

Hidden Costs: How Readmissions Undermine Roma Inclusion in the Western Balkans

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There are blind spots regarding the interactions between return, development and inclusion policies. Readmissions disrupt the very processes that development cooperation and inclusion policies seek to strengthen. This *policy brief* calls for greater awareness of these cross-sectoral links and urges transparency about the downstream implications of return governance.

Key Messages

1 READMISSIONS INCREASE THE RISK OF STATELESSNES

Significant progress has been made in tackling statelessness in the Western Balkan countries, an issue that disproportionately affects Roma. However, readmissions from EU countries continue to create new cases of statelessness, many involving children. Better data, legal safeguards and closer transnational communication between authorities are needed to prevent return-related statelessness.

2 READMISSIONS DISRUPT EDUCATIONAL INCLUSION

Inclusion in formal education is key for breaking the cycle of inter-generational exclusion and marginalisation. School registration after forced return is tied to formal requirements that many families struggle to fulfil without assistance, increasing the risk of children dropping out of school. Efforts to harmonise legal frameworks protecting the best interests of the child with readmission procedures need to take post-return implications into account.

3 READMISSIONS ENTRENCH PRECARITY AND POOR PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

Asylum migration can be driven by the need to find solutions to extreme poverty or serious health conditions when adequate local support is unavailable. Accelerated return procedures reinforce a vicious circle by further undermining self-efficacy, disrupting medical treatment and worsening mental health. Legal pathways to remain and pre-return vulnerability assessments with meaningful consequences for return orders can help to break this cycle.

4 ACCESS TO LEGAL MIGRATION OPPORTUNITIES IS STRUCTURED UNEQUALLY

Legal migration is an important source of family income, social protection and opportunities for many. Yet, access to legal migration is unequally distributed. Meeting the requirements for work or study visas is often unattainable for those who are marginalised or discriminated against, leaving irregular migration or seeking asylum as their only mobility options. This points to the need for targeted support to make legal migration and skills partnerships more inclusive.

5 SMARTER FUNDING CAN MAKE ROMA INCLUSION MORE EFFECTIVE

Roma organisations play a vital bridging role between communities and public institutions but depend heavily on external funding. Several key donors have recently terminated or significantly reduced their programmes in the region, cutting essential support, capacity and trust. Inclusion- and readmission-related challenges are certain to worsen if they remain unaddressed. It is therefore essential to re-think assistance, making it smarter, better targeted and more closely aligned with local needs, rather than risking the loss of the progress achieved so far.

Background

The fight against inequality and the promotion of inclusive societies remain at the core of the German government's development agenda.¹ Inequality is growing not only in least developed countries, but also in emerging and post-socialist economies, such as the Western Balkans. Since the transition, the lack of public social protection and weak economies have become increasingly linked to marginalisation at the intersections of class, ethnicity and gender. Roma² face a particularly high risk of exclusion due to discrimination. A comprehensive report by the World Bank concludes that Roma across the region face "systemic economic and social exclusion and institutional discrimination" (World Bank Group, 2019, p. viii).

Official development assistance and EU pre-accession assistance (IPA)—€87 million EU funds between 2014 and 2022³—have been allocated to remedy this. However, despite individual successes and progressive legal frameworks, major improvements and progress in addressing the root causes have yet to materialise.⁴ Reasons for the low impact include ill-targeted spending—poor alignment with other policy goals, insufficient coordination with the target group and the broader context of democratic backsliding and weak governance. The European Union's progress reports and shadow reports issued by minority

rights organisations regularly flag issues relating to the practical implementation of existing laws and regulations.

One of the most visible outcomes of the lack of progress on Roma inclusion is that significantly more Roma seek asylum in EU member states than the general population. The figure below illustrates the overall trends in asylum applications filed in Germany by citizens of four Western Balkan countries since 2015, alongside the proportion of Roma, as reported in the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) statistics.⁵ Meanwhile, Roma constitute five per cent or less of the populations of these countries; systematic underreporting in national censuses, however, means that population figures vary considerably.

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The protection rate for asylum seekers from these countries has been persistently low for many years (between zero and one per cent). In turn, Western Balkan nationals account for over 20 per cent of deportations and more than 17 per cent of assisted returns from Germany, while filing only four per cent of the asylum applications in 2024. These figures support the conclusion that Roma are also overrepresented among those forcibly returned, although disaggregated data on readmissions are not available.

Collaboration on migration and return has been made a cornerstone of the relations between the European Union and its member states and their neighbours, largely, however, without considering the intersections between this and other policy fields, such as development, human rights and minority rights.

TRENDS IN ASYLUM-SEEKING FROM WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES IN GERMANY

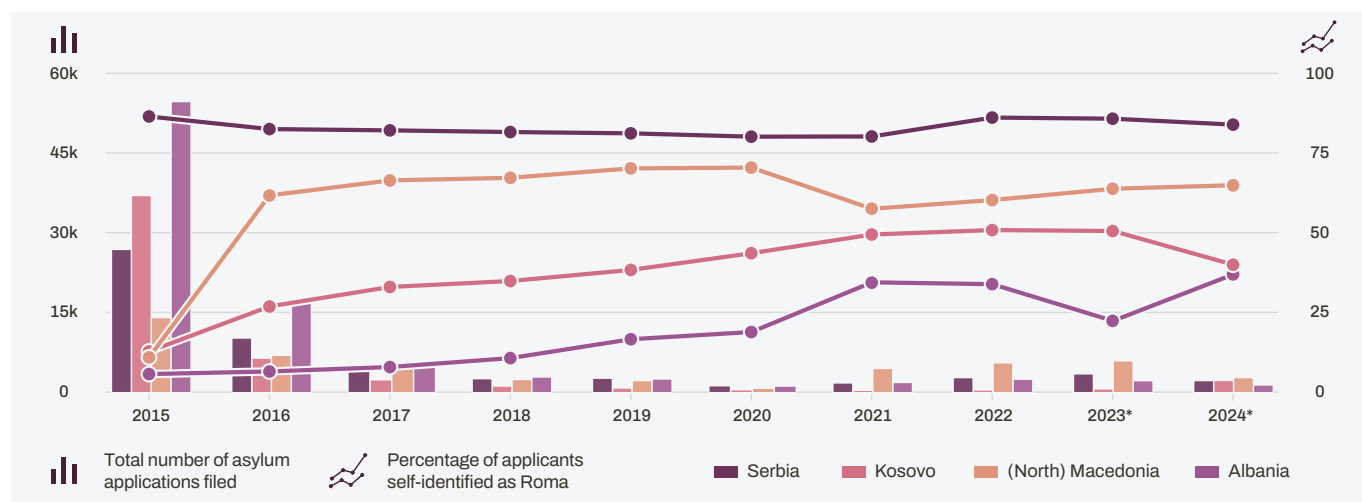


Figure: Jamila Nachid; Santiago Duque
Source: Bundesregierung (2017–2025)

*Data on Roma asylum seekers is not publicly available for October–December 2023 and November–December 2024.

Hence, emigration controls to prevent asylum seeking implemented by the origin countries in exchange for the Schengen visa liberalisation not only violate the right of citizens to leave their own country (Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) but also expose Roma to racial profiling.⁶

Migration and return cooperation has been made a cornerstone of EU relations with neighbouring countries, yet its implications for development, human rights and minority rights have largely been overlooked.

Readmission agreements signed by all Western Balkan countries lack human rights safeguards and provisions to promote reintegration. All countries in the region were classified as 'safe countries of origin' by Germany (in 2014–15) and by the European Union in its first common EU list of safe countries of origin (February 2026). Legally, this classification remains contested, not only due to the lack of standardised assessment criteria. Experts and minority rights organisations argue that portraying asylum migration as driven by poverty conceals the effects of systematic and cumulative discrimination, particularly of Roma. Refugee law allows "cumulative grounds discrimination" to be assessed as amounting to persecution (Müller, 2016, p. 3). While the issues addressed by this *bicc policy brief* are not specific to Roma but largely affect impoverished people who lack well-resourced networks, discrimination acts as an additional and often hidden obstacle to equal opportunities, a normal life and fundamental rights for people read as Roma or "visibly Roma and poor" as one respondent described it (MKD-MS-SI-02).

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In Germany, legal and human rights organisations also appeal to the country's historical responsibility towards the descendants of Roma Holocaust survivors, arguing that humanitarian protection may be granted under Section 23 of the Residence Act. Similarly, the German independent commission on antigypsyism (Unabhängige Kommission Antiziganismus), mandated by the German government, calls for the recognition of Roma as particularly worthy of protection for historical and humanitarian reasons and recommends withdrawing the classification of Western Balkan countries as safe (Bundesministerium des Innern, für Bau und Heimat, 2021). The same report shows that dealing with historical injustices and including Roma in contemporary society is an incomplete process, also in Germany.

In this *policy brief*, we draw on the example of Roma asylum migration to create awareness of the pitfalls inherent in treating migration, development and minority rights as separate policy domains. They interact in ways that can undermine one another. We argue that ignoring these interactions jeopardises the effectiveness of Roma inclusion efforts, which are an important goal of inclusive development policies and criterion for EU accession. Concretely, we identify five mechanisms through which return policies affect inclusion: disruptions of access to a) legal identity, b) education, c) health and self-efficacy, d) legal mobility, and e) the effectiveness of development interventions. Now that the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) has entered into application in June 2026, these findings gain even greater relevance, as the pact makes accelerated return procedures, pre-return detention and entry bans even more central features of EU migration governance. This heightens the risk of migration governance and inclusion policies working at cross-purposes. Systematic and transparent assessments of the downstream effects of return governance on Roma inclusion, social and minority rights as well as development objectives become even more urgent.

1 Readmissions increase the risk of statelessness

Without citizenship, people are excluded from most aspects of normal life and denied fundamental rights. Statelessness in the Western Balkans has several causes, including state succession following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, forced displacement and the lack of civil documentation. Statelessness can also be inherited, and Roma are disproportionately affected. Concerted efforts by international organisations, non-state and community-based organisations to combat statelessness have achieved significant successes.

Readmission collaboration between the European Union and the Western Balkan countries lacks safeguards to prevent people from becoming stateless after they return. Children born abroad, children readmitted without a legal guardian and adults readmitted on *laissez-passer* documents are particularly at risk. Interviews with representatives of reintegration assistance and legal aid organisations have highlighted that readmissions are continuously creating new cases of statelessness and that these are the most difficult to resolve. The main challenges are the lack of a clear process, limited capacity to engage with the authorities in the returning states, language barriers and entry bans. Statelessness resulting from readmissions usually cannot be resolved by those affected.

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Massive funding cuts are exacerbating the situation, forcing many of these organisations to discontinue their statelessness work in the region. Some NGOs reported that they will continue to provide support on a *pro-bono* basis for as long as they can, albeit with limited capacities. One solution would be to grant citizenship of the country of residence to children born abroad—as promoted by the UNHCR’s ‘#I Belong’ campaign. Other steps include ending the practice of readmissions based on *laissez-passer* documents, institutionalising free legal assistance in the countries of return and, as a first step towards tackling the issue, conducting a thorough assessment of its scale, causes and possible solutions.

2 Readmissions disrupt educational inclusion

Schooling is a key determinant of future inclusion, opening the door to the formal labour market and higher education. Conversely, a lack of employment opportunities and discrimination can affect even highly skilled individuals. Reasons why pupils are absent from school and drop out include poverty (the need to contribute to family income or the inability to afford school materials or transport), experiences of discrimination and language barriers (for children from Roma-majority municipalities, those living in neighbourhoods with other minorities or after longer stays abroad), as well as frequent moves when parents have to relocate for work.

School registration after readmission is tied to formal requirements that many families struggle to meet or navigate.

Externally funded projects and programmes have placed strong emphasis on educational inclusion, including support for preschools and learning centres, the free provision of books and school materials, assistance with school registration and advocacy for adult education for early school leavers. These initiatives have been quite successful but remain far below demand and often depend on short-term funding.

School registration after readmission is tied to formal requirements that many families struggle to meet or navigate. These include providing translated and/or certified proof of previous grades and credits or undergoing alternative skills assessments, catch-up classes or language courses, which are not available everywhere. Interviewees described educational re-inclusion as one of the most complex aspects of reintegration, especially following deportation. Language classes and skills assessments are usually not included in reintegration assistance. Many families require institutional support throughout the school re-registration process, yet registration is often still

delayed, children are placed in classes well below their age and ability, or they are not enrolled at all.

Our data indicate the existence of this issue, not its scale. Systematic data collection could shed light on the links between readmissions and disrupted educational trajectories. Returning states have a responsibility to take legal requirements to protect the best interest of the child much more seriously and give greater weight to post-return risks when deciding whether to enforce returns or not.

3 Readmissions entrench precarity & poor physical and mental health

Asylum migration from Western Balkan countries is often driven by the need to find solutions to abject poverty, desperate life situations or serious health conditions when local solutions are unavailable or blocked by discrimination. Until 2015, outcomes were mixed. Some sold assets and property and returned in a worse state than before, while others reported modest gains, such as successful medical treatment, small savings, new social connections, language skills or information about legal migration opportunities. Following the introduction of the safe-country-of-origin classification in 2014–15, return procedures have accelerated, while access to legal recourse, the labour market and wider society in destination countries has become increasingly restricted. Mandatory accommodation in reception centres and detention have also expanded. Together, these changes have created a vicious circle in which migrants are deprived of much needed resources, prolonging cycles of intergenerational marginalisation. Many become more heavily indebted, often to informal moneylenders who charge exorbitant interest rates and resort to threats or violence should payments be delayed, making sustainable reintegration unattainable. Deportations now increasingly take place during, or even before the start of, much-needed medical treatment.

As long as major post-return barriers persist, protection status or meaningful vulnerability assessments remain essential to prevent inhumane conditions and protracted precarity.

Protracted poverty and discrimination both have negative effects on mental health. The limited available research also finds a disproportionately high prevalence of mental health disorders among people with precarious or uncertain legal status in Germany, which increases significantly after coerced, including assisted return. People working in reintegration assistance describe clients experiencing symptoms resembling epileptic seizures, which they attribute to post-traumatic stress disorder

(PTSD). Treatment for these conditions is often unaffordable after return. As long as major obstacles to post-return access to quality healthcare, decent formalised housing and infrastructure and social protection persist, granting protection status or implementing pre-return vulnerability assessments with meaningful consequences, such as hardship classifications, are the only ways to prevent return to inhumane conditions and protracted precarity.

4 Access to legal migration opportunities is structured unequally

Migration is a response to economic insecurity, the lack of social protection and healthcare. Large sections of the population in Western Balkan countries rely on temporary labour migration and transnational networks to survive. However, access to legal migration pathways excludes certain groups. Exclusion mechanisms include the lack of documentation, limited or no formal qualifications, insufficient information, the absence of networks abroad, the inability to pay agency fees and little trust in formal processes due to previous negative experiences. These barriers disproportionately affect those who have experienced discrimination. During our interviews, participants recognised the advantages of legal migration but resorted to asylum or irregular migration because they did not meet the eligibility criteria for legal migration. Asylum seeking is therefore primarily pursued by those who lack access to more promising alternatives.

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Deportation is, and assisted return can be, followed by re-entry bans. Their duration, as well as the use of permanent entry bans, is significantly expanded under the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). Also, deportation costs must be repaid upon re-entry. Relatively accessible labour migration schemes, such as the Western Balkans regulation, introduced by the German government in 2016, require applicants to secure a job offer from a German employer and prior approval from the German Federal Employment Agency. Those who have sought asylum in Germany within the previous 24 months are excluded, and the national quotas are usually filled quickly. To make legal migration a tool for inclusive development for all, targeted support is needed to ensure equal opportunities for minorities, for example, through skills mobility partnerships.

5 Smarter funding can make Roma inclusion more effective

Key donors supporting development and inclusion projects in the region, such as USAID, have reduced or withdrawn funding, even during ongoing activities. Civil society organisations in the Western Balkans, including Roma organisations, depend heavily on external funding. As a result, Roma organisations and initiatives now compete with a much larger pool of applicants, making access to EU and development funding increasingly difficult. Our data show, however, that these organisations enjoy a high level of trust among the people they support, unlike many public or governmental institutions, and therefore fulfil an important bridging role.

Consultations on Roma inclusion—for example in the context of German development cooperation—concluded that Roma need to play a central role in interventions addressing their situation (Müller, 2016). Evaluations of projects funded under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) together with meta-evaluations⁷ of Roma inclusion programming, found that key elements of effective and sustainable interventions, such as early engagement with all stakeholders, especially Roma communities, and mainstreamed rather than siloed programme design, have been applied inconsistently, helping to explain the mixed and often disappointing results. Abandoning such support, however, would carry considerable risks, as the challenges and missing links between the different policy areas identified here are likely to grow. Better data and more effective support are therefore essential to avoid losing the progress achieved so far. The most promising way forward is to rethink and better target development and IPA funding for Roma communities by consulting them directly and continuing to build on the expertise and trust developed over time.

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Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.bmz.de/resource/blob/282486/reformplan-zukunft-zusammen-global-gestalten.pdf>
- 2 In the European context, the terms Roma and Romani people refer to an ethnic self-representation and to an externally enforced umbrella term for diverse and heterogeneous sub-categories (see Leko, 2017), including, for example, Egyptians or Ashkali, most of whom do not consider themselves as Roma
- 3 https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-09/EU_support_to_Roma_integration.pdf
- 4 https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2025-roma-survey-2024_en.pdf
- 5 Data were accessed through the biannual reports by the federal government on “safe countries of origin”: <https://www.bundestag.de/presse/hib/kurzmeldungen-996376>. The latest, and final report was published in March 2024, after the government decided not to publish further reports.
- 6 See for example [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre#{"itemid":\["001-228661"\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre#{)
- 7 <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC117901>

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