad while they are deported with their children.** Accessing essential rights becomes significantly hindered due to the absence of the other parent's consent, which is typically required in various processes, including documentation acquisition, institution registration, and seeking assistance. Their inability to secure the consent of the absent parent can lead to frustrating bureaucratic roadblocks, thereby prolonging the process and, in some cases, preventing access altogether. One potential solution to address this challenge involves streamlining administrative procedures to accommodate the circumstances of returnees who are single parents temporarily separated from their partners.

### 3.4 Drivers for remigration

Returnees face a multitude of challenges upon their return, and these challenges significantly influence their motivations and perceptions regarding remigration. Several interconnected factors contribute to these drivers for remigration, primarily rooted in the difficult circumstances they encounter upon returning to their home country.

**For many returnees, their willingness to remigrate is strongly tied to persistent economic difficulties upon their return.** This is especially pertinent to those who were once asylum seekers. They continue to grapple with impoverished conditions upon their return, and unemployment remains a pervasive issue. Many rely on various forms of social assistance for their livelihoods. These economic challenges mirror the same difficulties that initially drove them to seek opportunities abroad. The lack of stable employment and limited economic prospects perpetuates their sense of vulnerability, making remigration an appealing option. Vulnerable returnees are often characterized by low or no formal education and limited skill sets, which hinder their ability to secure stable employment. These limitations often confine them to poor working conditions within the service sector, which frequently demands challenging working hours, thereby creating difficulties for those with family responsibilities, such as single parents. This educational disparity exacerbates their challenges and diminishes their confidence in finding meaningful employment in Montenegro.

**Discrimination is another significant factor driving remigration, particularly for vulnerable groups like Roma.** Returnees from Roma communities often face discrimination based on their ethnic backgrounds, resulting in denied work opportunities and unfavorable treatment by potential employers. Discriminatory practices, coupled with limited employment opportunities, further contribute to their disillusionment and motivation to seek opportunities elsewhere.



*“It is difficult for us Roma to get a job. And even when we get a job, they take advantage of us...” - 42-year old Roma man*

**A critical issue that affects many returnees is a lack of awareness regarding opportunities to obtain grants and loans for starting their own businesses.** Returnees often lack confidence in their ability to secure such funds and believe that entrepreneurship requires skills and creativity beyond their capacity. Absence of information and awareness about available programs and workshops further hinders their pursuit of economic self-sufficiency. This lack of information leaves many returnees, especially those from vulnerable groups, with a sense of passivity in their job search efforts.

Returnees often only do the minimum required to secure social assistance due to their pessimistic outlook regarding their economic prospects. This passivity is compounded by their prior experiences of discrimination and unemployment.

**Returnees express dissatisfaction with the assistance they receive from institutions and NGOs.** Returnees often perceive these organizations as offering temporary solutions rather than long-term support for sustainable reintegration. This lack of effective support services contributes to their disillusionment and desire to remigrate. In addition, returnees encounter numerous bureaucratic challenges, including an incomplete understanding of available services, protracted procedures, and difficulties in acquiring essential documentation. These challenges often necessitate multiple visits to institutions and sometimes even travel to different municipalities, which many returnees cannot afford. These bureaucratic hurdles discourage returnees and deter them from fully engaging with the reintegration process. Interviews show that returnees perceive institutions as unreliable due to inconsistent regulations, frequent institutional changes, and the influence of informal connections. Informal connections are sometimes perceived as shortcuts to obtaining assistance, undermining trust in formal procedures. This unreliability further erodes their confidence in the system and discourages them from seeking support.



*“Everything is too complicated, it is difficult to get some long-term help... the most ordinary help takes a lot of time.”*



*“I don't know who to turn to sometimes, and sometimes they treat me as if it is taken for granted that I know how everything works in the system. If you don't know someone personally, you will hardly get anything, or finish quickly.” – 51-year-old man with four kids*

**Family separation gives rise to specific challenges, particularly for returnees who are single parents separated from their partners abroad.** Returnees who are single parents and separated from their partners abroad face significant challenges in accessing essential rights and services. Many administrative processes require the consent or involvement of both parents, causing bureaucratic delays and complications. The inability to secure the absent parent's consent can lead to prolonged processes and hinder access to services.

Hence, the drivers for remigration among returnees in Montenegro are multifaceted and interconnected, encompassing economic difficulties, educational disparities, discrimination, limited awareness of economic initiatives, passivity, ineffectiveness of support services, bureaucratic challenges, perceptions of institutional unreliability, and family separation. Providing tailored support and opportunities for returnees is essential to promoting their sustainable reintegration into Montenegrin society and preventing further emigration.

### 3.5 Returnee's journey through the system

Figure 9 below outlines the typical returnee's journey within the system, emphasizing three key pillars of support and reintegration: economic, social, and psychosocial, along with actors present. It identifies areas where services and rights might be lacking from returnee's perspective and connects these issues to potential consequences in the reintegration process.

**The first point of contact with service providers occurs at border crossings or airports, where representatives from the Ministry of Interior welcome them.** Returns are announced in advance so that central-level authorities are ready to accept returnees. During this first interaction, returnees are supposed to receive social and psychosocial support, which includes provision of informational brochures outlining their rights, obligations, available services, and guidance for their next steps. Upon arrival, in a designated office at the Airport, the officers of the Department for Reintegration of Returnees conduct an interview with the returnees using pre-structured questions, all with the aim of mapping returnee needs. End of the interview, the returnee is given an Information Note, which contains additional contacts and clarification of individual rights and obligations. Individuals are given the contact phone number of the local team coordinator, depending on the municipality they are returning to. They are also provided with transportation if they do not have one. Unfortunately, this key encounter often fails to meet its intended objectives, leading to returnees reporting feelings of unwelcome reception and perceived stigmatization as law violators. Consequently, many returnees emerge from this experience feeling disoriented about their rights, assistance avenues, and burdened by the overwhelming volume of information presented, often compounded by instances of outdated and conflicting information. These challenges frequently lead to a loss of motivation and interest among returnees, deterring them from seeking further information and fully exercising their rights and accessing available services. Instead, many may rely solely on guidance from fellow community members, following their examples and experiences.





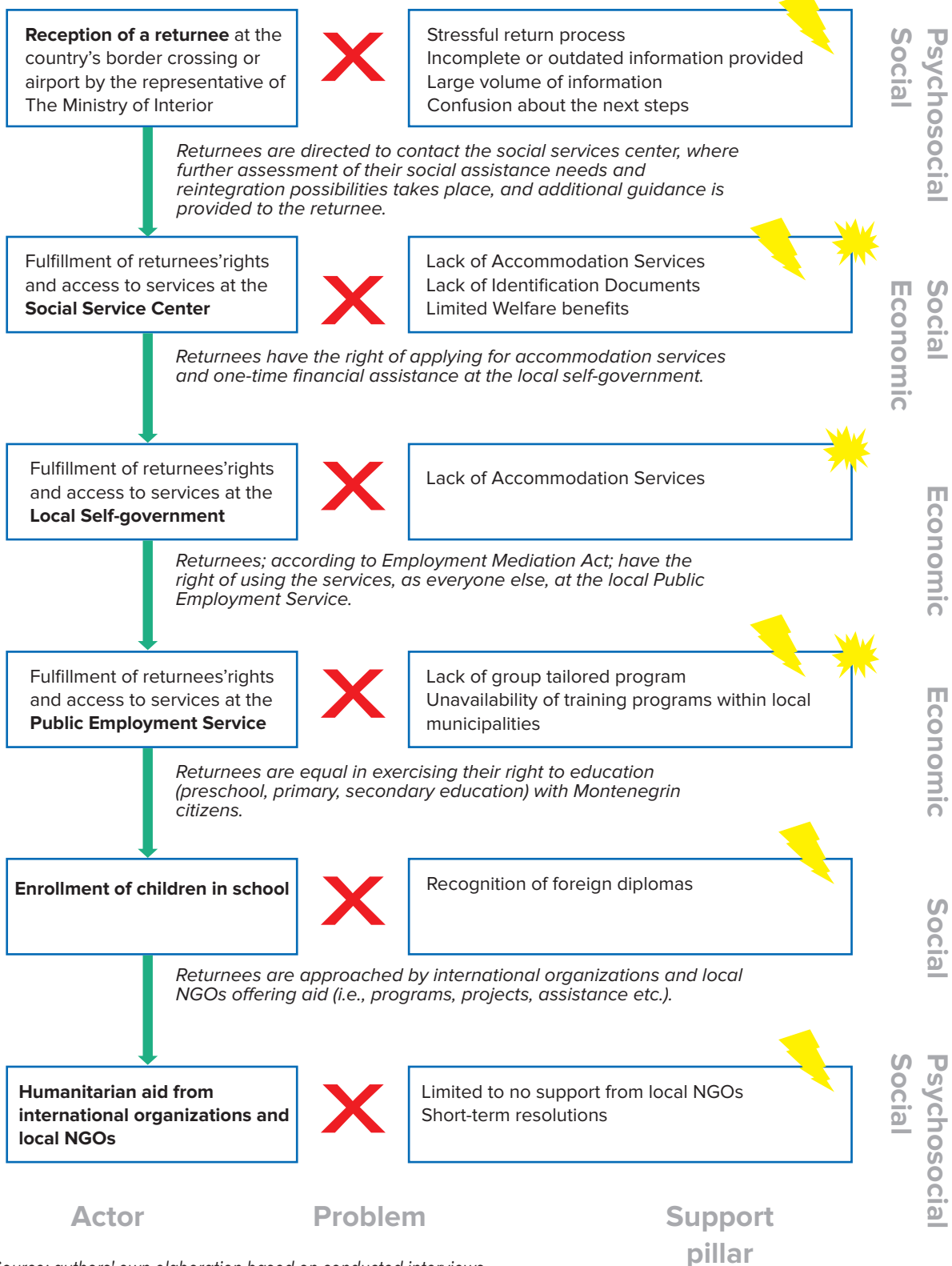
**Next step is the local Social Service Center.** This is where returnees are expected to receive economic and social assistance, and guidance on the subsequent steps to follow. However, a significant majority of returnees have voiced concerns regarding the limited welfare benefits, which they perceive as a major deficiency. Many argue that these benefits fall short of covering basic expenses, thus affecting their ability to successfully continue the reintegration process. Essentially, without adequate financial support and a sense of security, these returnees often contemplate remigration as their primary option. They strive to access all available financial support merely to sustain themselves until they can emigrate again. These challenges go beyond financial support. Individuals in need of housing encounter difficulties as the institution lacks the capacity to provide these services. Furthermore, some face obstacles in obtaining assistance due to a lack of identification documents, and there is no specific regulation or tailored assistance to address their unique situations, leaving them in an extremely vulnerable position.



**Figure 9 : Returnees' pathway through the system – summary map**

Legend

-  Returnees are in danger of not fulfilling their their rights/accessing services
-  Returnees are likely to fall into poverty



Source: authors' own elaboration based on conducted interviews.

**Two additional actors within the system are responsible for providing economic support to returnees—the local self-government (municipality) and the local Employment Agency of Montenegro (EAM) office. The municipality provides one-time financial assistance to most vulnerable returnees and offers accommodation for those in need, although it frequently faces capacity limitations in this regard. The local Employment Agency of Montenegro (EAM) office is responsible for assisting returnees in accessing labor market opportunities.**

Challenges arise due to the returnees' skill profiles and the availability of job opportunities. Notably, there is an opportunity for improvement within the EAM to enhance the effectiveness of this process, with issues of competitiveness, being placed into the general job-seeking pool and often left waiting for job opportunities for an extended period. Moreover, challenges faced by returnees extend beyond absence of tailored employment programs; challenges are present related to availability and accessibility of training programs also. In particular, most skills development initiatives are centralized in the capital, limiting their accessibility as returnees often lack the financial means to travel. These identified shortcomings often lead to the discontinuation of the economic dimensions of the reintegration process, placing returnees at risk of poverty and increasing the likelihood of future remigration.

**In the context of social assistance, the educational system plays a pivotal role in the reintegration of returnees, particularly children and young adults.** Successful reintegration of returnees into schools or universities significantly influences the overall success of their reintegration process. It is noteworthy that many returnees encounter a specific issue related to the recognition of their diplomas, which often results in setbacks when enrolling in educational institutions. Furthermore, children attending primary and high schools often find themselves required to repeat the last grade they completed in their destination country.

**International organizations (IOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are expected to provide a comprehensive range of economic, social and psychosocial support to returnees. However, feedback from returnees underscores their dissatisfaction, particularly regarding limited support provided by NGOs.** Returnees frequently emphasize that solutions proposed to them often have a short-term focus. Thus, there is a need for a more effective response from NGOs, especially in assisting those belonging to vulnerable groups. Vulnerable groups, such as Roma returnees, stand to significantly benefit from more effective programs and projects. Programs need to offer comprehensive social and psychosocial support, including advisory services, training opportunities and job placement assistance and other. The expertise of international organizations, such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in the reintegration of voluntary returnees is underutilized. The government needs to take it more into account to respond more efficiently to reintegration issues.

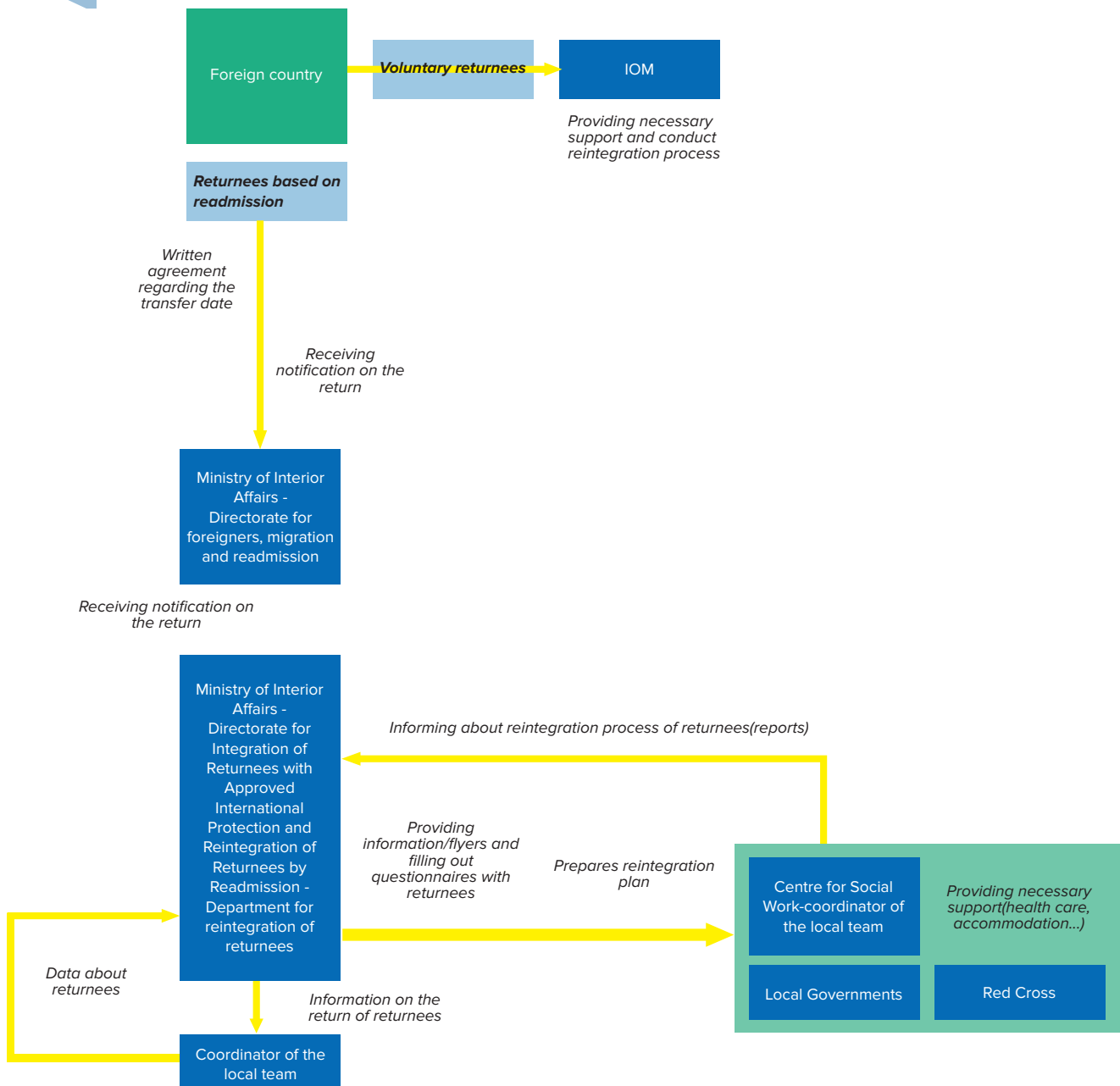


# 4. ANALYSIS

## 4.1 Stakeholder mapping

The primary institutions responsible for the reintegration of returnees in Montenegro are the Directorate for Integration of Returnees with Approved International Protection and Reintegration of Returnees by Readmission of the Ministry of Interior, the Interdepartmental Team for Integration of Returnees by Readmission, local teams, and other relevant entities within the system.

**Figure 10 : Stakeholder mapping**



Source: authors' own elaboration based on conducted interviews.

#### 4.1.1 Central and sub-central, local institutions

**All activities and services for returnees are coordinated by the Directorate for Integration of Aliens with Approved International Protection and Reintegration of Returnees upon Readmission, part of the Ministry of Interior.** Activities related to reintegration are carried out by the Department for reintegration of returnees upon readmission, within the aforementioned Directorate. The Department carries out tasks related to the provision of assistance in the reintegration of returnees into society; coordination in the realization of the legally prescribed rights of returnees (social protection, education, humanitarian aid, psychosocial aid, legal aid, financial aid, work, family reunification, etc.), providing transportation to the place of residence, providing support for inclusion in social, economic, cultural life.

**Since reintegration services encompass various areas (healthcare, education, employment, etc.), institutions such as the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, Employment Agency of Montenegro, and the Police Directorate are involved in the reintegration process at both central and local levels.** These institutions participate in the Interdepartmental Operational Team, responsible for helping Montenegrin citizens exercise their rights upon returning to Montenegro. It is concerning that the Operational Team, that should play a vital role in shaping reintegration policies has not been regularly meeting. This lack of regular exchanges can negatively affect the coordination and implementation of activities on both central and local levels, especially regarding social protection and employment opportunities for returnees.

#### 4.1.2 Extra-territorial and non-governmental bodies

**In addition to the Interdepartmental Operational Team, international institutions and NGOs are also active throughout returnees' journeys.** The Red Cross, the UNHCR, the IOM, and other NGOs are engaged in the interdepartmental working group. The purpose of this group is to monitor the implementation of the Strategy on Migration and Reintegration of Returnees in Montenegro and its Action Plan. The Red Cross and NGOs are directly involved in addressing returnees' reintegration issues. The Roma NGOs are currently not engaged in the interdepartmental working group, even though most returnees belong to Roma population. However, Roma NGOs provide support for reintegration as part of their services available to the entire Roma community and initiatives aimed at improving living conditions in impoverished Roma settlements. Notwithstanding this support, it is crucial to involve relevant Roma NGOs more in defining support for returnees.

**The International Organization for Migration (IOM) plays a role in shaping reintegration policies and processes in Montenegro.** Voluntary return is supported by IOM. Various projects have been implemented with IOM support, contributing to improved migration management and reintegration in Montenegro. IOM activities are focused on capacity building, support for implementing a sustainable three-layer model of reintegration,<sup>5</sup> enhancing cooperation among different actors, and providing direct assistance to returnees in areas such as housing and micro-business support. The Ministry of Interior, the Police Directorate, and the IOM have worked together on a draft Memorandum of Understanding regarding the voluntary return of migrants to their countries of origin and their reintegration after return. Although it was expected to be signed by the end of 2020, its signing is still pending. Once formalized, this cooperation will enhance the efficiency and quality of voluntary return and contribute to more effective migration management in Montenegro.

## 4.2 Scope of Services and Capacity Assessment

**The system of providing services to returnees in Montenegro has been formally established, but a holistic approach to reintegration remains elusive.** This conclusion is drawn from the analysis of the services provided and their availability and accessibility. The process of reintegrating returnees is fraught with challenges, both at the governmental-central level and at community levels. This analysis explores various facets of the reintegration process, including initial reception, documentation, housing, employment, education, and provision of humanitarian aid, highlighting gaps and identifying potential solutions to improve reintegration of returnees into Montenegrin society.

### 4.2.1 Initial Reception

**Upon receiving notification of a Montenegrin citizen's return, the Directorate for the Integration of Returnees with Approved International Protection and Reintegration of Returnees Upon Readmission (Directorate) organizes their reception.** The notification is sent immediately and without delay to the coordinator of the local team for the reintegration of returnees in the last place of residence of the returnee in Montenegro, which coordinator then delivers to other members. However, there are limitations in this communication process, as not all local team members are included initially. The local team is tasked with gathering vital data related to the returnee's social and property status, among other relevant information. Unfortunately, this communication process is underdeveloped, leading to missing information.

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<sup>5</sup> Report on the realization of the Action Plan for the realization of the Strategy on Migration and Reintegration of Returnees 2021-2025



► **Interview and Reintegration Plan.** Upon arrival, a structured interview is conducted with the returnee, using a predefined questionnaire. The information gathered during this interview serves as the basis for an initial reintegration plan, which aims to address returnee's specific needs, such as the need for documents, educational and work history, health status, and more. While a structured process is in place, there is room for improvement in data collection, tracing of returnees and in comprehensiveness of reintegration plans.

► **Rights and Obligations.** Returnees are informed about their rights and obligations and provided with the "Informant for Returnees," a resource containing information on how to exercise these rights and fulfill obligations. However, despite distribution of this information to all returnees, some individuals fail to report to local social work centers, resulting in difficulties for social work centers to reach them. Coordination and communication between centers for social work, local teams, and returnees need improvement.

#### 4.2.2 Documentation and Identification

**Obtaining proper documentation is a significant challenge, particularly for internally displaced persons (IDPs) who lack accompanying documents from their home countries.**

Moreover, children born abroad face difficulties in obtaining documents in cases of absence of one parent and slow identification processes. A possible solution to these returnee challenges may involve more significant involvement of local teams in assisting returnees with document acquisitions.

#### 4.2.3 Services upon Return and Challenges

**The biggest challenges in providing services to returnees arise after their return to local communities.** Effective reintegration at this stage is crucial to prevent further migration.

► **Limited Capacity.** Local teams, responsible for providing assistance in reintegration, face limitations primarily related to their capacity. These teams struggle to provide continuous social assistance and lack funded-programs and services to improve returnees' employability and employment prospects. Returnees often rely on social assistance programs and while social benefits are provided to returnees, there is room for improvement in differentiating between returnees and other beneficiaries.

- ▶ **Temporary Accommodation.** Local governments are responsible for providing temporary accommodation to returnees, however capacity constraints and poor communication result in inadequate provision of this service to returnees. Absence of a systematic approach necessitates more significant involvement from local governments and the need to address funding constraints.



*"The help is based on goodwill. We say: let's help him. No funds have been allocated in budget for this" – Representative of the local team for the reintegration of returnees*

- ▶ **Employment Challenges.** The reintegration process is complicated by employment-related challenges and low employability of returnees. Returnees often face challenges related to their low qualifications and limited employment opportunities. The Employment Agency of Montenegro (EAM) does not recognize returnees as a specific target group, and returnees (like all other job-seekers) are eligible for public works and seasonal employment programs.<sup>7</sup> Labor markets in less developed regions with very limited job opportunities exacerbate this problem for returnees in these areas. Solution may lie in creating tailored programs to increase returnees' employability and cooperation with the private sector to offer returnees opportunities for skill development.
- ▶ **Education.** Integrating returnee children into the educational system post-COVID-19 pandemic has been relatively smooth. During Covid-19 pandemic some challenges emerged, especially concerning access to online education due to a lack of technical equipment among socially vulnerable families (World Bank, 2021). Returnee- children's integration into the educational system can be enhanced through the provision of psychological counseling and teaching assistants, particularly for children born abroad.

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<sup>6</sup>The Law on Local Self-Governments mandates that municipalities, in line with their available resources, actively engage in enhancing the quality of services related to healthcare, education, social welfare, child protection, employment, and other crucial aspects that concern the well-being of their local residents. Additionally, municipalities are responsible for addressing housing requirements for individuals facing social challenges or disabilities and facilitating the efforts of humanitarian and non-governmental organizations operating in these sectors.

<sup>7</sup> Law on Mediation in Employment and Rights During Unemployment ("Official gazette of Montenegro," No. 024/19)

#### 4.2.4 Services upon Return and Challenges

**Humanitarian aid for vulnerable returnees is predominantly provided through centers for social work, NGOs, and international organizations such as the Red Cross, IOM, and CARITAS.**

Coordination and communication between these stakeholders is generally effective. Furthermore, various EU-funded and Ministry of Public Administration projects, implemented by NGOs and international institutions have provided humanitarian packages distributed to returnees through centers for social work. The availability of this type of assistance relies on external funding and lacks formal budget allocation.

**IOM offers direct assistance to beneficiaries returned under readmission agreements.** Under this initiative, assistance is provided to address housing requirements, along with support for launching micro-businesses. Furthermore, 103 individuals from EU countries returned to Montenegro as part of IOM's program of assisted voluntary return, with a significant representation of returnees from Germany, 14 of whom qualified for reintegration assistance upon their return.

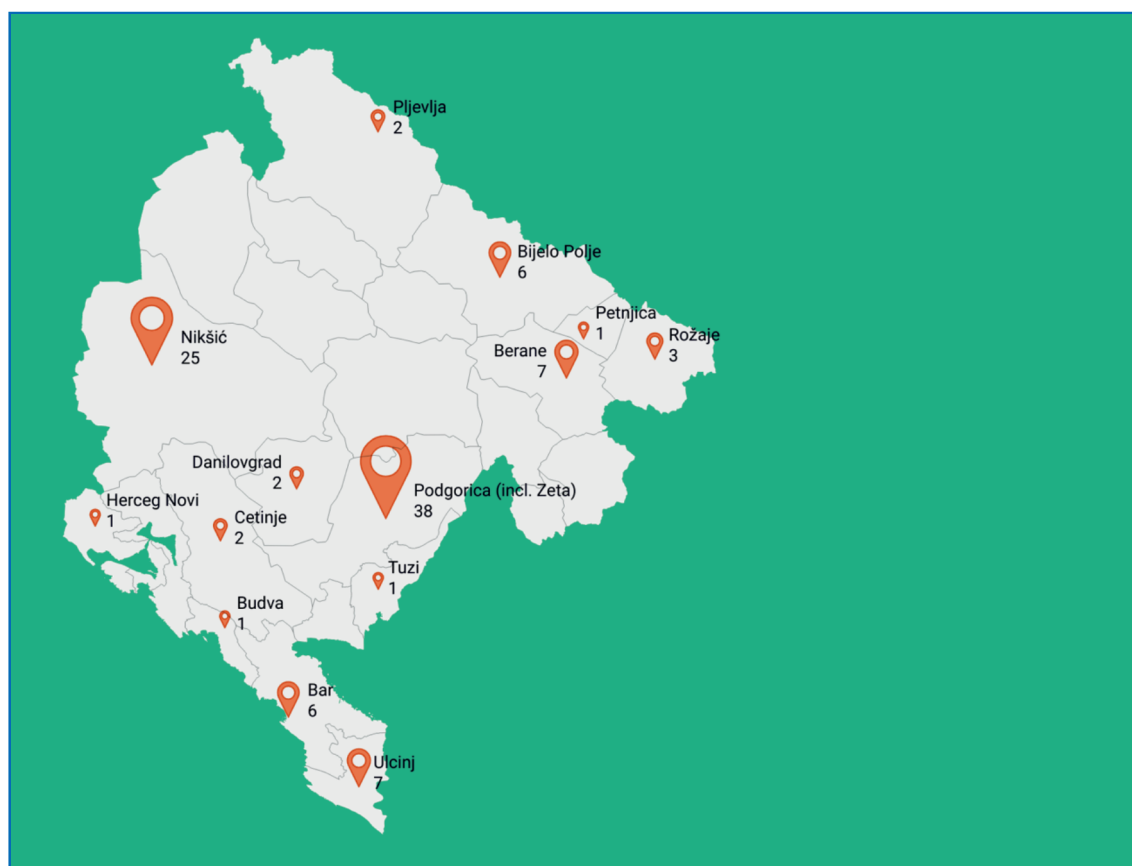
#### 4.2.5 Future direction and recommendations

- ▶ **Enhanced Communication and Data Sharing.** To overcome many of the challenges, there is a pressing need for improved communication and data sharing among relevant stakeholders. This includes better coordination between local teams, centers for social work, local governments, and the Employment Agency of Montenegro (EAM). Access to a comprehensive electronic database of returnees can significantly aid in tracking and assisting returnees more effectively.
- ▶ **Financial Support.** Local governments should be supported financially to address the housing and social assistance needs of returnees. Collaborative solutions that leverage national and local resources should be considered to provide suitable accommodation. Specialized Employment Programs. Creating specialized employment programs and interventions for returnees with a focus on skill development, training, and self-employment opportunities can help improve their employability.
- ▶ **Psychological Support.** The provision of psychological counseling services is essential to aid returnees, particularly children, in adapting to their new environment. Such support can facilitate their integration into the local community and the education system.

### 4.3 Geographic Coverage of Local Entities Providing Services to Returnees

Local teams for the reintegration of returnees have been established in all municipalities across Montenegro over the past two years. However, service provision does not always match the number of returnees, varying across municipalities. There are inconsistencies between municipalities due to differences in the teams' capabilities, personal initiatives, and coordination. The biggest burden on the number of returnees is in the most populated areas (Podgorica and Nikšić), as well as in the north of the country (especially the municipalities of Bijelo Polje, Berane and Rožaje), where most people emigrate from.

Figure 4 : Geographic distribution of returnees by municipality



Source: Authors' computations based on data from the Ministry of Interior.

In conclusion, while there is a framework for returnee reintegration in Montenegro, several challenges, such as service coordination, housing, employment opportunities, language support, and psychological counseling, need to be addressed. Better communication and collaboration between various stakeholders are essential to ensure a comprehensive and effective approach to reintegration, considering the specific needs and vulnerabilities of returnees in different regions.

Multiple institutions are responsible for holistic returnee reintegration and inclusion, encompassing social protection, health insurance, employability and labour market participation, education, and other returnee needs. For effective inclusion of returnees, coordinated action of all actors is of great importance and needs to be ensured through their full commitment to the reintegration process and effective communication and cooperation.

### 5.1 Internal cooperation

**The Strategy on Migration and Reintegration of Returnees in Montenegro for 2021-2025 period highlights the importance of communication and collaboration between the various stakeholders** involved in the process of reintegrating returnees, which includes the Ministry of Interior, Police Administration, Centres for Social Work, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, Employment Agency of Montenegro (EAM), local EAM's offices, local governments, NGOs, and others (MoI, 2023).

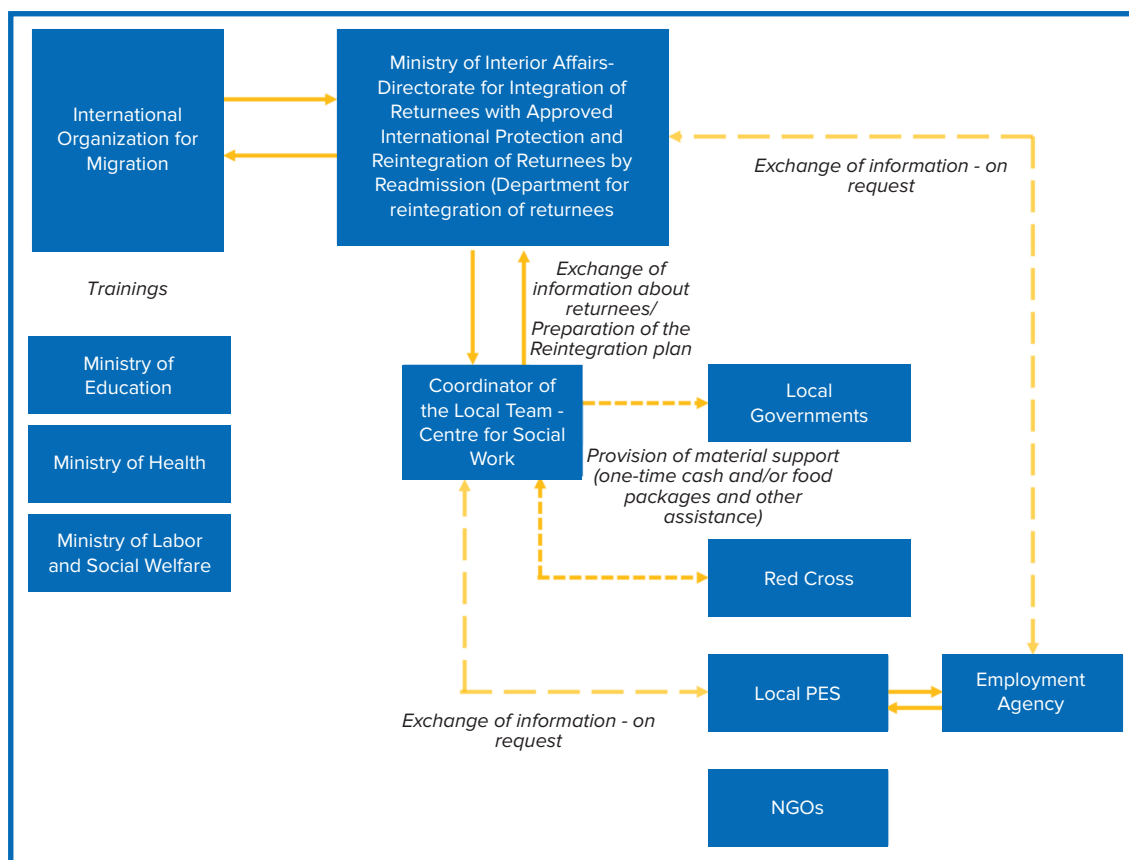
**Challenges persist at both the central and local levels**, despite initiatives to improve inter-institutional cooperation aimed at enhancing the quality of the reintegration process.

- ▶ **At the central level**, the formation of a team consisting of representatives from various institutions is envisaged to provide comprehensive services and assistance to returnees. However, in practice, this team faces significant shortcomings. Meetings within the team are infrequent, and communication between its members is limited. Lack of communication at the central-level is a substantial issue. While email communication exists between certain institutions, it is slow and often emails go unanswered.
- ▶ **At the local level**, the situation mirrors the challenges present at the central level. Local teams, which are vital for the reintegration process, exist primarily in a formal sense. In practice, these teams do not function as envisaged. Local teams are often passive, failing to take action or fully implement activities to improve the reintegration process. Coordination among team members is lacking, and there is an insufficient number of team meetings. Absence of regulatory framework further complicates matters, with specific responsibilities for coordinators, local teams, and national operational teams left undefined.

► **Local team coordinators**, often staff from the Center for Social Work, face challenges related to their already heavy workloads, multiple studies have highlighted excessive workload of social workers. Furthermore, coordinators and other team members do not receive financial compensation for their work on reintegration, which reduces their motivation and interest in the reintegration process. Structural changes within some municipalities in recent years have also had a negative impact. The World Bank (2021) noted that changes in the personal structure of operational teams have the potential to limit institutional capacities, emphasizing the importance of preserving institutional memory.

**The Center for Social Work is one of the most important players at the local level** and is responsible for providing many services to returnees, primarily related to social benefits. In some cases, the local team coordinator communicates with the Police Administration regarding documents for returnees, including documents for children born abroad. However, the coordinator often fails to share information about returnees with other team members, limiting the flow of essential information and potentially obstructing the implementation of specific programs, such as employment measures.

**Figure 5 : Inter-institutional cooperation and communication at the local level**



Source: Authors' own elaboration, based on the conducted research

**While various forms of cooperation exist, the most significant challenge is related to limited exchange of information about returnees.** The Ministry of Interior's Department for Reintegration of Returnees shares information about returnees with local team coordinators, who, in turn, provide data on reintegration activities, including quarterly, half-yearly, and annual reports, to the Ministry of Interior.

**Another aspect involves providing material support to returnees,** which typically requires coordination with the Red Cross and local self-government. The type and amount of support vary from one municipality to another, depending on financial capacities. Municipalities do not have a separate budget item dedicated to supporting returnees, and funds are usually allocated from budgets intended for social protection and assistance to vulnerable citizens.

**Cooperation and communication with local EAM's offices,** part of local teams, is marked with significant challenges. Due to inadequate communication and information sharing within local teams, the local EAM offices often lack information about whether individuals applying for unemployment registration are returnees or not. While some EAM offices conduct in-depth interviews with returnees to better understand their profiles, these interviews are often missing key elements due to the lack of information.

**Lack of effective communication between institutions at both central and local levels limits opportunities for providing comprehensive and holistic support to returnees.** Furthermore, fragmented approach to reintegration is a result of absence of normative regulations defining responsibilities and roles of various institutions involved in the reintegration process. Despite available resources and services within municipalities, there is insufficient awareness among institutions about the services offered by other institutions, hindering the referral of returnees to relevant support.

**Communication and cooperation between central and local institutions remains limited.** Local governments and local PES offices have minimal communication with ministries and communication primarily takes place between the Center for Social Work at the local level and the Ministry of Interior regarding the exchange of data on returnees.

**In conclusion, the process of reintegrating returnees in Montenegro faces significant challenges stemming from lack of effective communication and cooperation between institutions at both the central and local levels.** These challenges, coupled with the absence of regulatory frameworks and heavy workloads of involved personnel, hinder successful reintegration of returnees. Addressing these issues and establishing clear responsibilities and communication channels is essential to improving the reintegration process.



## 5.2 Cross-sectoral cooperation

**The reintegration process also necessitates intersectoral cooperation and coordination among various relevant ministries and government agencies.** Consequently, the established teams at both the national and local levels include ministries responsible for a range of issues, such as the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and other government agencies like the Employment Agency. Despite the intent and requirement for all institutions to participate and cooperate in the reintegration process, interviews indicate that inter-ministerial collaboration is not at a satisfactory level. Communication typically occurs bilaterally between ministries related to exchange of data, and this communication has been described as slow. Joint meetings or workshops to discuss policies and actions aimed at returnees are not organized.

**As a result, effective sustainable reintegration is currently lacking, as collaboration among different institutions is not at an optimal level.** Planning, mapping out and ensuring cooperation are thus of great importance to achieving successful reintegration.

## 5.3 Cross-border (between sending and receiving countries)

**Montenegro collaborates with other countries based on readmission agreements for deported returnees.** This cooperation primarily involves communication and exchange of information between Montenegro's Ministry of Interior (specifically, the directorate responsible for these matters) and the competent authority of other countries.

**In cases where Montenegro has signed readmission agreements or implementation protocols with certain countries, cooperation and communication occur directly between respective competent authorities.** Consular offices issue travel documents to returnees as needed. However, in situations where Montenegro has not signed an implementation protocol, the competent authority of the other country becomes involved in the communication and travel document issuance process. These competent authorities may communicate with the Embassy of Montenegro in that country, and the information is subsequently forwarded to Montenegro's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. On the other hand, in cases where there is no obligation to inform the consular representation of the date of departure from the country, there is a possibility that a travel document is issued multiple times for the same individual, leading to delays in the readmission procedure (MoI, 2023). At the local level, there is currently no established inter-institutional cooperation and coordination between host countries and EU countries-countries of origin of returnees.



**Montenegro has made significant progress to enhance the readmission policy by establishing new agreements and protocols.** Montenegro signed agreements with several countries. Efforts were made to work on implementation protocols, particularly with EU countries where these protocols were not yet in place. Montenegro entered into a readmission agreement with the EU and signed 15 implementing protocols on readmission with EU Member States. Furthermore, readmission agreements have been signed with a total of 12 third countries.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, Montenegro's Ministry of Interior initiated negotiations aimed at signing agreements with Pakistan, Morocco, Iraq, Iran, Algeria, and Bangladesh (Mol, 2023). Preparations have begun in 2022 for the signing of a readmission agreement between Montenegro and Ukraine (Mol, 2023). The signing of these agreements and protocols has occurred at various stages, and according to the report on the implementation of the Strategy on Migration and Reintegration of Returnees in Montenegro for 2021-2025, significant progress has been made in this domain.

#### **5.4 Cooperation with non-state partners**

**Cooperation with NGOs has been established by including specific NGOs in teams at the central and local levels.** At the central-level, in the operational team, two NGOs, namely the NGO Legal Center and NGO Juventas, are actively participating. Nevertheless, there is ample room for enhancing this cooperation, particularly in the realm of providing support to returnees. The operational team at the central-level does not convene regularly, which limits the role of these institutions. Given that majority of returnees are from Roma community, there is a pressing need to engage Roma NGOs. Interviews have revealed that these NGOs do not have established cooperation or communication channels with other institutions in the reintegration of returnees' system. Instead, these NGOs provide assistance to returnees on an ad hoc basis when approached or through specific projects. Similar to other institutions, these NGOs lack dedicated programs for returnees and offer help through their routine activities.

**Collaboration with non-state partners also encompasses engagement with the IOM, which plays a role in reintegrating voluntary returnees.** To formalize cooperation, a memorandum of understanding between IOM and the Ministry of Interior is being prepared, outlining the responsibilities and obligations of both institutions. While this memorandum has yet to be signed, according to the interviews, the defined activities are already being implemented. IOM is a member of the working group responsible for monitoring the Strategy's implementation and is actively involved in crafting action plans related to the Strategy's execution.

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<sup>8</sup><https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-10/Montenegro%20Report%202022.pdf>

**IOM delivered training aimed at enhancing the capacity of institutions involved in the reintegration of returnees, including members of local teams.** In support of implementation of the IOM reintegration model (comprising of three levels: individual, social, and structural, and three dimensions of reintegration: economic, social, and psychosocial), IOM organized training sessions for representatives of institutions involved in the reintegration process (Mol, 2023). However, due to the limited practical functioning of local teams, the value of these training programs is limited and diminishes. An additional challenge faced in recent years is frequent turnover of officials in ministries, resulting in communication difficulties and delayed implementation of activities and policies. Absence of a knowledge transfer system further exacerbates the negative impact of staff changes.

**In addition, direct IOM support has been provided to returnees upon readmission.** Collaboration between IOM and the Ministry of Interior has been established in this domain, and IOM has been providing assistance related to returnee housing needs and supporting the launch of returnee micro-businesses (Mol, 2023).

## 5.5 System interoperability

**There is no single information system or database accessible to the various institutions within the reintegration system.** The Strategy on Migration and Reintegration of Returnees in Montenegro 2021-2025 outlines an operational objective of establishing a system for electronic data exchange between authorities and enhancing professional capabilities of employees involved in the reintegration of returnees. However, as of now, this objective has not been achieved and has been deferred to 2023. Regrettably, interviews indicate that the establishment of an electronic database is not expected to be realized even within this year. As mentioned earlier, there is no information system for data exchange, nor is there an avenue for collaborative data input and reintegration plan preparation. The information systems of individual institutions are not interconnected, resulting in a severely limited information flow. According to interviewees, communication takes place via email between institutions, and communication and exchanges are not systematically defined but rather are conducted as need arises. If all relevant stakeholders were granted access to data and information pertaining to returnees, the quality of the reintegration process would see significant improvement.



**While the teams at the established at central and local levels still encounter practical challenges in their everyday work, the establishment of these mechanisms could signify a positive step toward enhancing the integration process for returnees.** These processes could serve as the initial phase of establishing a one-stop-shop, returnee-centered service delivery mechanisms. Through this approach, service delivery could become more efficient and of higher quality. A similar example of service delivery improvement was implemented by introducing a social card and linking databases of centers for social work, employment offices, real estate administration, and others. This not only enhanced data quality but also facilitated more precise targeting of individuals in need and more efficient service provision.

## 6. GAPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**While Montenegro has established a strategic and institutional framework for reintegration of returnees, there is absence of a holistic approach in its implementation.** The current approach fails to address the diverse needs of returnees across the system. Therefore, there is a pressing need for a comprehensive, collaborative, and holistic reintegration framework that encompasses various aspects of returnees' needs, including social, economic, educational, and psychological support.

**The principal problem in the reintegration process stems from weak communication and coordination mechanisms, both horizontally and vertically.** This issue leads to various problems within the reintegration process, resulting in fragmented services, disjointed actions, limited outreach, and some individuals not accessing available services. For instance, the Interdepartmental Team for Integration of Returnees by Readmission rarely convenes, and a similar situation exists with local teams.



To address this, it is essential to precisely define and regulate team members' obligations to meet at both central and local levels. Furthermore, despite the initial intention outlined in the Action Plan for the realization of the Strategy for Migration and Reintegration of Returnees 2021-2025, a centralized database accessible to all stakeholders remains absent. Establishing such a database is crucial as it would significantly improve information sharing and coordination throughout the reintegration process, enabling tailored support and effective progress tracking.

**Furthermore, the absence of normative regulation regarding the responsibilities of various stakeholders, such as coordinators, local teams, and national teams, hampers effective coordination.** Defining clear protocols and procedures for each institution (stakeholder) involved in reintegration at both central and local levels is necessary to provide a structural framework for cooperation, improve meetings and communication at all levels, and encourage effective information sharing and updates, which is essential for effective planning.

**Enhancing the coordination system at the local level could be achieved through financial incentives or compensation for local team coordinators.** This would help alleviate workload issues related to reintegration activities and tasks. Interviews with stakeholders have indicated that there is partial or incomplete engagement of local team members for reintegration of returnees, with varying levels of interinstitutional cooperation at the local level among different municipalities, leading to unequal support and services for returnees across regions. Ensuring full participation of local teams and comprehensive data collection on returnees' needs and circumstances can be achieved through better coordination, communication, regular meetings, and defining clear obligations and responsibilities.

**Cross-sectoral cooperation and communication occurs bilaterally and sporadically between ministries, agencies, CSWs, and other institutions, resulting in slow progress and lack of comprehensive policies and actions.** Standardizing this communication and cooperation through development of guidelines for inter-institutional cooperation at the local level would ensure consistent procedures for supporting returnees. In addition, promoting good communication practices and information sharing should be encouraged.

**Cooperation between national institutions and international and non-governmental organizations should be intensified to leverage their valuable expertise and resources,** particularly regarding the implementation of integrated case management system to ensure that returnees receive comprehensive, coordinated support tailored to their specific needs. In addition, a better-defined role for NGOs in the reintegration process is necessary.



**A comprehensive monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system is crucial to enhance effectiveness of reintegration of returnees.**

This system should inform relevant entities and returnees about all aspects of sustainable and efficient reintegration, providing comprehensive information materials to all stakeholders. Gathering regular feedback from returnees is essential for continuously improving support services.

**Coordination, cooperation, and communication issues contribute to several specific problems in implementation of reintegration efforts.**

Reintegration plans for returnees are often incomplete or not regularly updated, affecting their effectiveness. To address this, efficient mechanisms for filling and updating reintegration plans and monitoring the reintegration process based on evolving needs should be developed.

**Employment of returnees is a significant challenge, particularly for returnees with low education and skills who often struggle to find stable employment.**

Discrimination in the job market, lack of awareness of specific initiatives, and a pessimistic job search outlook are further obstacles. Specialized projects should be designed to encourage employment, while the Ministry of Education and Sports should provide training and skills development programs tailored to returnees' needs. Collaboration with the private sector and awareness campaigns to inform returnees about available grants, loans, and support programs for starting businesses are essential. To combat discrimination, implementing anti-discrimination measures in the job market is recommended. Furthermore, an information campaign that would use real-life examples and experience as its foundation would help dispel the myth of an ideal employment situation abroad and help returnees understand better the risks and make informed choices in relation to repeated migration.

**Lack of communication and data sharing with local employment bureaus results in some returnees not receiving available employment support.**

In addition, a system of qualification and skill verification could help returnees find employment more easily, particularly for those with work experience and skills acquired abroad.

**Analysis also highlights complete absence of psychological counseling and support for returnees, who may experience trauma or emotional challenges during their reintegration process.**

Therefore, accessible and functional psychological counseling services are needed to support returnees' mental well-being, especially for children returnees from Roma families and single mothers. Strengthening and supporting the capacities of NGOs to provide long-term, sustainable support for returnees is crucial, and these organizations should collaborate with CSOs working with vulnerable groups.

**Returnees often express dissatisfaction with the assistance they receive, viewing it as a temporary quick fix rather than long-term support.** This indicates that support services are not as effective as they could be. Bureaucratic challenges, incomplete understanding of available services, protracted procedures, and difficulties in acquiring essential documentation deter full engagement of returnees in the reintegration process. Therefore, legislative improvements should be considered to reduce the bureaucratic barriers and provide one-time social assistance to support returnees during vulnerable periods, irrespective of political changes. A tailored family-centered approach to address the unique challenges faced by single mothers and their families is also recommended.

**To ensure equitable access to humanitarian aid and one-time assistance, distribution should be better coordinated** and record-keeping should be improved and standardized for each returnee at the central-level.

**Some returnee children face difficulties in accessing education due to language barriers. To address this, the inclusion of teaching assistants and language support to facilitate seamless inclusion of returnee children** during first years of their education back home is recommended.

**While some returnees have solved their accommodation issues, data shows that these solutions are inadequate or temporary.** This is particularly relevant to some Roma returnees. Collaborating with CSWs and local authorities to provide better temporary accommodation and explore housing solutions is recommended. Legislative changes or incentives to encourage local governments to offer accommodation to returnees as part of their social services should also be considered.

**Finally, encouraging active involvement of the entire local community in the reintegration process through promotion and awareness campaigns is essential,** considering that to date an implementation of a holistic approach to reintegration has been limited due to various factors.

## 7.1 Ideas/suggestions/examples from the fieldwork

### 7.1.1 Example of the Coordination of the Reintegration Process in Nikšić

**Communication and cooperation between institutions at both local and central levels were found to be unsatisfactory.** An effective model for improving these aspects is the work of the coordinator of the local team in Nikšić, which can serve as a practical example for other institutions and teams. Despite lack of regulatory norms, the coordinator of the local team, affiliated with the Center for Social Work Nikšić, is actively involved in improving the reintegration process. The coordinator collaborates intensively with the Ministry of Interior from the moment a returnee arrives in Montenegro. Based on an initial interview and questionnaire filled by the returnee, the coordinator prepares a personalized reintegration plan for each returnee. To ensure a smoother integration, the coordinator proactively invites returnees to contact the Center for Social Work, providing additional information and guidance on their rights. Additionally, the coordinator maintains detailed individual records for each returnee, encompassing all information since their departure from a foreign country, including documentation related to the deportation process. The coordinator also directs returnees toward potential material and non-material support from local institutions and facilitates their access to material aid from local self-governments and aid packages from the local Red Cross. This effective communication with institutions is nurtured through personal relationships, which are largely initiated by the coordinator. In addition to these regular activities, the coordinator conducts field visits to assess the housing conditions of returnees and monitors their reintegration progress through continuous contact.

This hands-on approach can serve as an example for other local teams in terms of active involvement in the reintegration process, cooperation with other institutions, meticulous record-keeping, progress monitoring, and case management.

### 7.1.2 Mediator for Roma Population in Bijelo Polje

**Returnees are predominantly from Roma population, and they face significantly greater challenges related to reintegrating compared to other returnees.** These challenges include lack of education, language barriers, discrimination in employment, and limited work experience. Recognizing these hurdles, the local PES in Bijelo Polje employs a mediator for Roma population, whose role is pivotal in promoting the inclusion and activation of the Roma population.



The mediator works closely with Roma individuals, aiming to enhance their engagement in job-seeking and social inclusion. This involves informing the Roma about their rights, obligations, and available employment measures. Many Roma individuals are unaware of these services, resulting in their low interest in labor market opportunities. By understanding the specific needs, culture, and value systems of Roma returnees, the mediator effectively communicates between returnees and institutions involved in the reintegration process. The work of mediators with Roma returnees significantly enhances the reintegration support provided to Roma returnees, who typically face educational disparities, language barriers, discrimination in employment, and other challenges. Since the issue of Roma reintegration is common across all municipalities, organizing similar practices across other municipalities can help engage and integrate Roma returnees more effectively into society.

### 7.1.3 Joint Filling of Reintegration Plan

**Research conducted in the field revealed that the preparation of the Reintegration Plan involved only the Ministry of Interior and the local team coordinator (Center for Social Work).**

However, given the multi-dimensional nature of the reintegration process and the need for the involvement of all relevant institutions, it is essential to include other entities in the development of the Reintegration Plan. Therefore, enabling other institutions, such as local self-governments, the Employment Agency, health centers and other institutions is of great importance. This approach would supplement the Plan with region-specific information and enhance communication among the members of operational teams. It would not only provide returnees with information about services and available resources but also improve information sharing and, ultimately, contribute to more efficient returnee reintegration. This challenge could be addressed through a simple IT solution or by using freely available tools and programs on the internet, minimizing additional costs.

### 7.1.4 Encouraging Entrepreneurship Among Returnees

**Activating returnees in the labor market is a significant challenge, with many returnees relying on social benefits rather than actively seeking employment.** Returnees who do seek employment often face various obstacles, including discrimination, lack of education, limited professional qualifications, and work experience. To address this issue, a specialized program aimed at self-employment and entrepreneurship could be created within employment measures. This program would include training in specific trades and business management. Assistance for self-employment, such as providing workspace, machinery, and financial aid, could help those who are recognized as vulnerable, including returnees establish their businesses.



Implementing this program would require collaboration among the Employment Agency, local governments, educational institutions, and NGOs, which could provide comprehensive support. This initiative would not only reduce the burden on social benefits but also enhance the employability of returnees, contributing to local economies through their entrepreneurial ventures.

### Example from other contexts

**Recognition of education, work abilities, and skills is a pressing issue for returnees, especially when they face obstacles to finding employment due to educational disparities.** This problem is particularly pronounced among the Roma population. Many returnees have previously worked abroad but had their skills and knowledge are unrecognized in Montenegro, leading to challenges in verifying their professional qualifications. Similarly, the education of returnee children is not always recognized when they resume their education in Montenegro after studying abroad.

In response to a similar issue related to skills recognition, a project was initiated in Moldova in 2019, implemented by UNDP in collaboration with the Ministry of Education. The project focused on formalizing skills acquired abroad for recognition when seeking employment. Migrants who gained knowledge and skills during their employment abroad were enabled to attain qualifications by applying to the institution responsible for evaluating their knowledge. This institution conducted knowledge assessments and validated their qualifications. Initially launched for catering and construction professions, the program expanded in 2021 to include various professions in different sectors. This initiative facilitates returnees' entry into the labor market and helps returnees meet employment requirements.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.fao.org/3/cc3996en/cc3996en.pdf>

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- <https://www.esap.online/observatory/>

## Annexes

### Annex 1: Key concepts

#### Box 1 : 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 2 : 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

**Table 1: Interviewed Institutional Stakeholders**

	Name of the institution	Position
1	Ministry of Interior	Head of the Department for Integration of Returnees by Readmission
2	Centre for Social Work Podgorica,	Coordinator of the local team for reintegration of returnees
3	Center for Social Work Nikšić	Coordinator of the local team for reintegration of returnees
4	Employment Agency of Montenegro, Employment Bureau in Bijelo Polje	Head of the Employment Bureau Member of the local team for reintegration of returnees
5	Employment Agency of Montenegro, Employment Bureau in Bijelo Polje	Mediator in the social inclusion of Roma and Egyptians in the field of employment
6	NGO Center of Roma Initiatives, Nikšić	Coordinator
7	IOM Montenegro	Project Coordinator
8	IOM Montenegro	Protection Coordinator

**Table 2: List of interviewed returnees**

No	Code	Municipality	Roma	Gender	Age	Month of interview
1	Int_1	Bijelo Polje	No	F	26	August, 2023
2	Int_2	Bijelo Polje	No	M	51	August, 2023
3	Int_3	Bijelo Polje	Yes	M	42	August, 2023
4	Int_4	Bijelo Polje	Yes	F	35	August, 2023
5	Int_5	Bijelo Polje	Yes	F	37	August, 2023
6	Int_6	Bijelo Polje	Yes	F	32	August, 2023
7	Int_7	Nikšić	Yes	M	37	September, 2023
8	Int_8	Nikšić	Yes	F	22	September, 2023
9	Int_9	Nikšić	Yes	F	20	September, 2023
10	Int_10	Podgorica	Yes	M	48	September, 2023
11	Int_11	Podgorica	Yes	F	40	September, 2023
12	Int_12	Podgorica	Yes	F	23	September, 2023



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