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Research Report

Involuntary return migration to Kosovo: Tackling challenges for successful reintegration

IAMO Policy Brief, No. 33e

Provided in Cooperation with:
Leibniz Institute of Agricultural Development in Transition Economies (IAMO), Halle (Saale)

Suggested Citation: Möllers, Judith; Traikova, Diana; Herzfeld, Thomas; Bajrami, Egzon (2017) : Involuntary return migration to Kosovo: Tackling challenges for successful reintegration, IAMO Policy Brief, No. 33e, ISBN 978-3-95992-051-3, Leibniz Institute of Agricultural Development in Transition Economies (IAMO), Halle (Saale), https://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:gbv:3:2-81518

This Version is available at:
https://hdl.handle.net/10419/172201

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Leibniz Institute of
Agricultural Development
in Transition Economies
(IAMO)
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IAMO
Policy Brief

No 33

Issue No. 33
December 2017

Involuntary return migration to Kosovo: Tackling challenges for successful reintegration

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Kosovo currently faces the challenge of reintegrating thousands of returned migrants who left the country in 2014/2015. This migration wave was discussed in the IAMO Policy Brief 24. After facing restrictive asylum policies in the destination countries in Western Europe, more than 20,000 people returned to Kosovo in 2015 and 2016. Based on the results of an empirical survey of around 180 returnees, this policy brief discusses a number of reintegration issues. In addition to low levels of education and skills, reintegration is impeded above all by the precarious state of Kosovo's labour market. This is compounded by a psychological burden that often arises from the sometimes traumatic experience of migration and involuntary return. The migration of Kosovars is at risk of becoming a vicious cycle composed of involuntary return and problems reintegrating, resulting in a further attempt at migration. Indeed, the results of the study show that many returnees do not intend to remain in Kosovo.

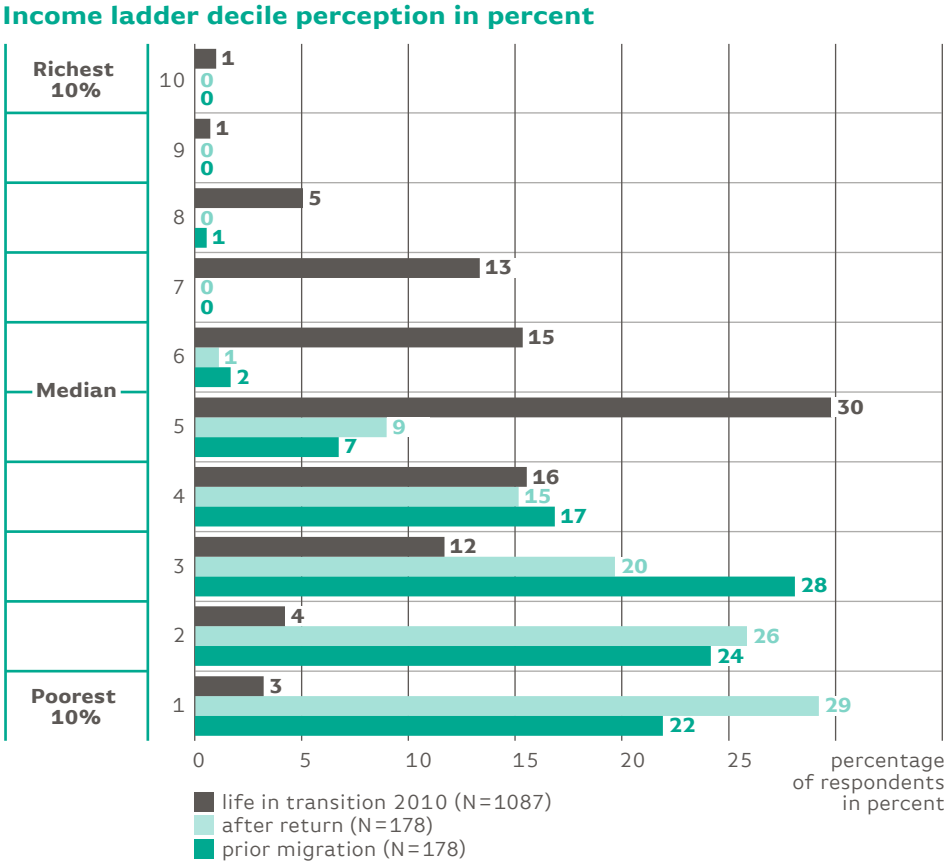
In 2014 and 2015, up to 100,000 people left Kosovo for Western Europe via the so-called Balkan route through Serbia and Hungary towards Austria. International migration has been an important element of the livelihood strategies of Kosovars for a long time. Much like in other Eastern European countries, migration is constantly pushed by high unemployment combined with a very low formal labour force participation rate as well as quality of life considerations. Driven by these and other specific circumstances, this recent wave of migration certainly represents a remarkable peak. It was provoked by changes in travel regimes, a rumour-driven snowball effect, and a high dissatisfaction with state governance and politics (Möllers et al. 2017). It is posing significant challenges for the country, not least because the outpouring of people was soon followed by significant (involuntary) returns. While in the past, Kosovar migrants could hope for long procedures, which would often allow them to stay (and work) for years in the destination country, this is no longer the case. In countries such as Germany (the main destination of Kosovar migrants) the large influx of refugees from the Middle East has pushed authorities towards speeding up asylum procedures and a stricter enforcement of repatriation laws.

In the literature, the positive effects of remittances on consumption and income levels are highlighted. Return migrants might contribute further benefits if they become innovators who bring different views, for example in terms of social norms and gender roles, as well as business ideas. However, negative effects of migration and return migration might also be at work. Migration is, for example, linked to disincentive effects with regard to work or education, or an increase in income inequality and mental stress. Return migration may be burdened by a lack of relevant new skills and work experience hindering successful reintegration. Involuntary returns and disrupted migration circles, in particular, put successful reintegration at threat: the experience of 'failed migration' causes not only mental stress, but most returned persons have to restart their life with fewer resources and are forced to depend on social assistance.

Objectives and database

This policy brief focuses on the involuntary return of Kosovars by looking at the socio-economic situation of returned migrants as well as opportunities for and barriers to their reintegration. The analysis was based on a survey financed by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) in the framework of its project "Competitiveness of

Figure 1: Income ladder perceptions before and after migration, compared to the national sample of the Life in Transition Survey (2010)



the Private Sector in Rural Areas". The dataset includes interviews with 179 returnees sampled from ten municipalities with comparatively high shares of returnees. The sampling procedure aimed at covering all the relevant ethnicities (Albanian, Roma, Ashkali, Egyptian), gender and age groups respective to their shares among the returnees. Interviews were conducted during April 2017.

Key results of the study

The survey results highlight four key issues of high relevance for reintegration. They are linked to economic vulnerability, skills levels, health and mental stress, as well as stay intentions.

First, our results point at the high economic vulnerability of return migrants: returnees positioned themselves in the lower deciles of income distribution before and after migration (Figure 1). Economic downward mobility as well as indebtedness were observed as a result of the costly migration. A high share of returnees (86 percent) indicated problems covering even basic needs. Although the majority lived in a house belonging to the family, appropriate housing remained an issue for some. The most important barrier to improving livelihoods and smooth reintegration is the labour market situation. Unemployment and economic inactivity is rather the rule than the exception: often many household members depend on just one income earner, and in many cases this income is derived from occasional, non-regular jobs. While only one-quarter of the interviewed returnees worked for money at the time of the interview, 88 percent were looking for work. Around 27 percent of returnee households fully depend on the small amount of social welfare (and in a few cases remittances) that they receive.

Second, low educational levels and a lack of skills and work experience are important barriers for returnees in a generally difficult labour market situation. Around 17 percent of the return migrants interviewed had no education or only primary school education, while more than 50 percent did not go beyond lower secondary school (nine years of schooling). Furthermore, returnees were characterised by a lack of work experience and professional skills. As the study deals with the involuntary return of asylum seekers, the opportunities for migrants to acquire new skills were, without doubt, limited. Less than 20 percent of returnees worked while being abroad. However, some returned with business ideas and almost 30 percent of male respondents and 21 percent of female respondents indicated that they see themselves in the future as self-employed entrepreneurs in their home country, Kosovo.

Third, the often desperate economic situation as well as the stress caused by the (failed) migration and return contributed to very low life satisfaction and a high prevalence of mental stress. Thus, the well-being of returnees was implied to be relatively poor. The level of life satisfaction was significantly lower than the national level (as measured by the European Quality of Life Survey), and was even comparable to values found among homeless people, who score the lowest in other international studies. Failed migration and return were furthermore linked to a worsening of both general health indicators as well as psychic and somatic symptoms. The prevalence of symptoms of depression was clearly elevated: more

than one-third of returnees showed symptoms that are normally only found in the 84th percentile or higher for average Western European adults, and 15 percent reported severe symptoms that are usually only found in 2 percent of this comparison group. More than half of the returnees with psychic and somatic symptoms became worse after their return. Chronic diseases were reported by 15 percent of interviewees. Health related issues were the second most important reason for the recent migration episode. It was also mentioned as a reintegration issue and 36 percent of returnees reported a worsening of their general health after return.

Fourth, according to the literature, involuntary returns tend to be followed by unsuccessful reintegration and the intention to re-migrate. Indeed, the survey results revealed an overall low level of willingness to stay in Kosovo. More than 40 percent of respondents placed their probability of staying at 20 percent or lower. For around 70 percent of the respondents, both males and females, the probability of leaving again was higher than the probability of staying. Economic conditions and unemployment were the most important reasons mentioned as a trigger for repeated migration, followed by health care. The willingness to stay was linked to close bonds with family, friends and culture, as well as economic assets such as a business or livestock. It was also linked to a number of conditions such as access to work, health insurance or health care.

In many of the aspects discussed above, vulnerable groups, such as ethnic minorities and women, were found to be in a comparatively less favourable situation. Ethnic minorities (Roma, Ashkali, Egyptian), for example, scored the lowest in terms of life satisfaction, and showed more somatic and psychic symptoms as well as a higher level of aggravated symptoms compared to the pre-migration situation. Women had lower education levels and lacked work experience, which, among other things, makes them more dependent on the income of male household members. Furthermore, despite significant reintegration problems, the outreach of assistance measures was found to be relatively low, and much too low in critical areas such as health and psycho-social treatment. Most support came from the close family. NGOs played an important role as providers of formal support. Direct state support was reported as comparatively low, but with regional variations. The low level of awareness of reintegration support measures was striking: most of the measures were known by less than one-third of the interviewed returnees.

Policy recommendations

Without doubt, return migration is a major challenge for Kosovo as a country as well as for thousands of concerned returnees and their families. The study points at several fields, in which policies could increase efforts to support and facilitate the integration of return migrants.

First, any improvement in the state of the labour market will have direct positive effects on the successful reintegration of returnees. The Kosovar labour market is characterised by a very low labour force participation rate (38 percent versus 73 percent in the EU28 in 2015) and an extremely high unemployment rate (33 percent versus 9 percent in the EU28 in 2015). Return migrants tend to be vulnerable in terms of their socio-economic, physical and mental well-being. Therefore, they are disadvantaged in the labour market and may need support to be able to find work.

— A focus on sectors and occupations with low entry costs (i.e. close to zero upfront investments) could help to generate broad and quick income generating activities. Much like the German workfare programme, 'One-Euro Jobs', a (temporary) programme could be launched to activate return migrants (as well as other vulnerable groups depending on welfare payments) and provide a bridge to formal labour markets. By strategically combining social and economic policies, people could be motivated to stay or become active and increase their welfare benefits through work with a positive effect on their personal well-being and society. Yet, market distortions should be carefully weighed against expected positive effects.

— To make the best use of the entrepreneurial spirit and ideas brought from abroad, it is important to identify returnees with entrepreneurial aspirations at arrival. An effective spread of information about business opportunities as well as available support is important. Access to credit for entrepreneurial activities, start-up funds and public guarantees could push the creation of employment (not only for returnees). As subsidised loans distort the market, they should be used only after thorough investigation of the market situation.

— The study pointed at a low involvement of rural people in agriculture. This should be further investigated since a better use of agricultural resources and incentives for commercialisation could contribute to job creation and improvement of income levels for some households. However, rural non-farm employment is certainly of key importance.

— Acknowledging the fact that Kosovo's labour market, even in the best of scenarios, will not provide as many jobs as are needed for its young population and that time is required before reforms can show positive effects, migrant labour and remittances will remain important in the near future. Agreements on circular migration with EU countries, for example for seasonal work, or other legal ways of migration could further reduce the pressure on (often unsuccessful) migration via asylum procedures. Given that legal ways exist, information about them and the skills that are needed to gain access to EU labour markets should be promoted and bureaucratic procedures accelerated.

Second, it is important to improve strategies towards reaching the target groups of integration support measures.

— A relatively modest use of support measures in the field of reintegration and a lack of knowledge about them calls for a timely identification of (1) individuals ready to be integrated into labour markets, (2) individuals who need medical or psycho-social treatment and /or need targeted social support. Available measures and support infrastructure should be adapted to the needs identified during this process.
— Inconsistencies in the statistical data concerning returnees and beneficiaries call for more systematic data collection and monitoring of data bases. Reliable data is the best base for evidence-based targeted policy measures and also helps to avoid any possible abuse of financial aids.

Third, medium-term strategies are needed to create an enabling environment in terms of business creation, social security, education and healthcare. Without such a supportive institutional framework, high rates of repeated migration could undermine reintegration efforts.

— Non-transparent business conditions driven by informal exchanges, corruption and clan networks are often mentioned as characteristics of Kosovo's economy. The creation of a transparent, merit-based and predictable business environment would provide the foundation for the improvement of labour markets. Thus, incentives for informal activities and corruption should be minimised. Improved governance will create more trust, and thus facilitate reintegration and increase the willingness to stay.
— Returnees return to communities. Therefore, providing funding for communities to develop own specific programs may facilitate reintegration. Experiences in similar community or grassroot led projects exist in the framework of the EU's Leader programme in rural development and should be explored.
— With regard to social measures, healthcare and housing seem to be very important, in particular for those who are most vulnerable, including the poor, elderly, and ethnic minorities. In some cases, housing is not only a short-term issue, but requires long-term solutions as well. Health and adequate health care is not only an important trigger for migration, but it is also relevant for successful reintegration and highly important for the decision to stay or to leave again.
— Education, including early education in kindergartens and pre-schools, is of utmost importance. Migrants indicate the future of their children as a reason for leaving. Offering adequate education is therefore key for keeping returnees from leaving again and, indeed, increasing the chances of a better life for the coming generations.

Further Information

Literature

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The study was carried out by the Leibniz Institute of Agricultural Development in Transition Economies (IAMO). The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) provided funds for this project, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Rural Development (MAFRD) provided technical support. The views expressed in this publication are the sole responsibility of the authors.

Printed edition: ISSN 2363-5800 ISBN 978-3-95992-050-6
Online edition: ISSN 2363-5797 ISBN 978-3-95992-051-3

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