REINTEGRATION GOVERNANCE IN SERBIA

INSTITUTIONALIZED REINTEGRATION SYSTEM

Over nearly two decades of implementing the EU Readmission Agreement, Serbia has developed one of the region's most comprehensive reintegration systems.

FAMILY-CENTRED REINTEGRATION

Reintegration in Serbia is not only an economic process but also a deeply social and family-based one, shaped by care responsibilities, health needs, education, and the long-term rebuilding of everyday life after return.

MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE

Through cooperation among national institutions, municipalities, civil society, and international partners, Serbia has built a multi-level reintegration system that provides needed support to diverse returnee groups across regions.

REINTEGRATE

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Reintegrate Project and Reintegration Governance

The Reintegrate Project aims to understand how reintegration is governed and how reintegration governance influences returnees' experiences. Many people do not have the right to stay in countries of migration and return to their countries of origin through different types of programs and policies; this return can be chosen, or it can be forced.

Little is known about how different countries govern the process of reintegration once people return and how return migrants experience their return and reintegration process. This study presents stakeholders' perspectives, alongside return migrants' experiences of return and reintegration in a comparative analysis across four case studies of Nepal, Nigeria, Serbia, and the Philippines. Reintegration is defined in this study as *"the process in which return migrants are supported in maintaining their cultural and social identities by the host society and the whole population acquires equal civil, social, political, human, and cultural rights"* (Kuschminder, 2017, p.43).

This definition considers various domains of reintegration and places emphasis on the duality of responsibility between both returnees and the receiving society in facilitating reintegration. A reintegration policy is defined *"as instruments intended to address the social, economic, and political needs of returnees to facilitate their reintegration into society"* (Kuschminder and Saguin, 2025). Reintegration policies are widely considered as implemented by different actors, reflecting different intentions and designs, and showing trade-offs between migrant protection and migration management objectives. Reintegration governance refers to *"the policies, practices, and institutions involved in the design, delivery, funding, implementation, and/or evaluation of processes to manage or support the returnees' transition into the household, community, and broader society of their country of origin"* (Kuschminder, 2024). Reintegration governance thus includes multiple actors and their associated policies to implement reintegration.

Introduction

In Serbia, reintegration governance emerged in response to EU external migration priorities. Since the Readmission Agreement with the European Union entered into force in 2008, Serbia has established a comprehensive, multi-level national framework for the reintegration of returnees. In February 2009, the government adopted the Strategy for the Reintegration of Returnees Based on the Readmission Agreement, followed by action plans for 2009–2010 and 2011–2012. This strategy outlines the institutional framework, measures, activities, and stakeholders required to achieve sustainable reintegration for returnees. The strategy established an inter-ministerial Council for Migration, supported by a monitoring team and coordinated by the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration. The Commissariat remains the central institution responsible for coordinating the readmission and reintegration of returnees. At the same time, local self-governments, social welfare centres, and employment services deliver direct assistance on the ground.

Research settings

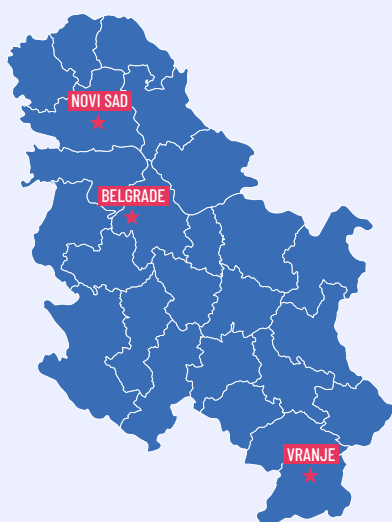|	
Belgrade	Capital of the country, attracts returnees with jobs and for settlement.
Novi Sad	Many returnees, successful implementation case.
Vranje	Many returnees, challenging implementation case

In October 2025, the Government adopted the National Programme for the Reintegration of Returnees under the Readmission Agreement 2025–2026, together with the accompanying Action Plan. The recently adopted National Programme outlines Serbia's renewed commitment to supporting citizens returning from EU countries. This strategic document aims to streamline reception procedures and provide coordinated reintegration assistance. It focuses on ensuring access to social protection, healthcare, housing, employment opportunities, education for children, and support in obtaining personal documentation, all of which are critical for returnees' long-term inclusion and stability.

Since December 2009, Serbian citizens have benefited from the visa liberalization regime with the EU, enabling them to travel within the Schengen area without a visa. In March 2012, Serbia became an official candidate for European Union membership. Serbian citizens are eligible for a 90-day visa-free stay in the Schengen area. Serbia is designated a safe country of origin by the EU, meaning there are no grounds for asylum recognition in Western European countries. This is evidenced by acceptance rates. In 2023, there were 3,415 first-instance asylum claims from Serbian nationals in Germany, of which only 10 were granted, resulting in a 99.7% rejection rate (Eurostat, 2024). Germany receives significantly more Serbian national asylum claims than any other EU member state.

Between 2006 and 2024, the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration recorded 24,452 individuals returned under the EU–Serbia Readmission Agreement, with Germany and Sweden accounting for more than 70 % of all returns. This figure counts only individuals who were physically processed by Serbia's Readmission Office at Belgrade's Nikola Tesla Airport (and its linked units); not everyone returned to the country. Many returnees are transferred at land borders or through police channels and therefore do not appear in these airport-based statistics; consequently, national totals are much higher.

Serbia's institutionalized multi-level reintegration governance framework involves national institutions, municipalities, international donors, and civil society. While the legal and bureaucratic structures are in place, reintegration policy remains heavily shaped by EU accession dynamics

and donor funding cycles. The result is a governance model that appears comprehensive and well-structured on paper but remains exclusionary and provisional in practice, with limited and short-term impact on the reintegration experiences of diverse groups of returnees. As this policy review shows, many returning with children, health problems, or limited documentation often find themselves navigating fragmented support systems. Returnees face a reintegration support system centred on labour-market inclusion that overlooks their broader social and care needs.

This policy brief provides an overview of reintegration governance in Serbia, the different forms of reintegration support, and how support forms shape returnees' reintegration experiences. This policy brief presents findings from the Reintegrate Project on the design and implementation of reintegration governance (RG) in Serbia. It examines how the state, local authorities, international donors, and civil society actors support returnees, and how reintegration frameworks align with their needs and lived realities. The brief focuses on Serbia as a case study due to its longstanding participation in the EU Readmission Agreements and its central role in the EU's external migration governance.

Data Collection and Participants Overview

This policy brief is based on mixed-methods research conducted under the Reintegrate project in Serbia, which examined how reintegration governance functions in practice and how it shapes the lived experiences of returnees. The study combined qualitative and analytical tools, including a comprehensive policy review, semi-structured and in-depth interviews, well-being grids, and local case studies. Fieldwork was conducted in two phases in 2023, resulting in 89 interviews: 51 with returnees and 38 with institutional stakeholders at the national, local, and international levels. Returnee participants were selected to reflect diverse migration trajectories and included individuals who returned: 1) under readmission agreements, 2) through assisted voluntary return programs, and 3) independently without formal support or spontaneous returnees. The sample was predominantly female, with women accounting for 74% of participants and men for 26%. The sample also included respondents from both recent (the last five years before 2023) and earlier return cohorts (2012–2018).

Interviews were conducted in three localities: Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Vranje, chosen to reflect varying levels of program implementation. Stakeholder interviews included representatives from the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, the National Employment Centre, Migration Service Centre, the Ministry of Labour, the National Employment Service, the Centres for Social Work, international organizations (e.g., GIZ, IOM, UNDP), and Roma-focused civil society actors. Interview questions focused on policy development, coordination, and implementation, as well as access to reintegration support, funding mechanisms, and institutional challenges. For returnees, participatory well-being grids were used to examine changes in livelihoods, emotional well-being, and access to rights since their return. The analysis combined critical discourse analysis with thematic coding in NVivo, triangulating across policy documents, interviews, and local practices to identify implementation gaps and structural constraints, particularly for families, women, and Roma returnees.

Among the participants, 74% were female, and 26% were male. The oldest respondent was 66, and the youngest was 18. The respondents younger than 25 were part of family migration and remained in Germany or Sweden as minors, spending extended periods there before returning to Serbia. In the sample, 95% of cases are family migration. We consider a family migration when an interviewed returnee is accompanied by a partner, with or without children, and by kinship-based relatives such as siblings, parents, or parents-in-law, during migration and return.

In the study, returnee families in Serbia have an average of 3 children, with a range of 1 to 7 per household. Among the respondents, 76% have a primary or incomplete primary school education. That is eight grades of school in Serbia. Thirteen percent of returnees have a secondary school education, 6% have a high school education or incomplete high school education, and 4% have no formal education.

All returnees who initially migrated from Serbia are either citizens of Serbia or hold official Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) status in Serbia. Ethnically, most respondents were Roma (94%), with only a small group of Serbs (6%). This finding also aligns with the Commissariat's statistics, which indicate that the majority of returnees are Roma. According to the KIRS Readmission Office (2024), the number of readmitted returnees for 2023 and 2024 is 2023 – 691 (489 Roma and 120 Serbs); 2024 – 556 (446 Roma and 71 Serbs).

Reintegration Policies in Serbia

Earlier assessments of reintegration policies in Serbia underscore commendable practices in reintegration governance (Cvejić, 2022; Obradović & Ilić, 2022). These

TABLE 1 | Returnees by Modality of Return

Return Modality	Description	Respondents (in %)
Readmission	Returnees under the EU Readmission Agreement are eligible for formal reintegration support	25
AVRR/AVR	Returnees who returned through Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programs, such as those run by GIZ, IOM, and Caritas in Germany	53
Spontaneous	Spontaneous returnees, whose return was not formally arranged or enforced by EU authorities	22

include implementing local action plans (LAPs), public calls, and projects to stimulate registration. An innovative housing approach that empowers beneficiaries and fosters collaboration between municipal authorities and the Roma community is also recognized. The positive contributions of local service providers and the presence of monitoring mechanisms further contribute to effective reintegration governance. At the same time, a recognized obstacle to the sustainable reintegration of returnees is their failure to register upon return. Persistent issues in housing and employment, as well as unfavourable socio-economic conditions, are significant factors driving migrants toward remigration. Among many implemented policies, in this section, we discuss the key policies that were identified and analysed:

- **Strategy for the Reintegration of Returnees under the Readmission Agreement (2009):** Sets the national framework for reintegration. The reintegration policy is implemented through Local Action Plans (LAPs), adopted in 156 municipalities more than a decade ago; however, implementation across the country varies significantly. Currently, the newly adopted National Programme for the Reintegration of Returnees under the Readmission Agreement (2025–2026), along with its accompanying Action Plan, is in focus. Developed by a Special Working Group coordinated by the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, and including representatives from key ministries, the National Employment Service, and Roma minority bodies, the program regulates the reception and reintegration of citizens returned from EU countries. It outlines strategic measures to improve access to social protection and healthcare, housing assistance, employment and education support, and address documentation challenges, with the aim of ensuring a more efficient and inclusive reintegration process.

- **The DIMAK Program (German Information Centre on Migration, Training, and Career):** Was launched in November 2016 in response to the emerging migration crisis and aimed to provide interested parties with information on legal issues in an accessible, unambiguous manner. DIMAK is a component of the global program *"Centres for Migrations and Development (ZME)"* implemented by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH. DIMAK offers counselling and information services (individual or group), as well as referrals to appropriate social services and active labour market measures, and all other services and information relevant to reintegration and the everyday lives of returnees and the integration of the vulnerable local population

- **AVRR Programs (IOM):** Has been a long-standing actor in Serbia's return and reintegration program, coordinating Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) and Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programs for over two decades. Their work centres on ensuring that return is safe, dignified, and informed, starting with pre-departure counselling and continuing through post-arrival reintegration. IOM Serbia provides tailored reintegration packages for returnees based on their country of return and vulnerability, including transport assistance, initial cash support, in-kind housing, business grants, and medical assistance.

- **UNDP "Strengthen National and Local Systems":** Has contributed significantly to reintegration governance through its regional programme Strengthening National and Local Systems to Support the Effective Reintegration of Returnees in the Western Balkans, co-funded by the EU. The programme is designed to enhance institutional readiness and service delivery for returnees, with a particular focus on Roma families and other vulnerable groups. In practice, it has supported the activation of local mobile teams, strength-

ened inter-institutional coordination, and provided tailored services, including school reintegration support for minors, assistance with housing and documentation, and small-scale employment initiatives.

- **Help "Emergency and Development Support to Returnees":** in support of asylum seekers' return and migration management Help provides comprehensive and tangible support in the form of support the reintegration of returnee through information centres (hubs throughout Serbia), improvement of housing and overall living conditions, creation of employment opportunities and supporting entrepreneurship, improving qualifications and skills for labour market competitiveness, improving conditions for education, re-socialisation services and support to schoolchildren. Provision of emergency assistance to transnational cases, supporting institutions, and creating networks and systems for better access to health care.

- **ASB RE!NTEGRATE Program:** Provides another example of practical, donor-funded reintegration support across central and southern Serbia. Its focus is on returnees under the readmission regime, especially Roma families and single parents. The programme provides housing rehabilitation, small-business grants, employment subsidies, and support for children and youth through community-based workshops. ASB has provided business training and school reintegration assistance to hundreds of beneficiaries. Funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and implemented in coordination with local municipalities and CSOs, ASB bridges donor priorities with concrete, locally delivered support to improve returnees' living conditions and economic stability.

- **Caritas Serbia:** Counselling Centre for Returnees (est. 2017), offering free guidance, administrative help, social support, and referrals for housing, employment, and education.

In addition to the above reintegration-specific polices, three reintegration-relevant migration policies were also examined:

- **Law on Migration Management (2012):** Institutionalizes coordinated migration governance. By adopting the Law on Migration Management at the end of 2012, a coordinated system for migration management was established, led by the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration.

- **National Employment Strategy (2021–2026):** Recognizes the Roma population as one of the particularly vulnerable groups in the labour market. The national Action Plan for Employment, developed annually, outlines employment-active policies aimed at improving employability and encouraging employment among Roma, the national minority.

- **The Law on employment and unemployment insurance:** Recognizes the category of *"hard-to-employ persons"* who, due to their health conditions, insufficient or inadequate education, social and demographic characteristics, regional or professional mismatch between labour supply and demand, or other objective circumstances, find it difficult to obtain employment. The law is based, among other things, on the principle of affirmative action designed for hard-to-employ persons. **The Law on Social Entrepreneurship** provides for returnee participation in self-employment initiatives and recognizes returnees as a hard-to-employ group.

Overall, the reintegration policies often operate in parallel rather than as an integrated system. National strategies such as the 2009 Reintegration Strategy and its newly adopted 2025–2026 program establish a foundational framework, but their interaction with broader migration, employment, and social inclusion policies remains limited. For example, while the Law on Migration Management centralizes coordination under the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, sector-specific policies, such as the National Employment Strategy or the Law on Social Entrepreneurship, lack clear mechanisms to align their activities with the reintegration needs of returnees, particularly for local delivery. Reintegration remains framed through the lens of economic activation and employability, sidelining social and educational needs and neglecting a life-course or family-based perspective.

The vertical and horizontal coordination between these policies is inconsistent. Local Action Plans, though intended to localize national strategies, vary widely in quality and implementation. Meanwhile, donor-funded programs such as **DIMAK, RE!NTEGRATE** and **UNDP**'s local systems initiative provide vital, targeted support, but are often not embedded in national policy frameworks or sustainable public budgeting. CSOs and international actors step in as service providers and system navigators, particularly when

TABLE 2 | The Reintegration Governance Actors and Assistance

Category of Reintegration Governance	Institutions	Reintegration assistance provided	
National Government *(State Institutions)*	Commissariat for Refugees and Migration (KIRS)	• Coordination of return and reintegration policies and reception • Policy development and implementation	
	Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans, and Social Affairs (MOLEVSA)	• Employment-focused and gender-sensitive programs • Financial aid and childcare.	
	National Employment Service (NES)	• Employment counselling, subsidies, and vocational training	
	Centre for Social Work (CSW)	• Welfare support, access, primary registration of returnees with no fixed address, and referrals	
Local Government *(Local Self-Governments)*	Municipalities Migration Service Centres Local Trustees Local Migration Councils	• Implementation of Local Action Plans (LAPs) • Updating LAPs • Delivery of services at the municipal level • Coordination with Migration Councils and Trustees	
Bottom-up Reintegration Governance *(Civil Society Organizations)*	Praxis Nexus ADRA ASTRA A11	• Legal aid • Referrals to state welfare • Housing assistance • Youth support • Educational access	• Psychosocial support • Skills training • Implementation of donor-funded programs
Supranational Reintegration Governance *(International, humanitarian Organizations and Donors)*	GIZ (DIMAK) SDC IOM Help UNDP ASB Caritas EHO	• Coordination and funding of reintegration programs • AVRR (Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration) • Employment and psychosocial support • System strengthening and project-based interventions	

state institutions fall short; however, their interventions are typically time-bound and project-based. As a result, reintegration policies do not function as a cohesive system; they coexist, occasionally intersect, but rarely reinforce one another in a durable, rights-based manner. For Serbia to deliver effective and equitable reintegration support, its policies must move beyond fragmented implementation toward a systematically integrated, socially inclusive approach that aligns national strategies with local capacities, mainstreams services, and accounts for the lived realities of returnee families.

Reintegration Governance Actors and Assistance

Reintegration assistance in Serbia is delivered through a multi-actor, multi-scalar system. Table 2 illustrates how reintegration governance in Serbia operates across distinct and interlinked levels: national, local, supranational, and across civil society. It shows how responsibilities are divided not just vertically between central and municipal authorities, but also horizontally among state agencies, in-

ternational organizations, and non-governmental actors. This structure creates a complex and interdependent ecosystem in which no single institution operates in isolation. While national institutions coordinate policies and frameworks, local institutions implement them; both civil society and international organizations play crucial roles in addressing systemic gaps, particularly in service delivery and individualized support for returnees. The table maps the layered governance landscape and clarifies who does what and at what scale within Serbia's reintegration system.

Returnees' Experiences of Reintegration Support

Returnees' access to reintegration support in Serbia is shaped by their return modality: under the Readmission Agreement, through Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR), or via spontaneous return. Reintegration assistance from the Commissariat (KIRS) is primarily accessible to those returned under the Readmission Agreement, leaving spontaneous and voluntary returnees largely excluded. AVRR-supported returnees, backed

by IOM and international partners, may receive housing or training support, but only for limited periods. Deportees face administrative challenges, and spontaneous returnees are often unrecognized by local systems that lack structured support pathways.

Across all returnee types, reintegration is not solely administrative or economic; it is also deeply social and emotional. Many families interviewed described significant disruption to household life after return. Among families, experiences of separation or divorce were common. Parents consistently reflected on the greater sense of safety, stability, and dignity their families experienced while abroad, particularly in Germany, where children had access to quality schooling, routine, and institutional care. In contrast, upon returning, many families struggled to meet even basic needs, and children who had grown up in host countries felt alienated and displaced in Serbia. Some had limited proficiency in Serbian, lacked cultural familiarity, and experienced difficulty reintegrating into the school system. Their parents expressed deep concern for their children's future in an environment they perceived as less inclusive and more precarious.

Despite these challenges, returnee families show remarkable resilience. They rebuild their lives through seasonal labour, informal work, and mutual household support. Youth, especially those with German or other language skills, play critical roles in family adaptation. In several families, young people mediated with border and reintegration authorities, helped with documentation, or contributed financially. These intergenerational patterns of adjustment underscore the need to design reintegration programs that recognize families, rather than individuals, as the units of return.

Of the 51 interviewed returnees, 35 (68%) reported receiving some form of support upon their return, whereas the remaining 32% reported receiving no assistance. Among those who accessed support, just over half (51.4%) benefited from reintegration programs delivered by international organizations and NGOs. This assistance included the provision of firewood, housing renovations, vocational training in hairdressing, manicuring, and pedicuring, as well as entrepreneurship training and grants for small-business ventures such as beauty salons and car-repair services. The remaining 48.6% received welfare state-provided support, most commonly in the form of child benefits, disability assistance, or one-time financial aid. Those who accessed welfare or reintegration services emphasized the transformative impact of these measures on their daily lives.

Social welfare support is a foundational element of returnee subsistence strategies. Many returnees, especially single mothers, people with chronic illnesses, and the unemployed, rely heavily on social benefits as their primary income source. These are not temporary supplements but essential pillars on which families depend when combined with seasonal remigration or informal income-generating strategies, such as landfill scavenging or agricultural work. However, more than half of those interviewed lost their formal employment post-return and faced barriers to re-entering the welfare system. Bureaucratic complexity, stigma, and limited information impede timely access, even among highly vulnerable individuals.

In addition to economic vulnerabilities, returnees face a highly conditional and fragmented support system. Institutional assistance favours "*employable*" individuals and neglects children, the elderly, and caregivers. At the same time, 95% of the study's sample represented family migration, not individual return. While reintegration is still treated as an individualized process in national and supranational frameworks, lived realities indicate that it is fundamentally household-based. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) fill critical gaps: organizations like Nexus, Praxis, ASB, and Caritas, among others, provide school re-entry assistance, housing referrals, documentation, and health navigation support. Still, this assistance is uneven, donor-dependent, and varies significantly by municipality. In Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Vranje, for instance, active CSWs and CSOs offer more comprehensive services, while rural areas rely on overburdened networks of NGOs and informal actors.

Access to reintegration support ultimately rests with returnees, who are expected to proactively request assistance. However, most respondents reported being unaware of their rights or of available services. Many first learned about support options through outreach from local Roma Coordinators or mobile teams. These actors play an essential role in helping returnees understand how to register, what they are entitled to, and where to go. As a result, the referral system offered by CSOs, NGOs, and mobile teams emerged as the single most important and valued support mechanism identified by returnees. Rather than financial aid alone, it was this ability to navigate the system, enabled by trusted intermediaries, that made access to reintegration support possible.

Promising Practices

1. Multi-Level and Multi-Scalar Reintegration Governance

Serbia's reintegration governance has evolved over nearly two decades through sustained collaboration between national institutions, international organizations, and a strong civil society sector. Key state actors, such as the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration (KIRS), the National Employment Service (NES), and the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs (MOLEVSA), have worked in close partnership with international bodies like GIZ, IOM, and UNDP, as well as local CSOs, to develop and implement reintegration policies. This collaborative environment has enabled the timely design and adoption of new policy frameworks, such as the 2024–2026 Reintegration Program, which drew on inter-ministerial coordination and multi-actor input. Importantly, Serbia's active civil society has played a critical role in embedding social protection and human rights safeguards within reintegration policies, ensuring that returnees, especially Roma families, women, and youth, have access to services, legal assistance, and referral systems. This multi-scalar cooperation model demonstrates how policy responsiveness and inclusion can be achieved even within resource-constrained systems.

2. Holistic Reintegration Support through the DIMAK Hotspot Model

The DIMAK hotspot model provides a comprehensive approach to reintegration by co-locating employment, legal, and psychosocial services in multi-service centres across nine cities in Serbia. Operated in partnership with the National Employment Service (NES) and civil society organizations, the centres prioritize support for single mothers and youth, offering vocational training, job counselling, and psychosocial care. Situated within NES's Migration Service Centres, DIMAK serves as a pilot for long-term institutional integration. The initiative also convenes regular coordination meetings with local self-governments and CSOs, fostering cross-sector dialogue and accountability in the delivery of returnee support.

3. Participatory Outreach and Consultation Mechanisms

Before launching reintegration support programs or public calls, national actors like KIRS and NES organize participatory consultations with municipal trustees and local stakeholders. These consultations strengthen transparency and increase the relevance of available support by incorporating feedback from communities and front-line implementers. Trustees play a critical role in building trust and facilitating outreach, especially among Roma communities. Migration Service Centres run by NES offer a foundation for expanding these practices into returnee-focused policy models.

4. Mobile Teams and Roma Coordinators as Institutional Bridges

Mobile outreach teams and Roma Coordinators serve as critical connectors between returnee families and formal support systems. These actors identify needs on the ground, facilitate referrals, and support returnees in navigating complex institutional procedures. Their work has become one of the most valued forms of assistance, particularly among Roma communities who face systemic exclusion. International organizations continue to fund and support mobile teams, ensuring that locally based outreach remains a cornerstone of equitable reintegration.

5. Integrated Housing and Women's Entrepreneurship Support

National and international reintegration policies increasingly recognize the value of bundled support that combines housing assistance, child benefits, and small-business grants for low-income families. MOLEVSA's targeted approach links women's entrepreneurship programs with access to childcare, addressing structural barriers that limit female returnees' reintegration. These initiatives represent an emerging model of gender-responsive reintegration, in which economic inclusion is supported by investments in social infrastructure.

Challenges in Reintegration Governance in Serbia

1. Implementation Gap and the need for Monitoring and Evaluation

Despite strong national policy frameworks, reintegration efforts are often poorly implemented at the local level. Many municipalities lack dedicated staff, stable funding, or operational mechanisms to activate their Local Action Plans (LAPs). In numerous cases, LAPs are

outdated or inactive, and local Migration Councils, key actors in coordinating returnee support, are under-resourced or non-functional.

2. Efficacy Gap

Reintegration support often fails to meet the complex needs of returnees. Available assistance is typically short-term and fragmented, focusing on one-time financial aid or brief training courses. Deeper challenges, such as trauma recovery, family reintegration, long-term housing insecurity, or education reintegration for children, remain unaddressed. Moreover, strict eligibility rules often exclude those without formal documentation or those who return spontaneously.

3. Invisibility of Spontaneous Returnees

Returnees who return outside formal channels, without deportation orders or assisted return, are typically not captured in any official database. They are not systematically referred to services and may be excluded from reintegration programs entirely, despite often facing acute vulnerability. Their exclusion highlights a structural blind spot in current reintegration governance.

4. Gender and Family Blindness

Existing reintegration frameworks treat return as an individual economic event, typically male-centred, and overlook the social realities of caregiving, family dynamics, and intergenerational needs. Women returnees receive little targeted support, even though many face multiple burdens, including unpaid care work, housing insecurity, and lack of childcare. Returnee children also struggle with educational reintegration, notably when documentation is missing or discrimination persists.

5. Welfare System Misalignment with Reintegration Objectives

The current welfare system in Serbia is central to reintegration support, but also demonstrates structural contradictions that undermine long-term reintegration goals. Returnees often rely on social assistance as their primary source of income, but fear losing these entitlements if they register for entrepreneurship training or small-business grants, key components of reintegration programs. This disincentivizes formal economic reintegration and reinforces informal livelihoods. Additionally, many returnees, especially Roma, avoid identifying themselves as returnees when seeking support, opting instead to present as welfare recipients, single mothers, or chronically ill individuals. This reluctance is driven by stigma, administrative complexity, and fear of jeopardizing access to welfare. As a result, returnee-specific programs are underutilized, while reintegration needs remain hidden within the general welfare system, weakening both targeting and impact. A more coherent policy approach is needed to align reintegration incentives with social protection mechanisms and reduce the trade-offs faced by returnee households.

Recommendations for Strengthening Reintegration Governance in Serbia

Reintegration governance in Serbia remains constrained by EU migration-management imperatives and underfunded domestic social policy. Structural fragmentation and narrow targeting limit institutions' ability to provide sustained, inclusive support for returnees.

1. Embed Reintegration in Mainstream Public Services and Ensure Inclusive Access

Institutionalize reintegration assistance within Serbia's social welfare, employment, and health systems as a long-term component of social protection. Simplify access pathways and broaden eligibility criteria to include spontaneous returnees, women, children, caregivers, and returnees with chronic health needs, ensuring that support reflects the diverse realities of return, not just formal readmission procedures.

2. Adopt a Gender- and Family-Responsive Approach

Reframe reintegration to reflect the lived experiences of entire households, not just individual male breadwinners. Design integrated services that combine housing, childcare, health care, and education for returnee families. Prioritize support for women and girls, especially those engaged in unpaid care work or facing social stigma.

3. Strengthen Monitoring and Evaluation to Adapt Support to Returnees' Realities

Establish a comprehensive and disaggregated monitoring and evaluation system to regularly assess the accessibility, effectiveness, and gaps in reintegration support. Establish permanent reintegration roles within public institutions and standardize monitoring systems to reduce duplication and support long-term learning and accountability. Data should be systematically collected and analyzed by age, gender, return channel (readmission, spontaneous, voluntary), and family composition to inform policy adjustments and service design. This will enable institutions to respond

proactively to the changing needs of returnees and better integrate underrepresented groups into national reintegration frameworks.

4. **Align Entrepreneurship Support with the Welfare System**

International organizations and donor-funded programs that promote entrepreneurship through training and mini-grants should be designed in coordination with Serbia's social welfare framework. Business start-up support must not place returnees at risk of losing essential welfare benefits before their income becomes stable. Embedding livelihood programs within welfare rules through temporary exemptions, gradual benefit reductions, or hybrid support models would allow returnees to test economic self-reliance without sacrificing basic financial security, making reintegration investments more sustainable and effective.

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