



Cognitive Remittances and the Reintegration 'Hump': Changing Self-Perceptions and Positionality among Roma Returnees in Albania and Kosovo

Zana Vathi¹ · Russell King² · Ilir Gëdeshi³

Accepted: 5 October 2022
© The Author(s) 2022

Abstract

Using the innovative concept of cognitive remittances, this paper looks at the transformation of the self-perception and positionality of Roma returned asylum-seekers. The empirical evidence, in the form of interview narratives and focus group quotes, is drawn from two research projects based in Albania and Kosovo and the wider Western Balkan region. The findings show that the migration and asylum-seeking experience, in Germany and other EU countries, provide the Roma with a new lens through which they can view and appreciate their historical and contemporary belongingness in the Western Balkan countries. Having been exposed to different lifestyles and values, they face real challenges upon return, where they have to confront anew very low living standards, socio-economic marginalisation and unfavourable positioning in the social hierarchy. We label this the reintegration 'hump'. A cognitive shift occurs and their self-perception changes, including a greater sensitivity to experiences of discrimination. Reintegration is both hampered and potentially enabled by their enhanced political literacy and agency.

Keywords Cognitive remittances · Asylum-seekers · Return migration · Reintegration hump · Roma · Albania · Kosovo

✉ Russell King
R.King@sussex.ac.uk
Zana Vathi
Vathiz@edgehill.ac.uk
Ilir Gëdeshi
Gadeshi@hotmail.com

¹ Department of Social Sciences, Edge Hill University, Ormskirk, UK

² Department of Geography, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK

³ Center for Economic and Social Studies, Tirana, Albania

Introduction

This paper floats the new concept of *cognitive remittances* to illustrate the increased self-awareness and agency experienced by Roma asylum-seekers returning from Western European countries to Albania and Kosovo. In essence, cognitive remittances are changes in migrants' social and political identities, which incline marginalised minorities, in our case the Roma, to a more critical view of their societies of origin, including a higher sensitivity towards discrimination. Originating from a background of poverty, marginalisation and discrimination, the Roma's exposure to more prosperous and welfare-rich societies such as Germany and France and their experiences there of schooling, vocational training and, for some, income-earning work, have an empowering effect. Becoming more cognitively aware of who they are and how they have been racialised and discriminated against in the past creates in them a greater social consciousness and improved political literacy. Taking this cognitive capital with them when they return makes them conveyors of cognitive remittances, with potential implications for individual and group positioning in the societies of origin, despite the barriers they experience in terms of the diffusion of such remittances.

Such increased self-confidence has, however, an ambivalent impact on their prospects for reintegration following the failure of their asylum project and the resulting obligated return. On the one hand, they are better equipped with the skills and determination to carve out a better livelihood for themselves in the challenging economic environment of Albania and Kosovo. On the other hand, the depressed economic situation of their home countries and the ongoing discrimination directed towards Roma minorities make them pessimistic about their chances of finding a job and making progress. In short, returning Roma face a *reintegration 'hump'*. We use this term, our second neologism, to refer to the particular challenges that already marginalised and stigmatised minorities face when they return to their territory of origin. Therefore, further emigration—but this time preferably by legal means and geared to a regular work contract rather than the long-shot of asylum-seeking based on economic reasons—becomes their plan for the future.

With these two key concepts in mind, we specify the main research and policy question addressed by this article. What should be done in order for the reintegration of Roma returnees to be a successful and dynamic process and for their cognitive remittances to generate social change?

In the next section, we lay out the contextual background to our research. We introduce the Roma ethnic minorities in Albania and Kosovo and describe their migration trends, culminating in the most recent phase, which is called 'economic asylum-seeking' (see Knezevic, 2019). The subsequent section responds to calls for a contextualisation of social remittances based on a deeper understanding of processes of social change in the sending countries (White, 2021). Given that the vast majority had their asylum requests turned down, return migration followed, leading to the main research focus of the article: the challenge of reintegration for a marginalised and disadvantaged minority population. Having experienced and witnessed a different lifestyle and set of values abroad, especially as regards

social welfare and human rights, the Roma returnees are less willing to accept being victims of discrimination when they return. However, their unfavourable positioning in the social and political hierarchy of their countries of origin is also a major barrier to the transmission and diffusion of cognitive remittances for broader social change. The significant barriers to forging a satisfactory livelihood post-return ultimately redirect them, once again, towards the emigration path.

Situating Cognitive Remittances in the Social Remittances and Social Change Literatures

Social remittances, as originally coined by Levitt (1998: 926), are 'the ideas, behaviours, identities and social capital that flow from receiving- to sending-country communities'. However, the (dis)continuities of receiving and sending communities in the transnational plane have not been sufficiently problematised by the ensuing empirical literature. The collective aspect of social remittances is recognised but only in terms of the capacity of organisational actors to remit (Levitt & Lamba-Nieves, 2011).

Our work on cognitive remittances is reflective of the broad observation that migrants can influence the values, attitudes and practices in home societies and this is best understood through a transnational lens. The context of return, in which research for this paper is embedded, is considered a privileged setting where the impactful intersection of migrants' social remittances—their ideas, values, lifestyle regimes—with home perspectives on the same can be best understood (Boccagni & Decimo, 2013). Indeed, return can consist of a social remittance strategy in itself (Isaakyan & Triandafyllidou, 2017). We argue that the context of return allows for a more holistic investigation of the acquisition of cognitive remittances, and the role these can play (or not) in combination with more indirect migration impacts and non-migration related factors (White, 2021).

However, as research is increasingly pointing out, migrants' individual and collective characteristics matter and so does the opportunity structure in both sending and receiving countries. Therefore, the political dimension of transnational intersections between migrants' experiences and home countries' expectations and practices should not be underestimated (Tabar & Maalouf, 2016). At the very least, a distinction between the individual and the collective level should be drawn, and the dynamic hierarchies of transnational social spaces on the basis of class, gender, race and ethnicity should be considered (Boccagni & Decimo, 2013). Even though, as our findings point out, this political dimension much depends on the positionality of migrants and, in particular, their individual and social identities prior to migrating.

Class is one of the major social identities that the social remittances literature has discussed, the conclusion of which is that class distinctions resist social remittances (Paasche, 2016). In the mainstream social remittances literature, the critical point around which social remittances are generated and contested is migrants' greater personal autonomy and the clash with the norms, behaviours and expectations of the communities of origin. The content of social remittances is attributed to the meaning which migrants attach to their experience of migration and the way in which their

personal, family and community circuits transform as a result (Boccagni & Decimo, 2013). When emotional remittances have been discussed, they are seen as a dimension of or as accompanying financial remittances within the framework of moral economy (Solari, 2019) and the impact that these remittances have on wellbeing (Huennekes, 2018) and feelings of love, gratitude or guilt (Katigbak, 2017). Similarly, the concept of political remittances is associated with the way in which diasporas impact on their homeland politics. Developed by Tabar and Maalouf (2016), political remittances are part of diasporic transnational fields and play a potentially significant role in homeland politics. While the unit of analysis changes—homeland *versus* family and community—ethnic and racial minorities are treated as irrelevant here, too.

In all these iterations, social remittances and variations thereof are seen as direct effects of migration and as externally observable, as the ‘conscious adoption and direct transmission of foreign ideas, attitudes, practices, etc.’ (White, 2021: 3195). However, this directedness and externally defined migration impact implies a ‘politically fit’ migrant, favourably positioned in a mainstream society, who is able to act as an ‘ordinary agent of change’ at the very least (Grabowska & Garapich, 2016) or as a global celebrity or transnational spokesperson (Isaakyan & Triandafyllidou, 2017). The same applies to the assumption that transnationally agile returnees are particularly influential in diffusing social remittances, consisting of highly reflexive remitters (Anghel et al., 2019). At the same time, there is increasing recognition of the role of the degree of preparedness of communities of origin for social innovation and of the political opportunity infrastructure in the way in and extent to which social remittances can make an impact (Isaakyan & Triandafyllidou, 2017).

Therefore, while social remittances are continuously studied as a process made up of acquisition, transmission and diffusion stages (Grabowska & Garapich, 2016), there is a need to recognise the more cognitive processes that accompany the acquisition of social remittances and to position minority migrants and returnees in the context of social change. While, for social remittances, additional translation/mediation may be needed to enable the remitter to ‘scale up’ the effects of social remittances, issues of agency and power are paramount in the case of minorities who generate cognitive remittances (Isaakyan & Triandafyllidou, 2017). The transmission and diffusion of these would mean channelling their political capital through coherent and impactful policies that close the minority–majority gap.

This focus on policies should not be confused with the overwhelming emphasis that European countries have put on Roma minorities’ ‘integration’ in recent years. In the EU and EU member states’ discourse, the Roma are currently not framed as an indigenous minority that needs protection against discrimination but as a group that ought to catch up with ‘mainstream’ society (Magazzini, 2020). In the case of the Roma returnees in our study, this conceptualisation of integration runs counter to their long-standing presence in the Balkans. Reintegration is, however, a part of Roma community leaders’ discourse, reflecting the political discourse in the Western Balkans and the broader discourse of EU conditionality as part of the EU accession process, which includes the curbing of free movement of large sections of the population from these countries (Magazzini, 2018). As the findings below demonstrate, this discourse does not translate into a better reception of Roma returnees,

despite the opening up of political spaces for (re)framing their identities and mobility intentions.

Roma Migration from Albania and Kosovo: 'Economic Asylum-Seekers'?

Albania and Kosovo lie at the heart of the geopolitically complex and historically volatile region of the Western Balkans.¹ Migration processes from the two countries reflect these complex geopolitical vicissitudes, with Roma mobility patterns generally mirroring the trends of the wider majority populations but with some particularities. Despite the essentialising use of the term 'Roma' in the Western Balkans region to refer to the Roma, Ashkalie and Egyptians (RAE), the Roma communities in Albania and Kosovo are, in fact, not a homogenous ethnic group; they exhibit quite subtle differences as regards culture, language and religion and in their 'distance' from the 'mainstream' population. They may, however, be perceived as homogenous by members of the surrounding 'mainstream' society and by other 'outsiders' who merely observe their superficial identifying characteristics as marginalised minorities (Knezevic, 2019). For the sake of simplicity and at the risk of masking inter-community differences (Messing, 2019), we label all interviewees and informants in this paper as Roma, unless there is a good reason why one of the sub-categories should be mentioned.²

The Roma communities in the Western Balkans are characterised by much lower socio-economic indicators when compared to the non-Roma (Robayo-Abril & Millán, 2019). This occurs not least because of the discrimination they experience in education and the labour market (O'Higgins, 2012). The estimated sizes of the Roma communities in both Albania (overall population 2.86 million) and Kosovo (1.81 million) are open to wide variations. For Albania, there are few official records of Roma numbers since the Roma and Egyptians are not normally recognised as distinct ethnic minorities (largely for linguistic reasons). However, for the first time, the 2011 Census included an ethnicity question, resulting in 8301 Roma and 3368 Egyptians being recorded (INSTAT, 2012). These figures were condemned by some experts and by the Roma and Egyptian community associations as unreliable underestimates.

Figures are even more shaky for Kosovo because of the legacy of the conflict and its population displacement effects, which affected many Roma communities whose loyalties were exposed or compromised. According to Government of Kosovo (2008) figures, there were at that time 35,000–40,000 RAE people living in Kosovo, with a much larger number living outside—estimated at 100,000, including 35,000 in Germany with *Dildung* status (temporary suspension of deportation) and others living as refugees and displaced persons in neighbouring countries of the Western Balkans (Sigona, 2012: 1218).

Legal routes of emigration from Albania and Kosovo into the EU are very limited; therefore, migration has mostly taken place through irregular means (Robayo-Abril & Millán, 2019). In the most recent phase of Albanian migration, during the 2010s, when the asylum route to Germany and the EU opened up, the Roma have

been over-represented. Data for Germany, the only EU country that records asylum-seekers' ethnicity (as opposed to their nationality), indicate that between 6 and 11% of Albanian claimants were Roma—substantially higher than most estimates of their share of the population of Albania. Germany appealed to potential asylum-seekers because of its high incomes, availability of jobs and growing reputation as a 'welcoming' country, especially during the so-called refugee crisis of the mid-2010s. Moreover, since the end of December 2008, Albanians have been permitted to travel visa-free in the Schengen area, subject to certain conditions such as the possession of a biometric passport.³ During the decade 2010–2019, around 193,000 Albanian citizens sought asylum in EU countries, especially in Germany where, in 2015, the asylum flow from Albania peaked at 65,900 in a single year. However, Albanians' asylum success rates were very low—only 2.1% according to EU statistics—implying that most asylum-seekers had to return to Albania once their asylum options, including any appeals, ran out. The pressure to return increased after September 2015, when the EU parliament ruled that Albania and the other Western Balkan countries be considered as safe countries of return.

Kosovan migration to Europe has a somewhat longer history than that from Albania. Kosovans were part of the temporary labour–migration flows from the former Yugoslavia directed especially towards Germany and Switzerland in the 1960s and 1970s. Kosovan migration took on a more refugee-like character after the break-up of Yugoslavia and especially during the later years of the Kosovan conflict. The scale of emigration from Kosovo is similar to that from Albania. According to World Bank data (2016: 159), there were 550,000 Kosovans living abroad in 2013. The Roma are thought to be over-represented in recent asylum and return flows, partly because of their poverty due to long-standing discrimination and partly because they were massively displaced by the Serb–Albanian ethnic conflict during the war.⁴

Methods

The empirical material presented in this paper comes from two projects in which the authors, in different combinations, were involved. The first was the World Bank project 'Supporting the Effective Reintegration of Roma Returnees in the Western Balkans'. Based on an extensive programme of field research in the so-called 'WB6' countries (Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) carried out in 2018, we concentrate on Albania and Kosovo. The fieldwork conducted in these two countries generated more consistent research results—in the form of Albanian-language transcripts of interviews and focus group discussions—which we could confidently access and analyse for the purpose of this paper. In Albania, the field team carried out 38 semi-structured interviews with returned asylum-seekers within the Roma communities, 14 focus group discussions with Roma returnees and 17 semi-structured interviews with key informants and stakeholders—Roma leaders, NGO representatives, social welfare experts and representatives from diverse sectors such as education, health, labour and local government.

The corresponding numbers in Kosovo were 26 interviews with returned asylum-seekers, 9 focus groups and 8 interviews with key stakeholders.

The second research project was commissioned by the International Organization for Migration and entitled 'Albanian Returned Asylum-Seekers: Reintegration or Re-emigration?' With field surveys conducted in 2019, this looked just at Albania and covered all returned asylum-seekers. The Roma sample consisted of 15 returned asylum-seekers and 2 focus groups. In addition, 30 key and stakeholder interviews were carried out, including some with the leaders of Roma organisations.

The data collected in both projects were broadly of the same nature, based on semi-structured interviews. Interview questions were grouped under three heads: interviewees' background and their reasons for migrating and seeking asylum; experiences in the host country, relating to welfare support, human rights, accommodation, education and changed mentality (linking to the topic of cognitive remittances); and their perceptions and experiences of return, including obstacles and challenges (the 'reintegration hump'). Focus groups were organised around a similar structure and sequence of themes.

Accessing Roma respondents for interviews and focus groups was not easy since they are a marginalised population both socio-economically and spatially: they endure high levels of poverty and deprivation and are often confined to peripheral locations on the edges of towns and villages. If the traditional view has been that the Roma have in general sought invisibility (Stewart, 2013), recent research cautions that this invisibility should be seen as a consequence and a construction of the racialised politics of the Roma in Europe (Knezevic, 2019; Kóczé, 2018). Sardelić (2016) writes that the Roma are 'visible minorities' but 'invisible citizens' existing on the 'fringes of citizenship' in the countries where they reside.

We adopted what we call 'methodologies of precarity' in order to access such a hard-to-reach group. This methodological approach involves a trade-off between, on the one hand, rigorous, representative sampling and/or rich ethnographic analysis and, on the other, a more pragmatically driven concern to capture broad trends and group characteristics. The intrinsic value of the data collected lies in their multi-level evidence rather than systematic analysis. Our interpretation blends generalised themes with 'outlier prevalence' since the Roma returnees reported some distinct experiences which impacted on their sense of individual personhood and, in turn, their group identity.

For both projects, fieldwork was conducted by a team of researchers hired by the World Bank and the IOM, respectively. Potential participants were approached via intermediaries and gatekeepers, including community leaders, local NGO staff, municipal offices and some random encounters in the field. The snowball method was also used, whereby interviewees 'recommend' friends, neighbours and other contacts to the interviewer. Naturally, this method does not constitute a true random sample, which we believe would have been impossible in such a field context. However, the number of informants whose voices are represented across the two countries—around 350, including members of the focus groups—gives us confidence in the broad representativeness of the findings. We consider this research and these methodologies of precarity as important for impact generation as, otherwise, this group's experiences would not be heard and informed policies would be lacking.

Moreover, our chosen methodology avoids the usual determinism that has characterised work on Roma minorities from ‘mainstream’ researchers (Surdu, 2016).

All interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed in their original language. Translations of selected extracts are by the authors. The quotes used in the paper are based on a reasoned choice and are representative of themes, reactions, behaviours and perceptions which are consistently evident in the overall narrative corpus, as well as acknowledging the existence of the ‘outlier prevalence’ noted above. Pseudonyms are allocated to respondents, and any other identifying details, such as very precise locations, are screened out in order to preserve the anonymity of the participants.

Migrating, Staying and Returning: Experiences of the ‘Reintegration Hump’

Earlier, we noted that recent Roma migrants from Albania and Kosovo who travelled to Germany and other EU countries in the 2010s were defined as ‘economic asylum-seekers’. Driven by poverty, marginalisation and discrimination in their Balkan home countries, they sought a better life by moving to wealthier countries and trying to gain a foothold there by claiming asylum. They hoped that the asylum process would offer better living conditions than those experienced in the home country; moreover, this route has, for years, been the only feasible legal one into EU countries. However, few were able to settle long term, resulting in very high rates of obligatory return. Nevertheless, despite the short duration of their stay, ranging from a few months to a few years, their experience abroad had a strong impact on them. When they returned, they not only took back knowledge of another way of life but also developed a reappraisal of themselves and this self-cognition conditioned how they saw themselves fitting into what they hoped might be a more egalitarian and less discriminatory society.

In answer to the question ‘Why asylum?’ the quote below, from Hamdi, in Fushë-Kruja, a town north of Tirana, speaks for many of the research informants:

In 2014, we heard news that some Roma households had been provided with shelter and help in France and Germany: free housing, free visits to the doctor, school for the children, and each adult received an allowance. ... Phone calls started to share the news and many left for these countries. Who had a car sold it [to pay for the trip], some borrowed money, others pledged their houses as guarantees [for loans]. ...

The Roma (and other Albanians and Kosovans) were also attracted by the lengthy procedural timeline for their asylum requests to be processed. In the meantime, they could benefit from the accommodation, allowances and social services (education, training, healthcare etc.) offered by the host country and perhaps access some informal work opportunities to boost their financial gains.

Having said that, poverty—caused by widespread unemployment—has been the overarching factor driving Roma migration, pushing them to take the speculative asylum route when other migration and livelihood options were closed off. In

Albania, Roma unemployment was 51% in the mid-2010s—three times higher than for the Albanian population as a whole, 17%. Younger Roma, aged 16–30 years, posted a higher rate of 62% (Gëdeshi et al., 2017). The situation in Kosovo was even worse: the official unemployment rate for the population as a whole was 31% in 2017 although RAE community leaders suggested rates of 80–90% for these groups.

Despite the high intensity of Roma migration from Albania and Kosovo, not all who wish to leave can do so. Interviews and focus groups in both countries revealed many situations where only those individuals and families with sufficient financial capital (or the means to raise it) were able to migrate. The combined costs—passports, smugglers' fees, 'tips' to border guards, plus bus/taxi/train/ferry/plane fares—would amount to 500–1000 euros per person or 2000–6000 euros per family, depending on the route and the size of the family. Given their background of poverty and unemployment, few Roma were able to make the trip without selling off some or even all of their material resources. They sold land, livestock, furniture and even their homes to raise the cash required. Others borrowed from relatives, including those already abroad. Some of the interviewees in Tirana were evacuees from an area of Roma housing which was demolished to make way for a new road scheme. Astrit related how her family used the compensation to fund their asylum trip to Germany:

In the first year, the municipality gave us 240,000 *lek* [around 1,900 euros] for the rent for new accommodation. ... We decided to use the money to emigrate ... because here there is no hope. ... We bought passports for the children, paid for the tickets and left.

Those who sold most of their possessions or borrowed heavily to finance their emigration took a risk that their asylum stay would be too short and unprofitable to amortise their debts. The relationship between asylum-seekers' experiences abroad and their return and reintegration outcomes was crucially affected by timing and in multiple ways. The most obvious temporal distinction concerns the length of time spent abroad, in synthesis, a few months versus a few years. This distinction depended in turn on the timing of the asylum move. Those who migrated before October 2015 were usually able to stay longer, be allocated better accommodation and receive more generous allowances for longer periods of time. Subsequently, the EU categorised Albania and Kosovo as 'safe countries of origin' and the asylum laws changed, so that asylum arrivals after October 2015 were accommodated in reception camps, received lower benefits and were sent back to their countries of origin sooner, as a result of an expedited asylum process. In general, those who were able to prolong their stay for 3 or 4 years could access independent accommodation, start working, learn the language and send their children to school. Izet, who was from the ethnically split (Albanian and Serbian) town of Mitrovica in northern Kosovo, described his positive experience in Germany:

In Germany, I initially worked for a Turkish guy who paid me 8.50 euros per hour. I worked six months without a contract. We were not supposed to work, because we went to Germany for asylum. But after two years we received a letter that gave us the right to work. Then, I worked for a bakery;

I used to wrap cookies. I loaded them into a van and delivered them. I was paid around 1,300 euros per month. The German government gave us 2,250 euros per month for the whole family, plus there was my wage. As you can imagine, the economic situation of my family improved significantly.

Izet's experience was by no means exceptional. Those who saved the most had large families (since each member received an allowance) and economised on expenditure. By contrast, those asylum-seekers who 'never passed the camp stage', as some of them put it, did not accumulate any financial capital, let alone gain skills or social contacts. Below are two typical quotes from returned asylum-seekers who were able to stay abroad for a length of time that enabled them not only to improve their financial situation but also to build their social and cognitive capital—learning a new language, developing work-related skills and making contacts.

In order to learn German, I attended a language course for 3–4 months ... I also made some money and got to know many people. ... I even went to Switzerland and worked a bit there. Wherever there were Albanians, we went and worked as they had their own businesses. Unfortunately, I didn't progress as much as I hoped as I received notification that I had to leave (Xhemil, Prizren, Kosovo).

In France I went to school as I was 17 years old when I arrived. ... I learnt French for one year and could communicate well... I had some work practice in a restaurant, working as a chef in the kitchen (Isa, young man, Tirana).

Finally, time is also linked to the traumas of forcible return and the lack of preparation allowed. The drama of return in these circumstances is manifold. As many informants narrated, the suddenness of departure involved experiencing their homes being raided by the police, often very early in the morning, confiscation of their savings and being given minimal time—as little as half an hour—to gather their things and be ready to be driven to the airport for the flight home (see also Knezevic, 2019). The loss of their accumulated financial resources was particularly galling, not just because of the obvious loss of capital but because returnees who went back empty-handed experienced high degrees of shame and social criticism (cf. Schuster & Majidi, 2013).

Therefore, the material outcomes of the asylum-seeking project vary enormously. On the one hand are those Roma who were able to prolong their stay for several years, accumulate social assistance payments, generate extra income by working, acquire language skills and develop new social networks. Equally common, however, were examples where 'failed' asylum-seekers were sent back after a few months, with nothing to show for their efforts. Indeed, many in this group ended up worse off, since they had sold their land and other possessions in order to pay for their emigration journey or still owed money which they had borrowed. Speaking of the village-origin Roma in Albania, Niku, a Tirana-based community leader, said:

We can say that 40–50 per cent of the Roma have sold their land or mortgaged it against a loan ... they needed to raise the money to emigrate. The

information that we have shows that those who sold their land are the most vulnerable; they really regret it.

Other interviewees related how they had even sold their houses to finance their asylum journey; naturally, when they returned, they had no place of their own to stay, so they were dependent on relatives to help out, resulting in temporary and cramped living conditions. Occupants of the 'Pallati me Shigjeta' Roma district in Tirana, whose homes were cleared for a new highway, likewise had to make alternative arrangements once they returned to Albania. Nonetheless, the biggest obstacle in the 'reintegration hump' facing Roma returnees is finding a job to sustain their livelihood. This is the situation with all returned asylum-seekers, not just the Roma (Gëdeshi & King, 2022). However, the situation is more challenging for Roma returnees, for two main reasons: first, because of their generally low educational and professional levels and limited social-capital links to the majority population. As a result, unemployment among returnee Roma is significantly higher. Second, the Roma still suffer from discrimination in the labour market and indeed across society as a whole (for details, see Robayo-Abril & Millán, 2019). Endrit, a Roma student in Kosovo, described a typical situation faced by Roma returnees:

The main problem for us is unemployment. It is mainly through connections that people get a job and the employers [most of whom are non-Roma] always consider their relatives and friends first for any job.

Another problem was faced by self-employed Roma who found that, after they returned, they had lost their place in the market in terms of access to suppliers and customers. Esmeralda, a young Roma girl who returned from Luxembourg, described the predicament faced by her parents:

When we returned to Albania, we found ourselves in a very difficult economic situation. My parents, who used to sell clothes in the market, had lost all their connections. It took a long time to re-establish them.

Often, perseverance and imagination are necessary to secure a job. As a result of their experience abroad, a higher standard of work ethics is generally observed among returned Roma, while others point to the ability to speak a foreign language that facilitates re-employment, even in an unpromising labour market. Fatos, interviewed in Tirana, tried the employment office without luck but then found a job on his own initiative:

When I came back it took me a good month to acclimatise. ... But after a while, it seemed reasonable to look for a job because I speak fluent German. I went to the jobseekers' office ... after that, I found a job by looking on the Internet. I work in a call centre.

Social remittances (Levitt, 1998) are therefore a distinct 'outcome' of these asylum experiences. However, while reintegrating with the mainstream requires significant social capital, which the Roma, to a greater or lesser extent, have cultivated abroad, Roma returnees face several barriers to reintegration related to the spaces

available to them, material obstacles and general attitudes towards them at the level of service provision.

Cognitive Remittances and Reintegration: ‘Basically, I Was a Completely Different Person There’

The more intrinsic factors that condition Roma’s reintegration are of an emotional and cognitive nature. To start with, Roma community leaders emphasise the long-standing mobile nature of the Roma and their lack of attachment to a specific national identity, both of which are underpinned by the systematic historical and contemporary discrimination against them. As the quote below from Xhafer, a Roma community leader in Kosovo, shows, the lack of national attachment and belongingness makes Roma (re)integration a difficult concept in the first place. These discourses employed by Roma community leaders may well refer to long-standing misperceptions on their mobility and lack of belongingness (Rostas, 2019; Van Baar & Kóczé, 2020).

Whenever I have discussed this with other Roma, the argument has been that we do not have our own state, our homeland; we like to think of ourselves as world citizens, to have full freedom of movement. We do not strive for a strong connection with a specific country or any patriotic feeling towards a particular state. If we can’t make a life here, we go and try to make a life in Germany. For us it doesn’t make much difference; but it is different for the Albanians [he means non-Roma Albanian-speaking Kosovans] because their belongingness to this country is much stronger.

Reintegration is therefore a form of paradox for returning Roma, for two reasons: firstly because, before they left on their migration and asylum journeys, they were not ‘integrated’ in the first place and, secondly, because of the Roma’s historical openness to movement, connected to their particular mode of survival and fashioning a life and a livelihood.

At a more cognitive level, the experience of migration, even if it is for quite a short time, changes the Roma’s self-perception and makes them more sensitive towards experiences of discrimination upon return. Either explicitly or more implicitly, hidden in their narratives and discussions, it becomes clear that Roma returnees are able to draw a distinction between their vulnerability and their being victims of discrimination. Some participants stressed that they are not, by nature, vulnerable; rather, being subject to discrimination at all levels of Albanian/Kosovan society only serves to increase their vulnerability. In the quote below, Dalip, a Roma man interviewed in Tirana, gives vent to his feelings of being racially discriminated against in Albania:

In Germany, life is very different; I learnt many more things than here, because here in Albania there is a lot of unemployment and also racism. I am a Roma and have started working here but I don’t feel good ... the main-

stream society discriminates brutally against the disadvantaged. ... There is some discrimination in Europe, too, but not as much as here...

As this quote shows, transnational comparison is thus the lens through which reintegration is seen, especially in the initial stages of return. After having experienced a better lifestyle and a different sense of dignity abroad, one of the main challenges is adaptation back to the discriminatory reality of the Roma in the Balkan region. The 'reintegration hump' is difficult for the returning Roma to overcome because of the multiple challenges that they face. For those who managed to achieve some personal and material progress while abroad and who experienced social inclusion through the work of charities and some structural integration through interaction with the social protection system, the return to the status quo ante of marginalisation, discrimination and unemployment is a particularly bitter pill to swallow.

Therefore, reintegration is both hampered and potentially enabled by the experience of being abroad and exposed to new opportunities, experiences and concepts of equality. In one interpretation, these experiences hinder reintegration since there is a long-standing view, deriving from the early work of Cerase (1974) and later Casarino (2008), that achieving a high level of integration abroad is a barrier to reintegration upon return. Liman, an interviewee in Kosovo, stressed this point as follows:

You would be surprised how easily the Roma have integrated [abroad] – not all of them but the majority. I have personally witnessed this, especially in Germany ... because the overall approach of Germany is to treat everyone equally and help everyone to integrate. Everyone is equal as long as they respect the law. [There] the Roma have been able to go on language courses, send their children to school, discuss their employment rights...

Some of these positive experiences abroad are converted into social capital, which the Roma can transfer to their country of origin to enhance their reintegration prospects (Gëdeshi & King, 2022). Soon after arriving in their asylum destination, many Roma were able to access their first decent housing, which they were allocated while their asylum case was being reviewed. They learned how to complete paperwork for the authorities and observed the schooling of their children alongside other children. They received social assistance and some developed new work habits. Despite the implication of the social protection staff in enforcing restrictive immigration laws (Cleton & Schweitzer, 2021), these learning experiences represented an accumulation of cognitive capital, which increases their feeling of self-worth and elevates their expectations and sense of entitlement in terms of performing active citizenship after return. The toughest (re)integration challenge is therefore primarily a cognitive 'hump', linked to the quest to build a sense of belongingness, hitherto missing in their territories of origin because of discrimination and exclusion.

One of the most striking narratives of changing social positionality and cognitive capital acquired abroad was this account from Adem, a young Roma man interviewed in Tirana:

What did I gain from migration? First of all, I gained the experience of feeling good. An avenue opened up in front of me, an opportunity. I went to

school, I also worked for a short while. Basically, I was a completely different person there [in Germany] compared to here; I was so very different! I learned the language; I had my own social circle. Wherever I go, the language certificate will be an asset. But it is also the mentality, because you interact with very different social networks. You have a day-to-day life, which is 100 per cent different to here.

The Roma community leaders, on their part, notice the change among returnees and their attitude towards work, particularly the desirability of getting a job in the formal sector. As Sigona (2012) noted, Roma community leaders can help the reintegration of returning young adults through their role as gatekeepers and mediators between the community and service providers. Shpetim, a Roma community leader in Tirana, put it this way:

Germany shaped them, in more ways than one. First, they now know how to communicate much better, plus many of them have registered in the jobseekers' offices. Before they left, they were unwilling to go to school or try to find a job. ... The majority of the returnees have started looking for a job and I have helped them to gain some vocational training. They are open to any kind of work opportunity because their mentality has changed.

This observation on the importance of what we have labelled 'cognitive remittances' also shapes participants' thoughts about re-emigration. Most interviewees saw re-emigration as their best option; returning does not remove the issue of discrimination they face whenever they try to make contact with state institutions:

I'd say discrimination is a major and common factor; basically when they go to receive a service they feel the discrimination, even though some of them cannot express it, they feel that there is some sort of discrimination even though it may be covert. So often they go to an institution, but they are sent back; they are told 'come back tomorrow' and they feel tired of this treatment and racism and stark discrimination (Niku, Roma community leader, Tirana).

While it is true that the Roma have a reputation for repeated asylum attempts, migrating each time to a different country to lodge their claim,⁵ most respondents wanted to get further training in order to access job openings—such as electricians, plumbers, vehicle mechanics or restaurant workers—in the desired host country. Meanwhile, Gazmend, from Fieri in Albania, talked about the new social contacts he made when he was in Germany, which he planned to utilise to obtain a work contract in the near future.

In Germany I have some Kosovan friends who live and work there. They have German passports and have promised to ensure a work contract for me.

A second implication of our findings has been to rethink the theoretical relationship between time and reintegration. The significance of these migrants' cognitive transformations despite the short stays abroad shows that time should be measured qualitatively rather than longitudinally. However, the whole 'integration' debate surrounding Roma migration and return has ambiguous effects on migrants' post-return

reintegration. Part of this ambiguity relates to the assumption that the Roma were 'integrated' in Albania and Kosovo before they left. Lumi, the leader of a Roma association in Prishtina, put this issue in the following terms:

Integration ... hmm, for me to say 'I am integrated' already poses an issue for me. I can talk about the history of the Roma in the Balkans going back 100–150 years, so to say today that I need to integrate indicates a massive issue. Because if I haven't yet managed to integrate after five or six generations, I never will.

Lumi then went on to open up an obvious and relevant issue—that of policy towards the Roma communities more widely and returning asylum-seekers in particular.

... Let's consider the extent to which the state is willing to help [the Roma] so that they don't beg on the streets or steal and break the law. ... This is a completely different matter.

The issue of re-emigration is linked with major geopolitical processes such as EU membership that the Western Balkan states are going through. Opportunities to diffuse their cognitive remittances can arise as an element of the process of reintegration that governments are obliged to commit to as part of EU conditionality. As a regional official put it:

When they come back here and everyone is doing everything around them, of course they feel like they are in a better position because here we are, talking about them, and trying to keep them in the country and they all say to themselves, 'Well, I will find 200 euros and leave the country if I can get this kind of treatment, easily'.

The policy domain, which, in reality, constitutes a combination of many interconnected subdomains—including social protection, anti-discrimination laws, reintegration measures, economic incentives, educational policies and many more—is a hugely challenging theme which largely lies out with the scope of this paper. We close, however, with a discussion of the theoretical, empirical and policy implications of our findings.

Discussion and Conclusions

The findings of this paper show that, during the process of reintegration into Albania and Kosovo, Roma asylum-seekers are faced with several obstacles, which we called 'reintegration humps'. Some of these obstacles are rooted in the historical–structural and geopolitical contexts of the two Western Balkan countries and the Roma's own intersectional positioning within the region. Ethnically based discrimination has been a persistent, overarching factor that contributes to the Roma's position as a marginalised minority at the very bottom of the social ladder. On the other hand, their experience abroad has a multi-layered set of effects on their reintegration

prospects and on their ability to progress their lives after return. What we have termed ‘cognitive remittances’ has given them a new sense of self-understanding. In comparison to the concept of social remittances, cognitive remittances constitute a set of more personal, knowledge-based political shifts that minority-origin migrants experience as a result of their interaction with the structure of another social system in which they are not as unfavourably positioned and discriminated against.

For our participants, their better treatment abroad while interacting with state and third sector structures provided humanising experiences of acceptance and a new sense of dignity and personhood. At the same time, their constructive interaction with the structures in the host countries is largely a result of their agency—their ability to mobilise their personal strengths, social ties and other resources to optimise their gains from these asylum experiences (Knezevic, 2019). Cognitive remittances make returnees more assertive towards claiming a sense of equality, but this has bifurcated effects. On the one hand, social and cognitive remittances can enhance their (re)integration prospects as they demonstrate an increased awareness of their rights and skills as active citizens. On the other hand, in developing a sharper critique of the continued high degree of separatedness between the Roma and mainstream society in Albania and Kosovo, they become more pessimistic about their chances of making progress in situ and more convinced that their future lies elsewhere.

The links between cognitive remittances and social capital are complex; while the social capital that migrants possess at the point of outmigration is important, empirically speaking and in the case of the Roma, social capital generated through experiences during migration appears as paramount for the shifts in perspectives on personal and collective political identities. The potential of social capital in this area is seen in the generation of *positive social remittances* that facilitate interconnections between social actors and settings (Boccagni & Decimo, 2013: 7). However, the concept of positive social remittances does not capture the change that needs to happen in very marginalised minorities who experience migration and its impact on their sense of individual and collective political identities—the focus of cognitive remittances put forward by this article.

Another difference with social remittances is that the collective dimension of cognitive remittances is based on the individual cognitive shifts that occur in members of marginalised minority groups who redefine their social identities based on their migration experiences. These social identities are stigmatised and become politicised in the context of migration. While both concepts are dynamic and carry the potential to ‘scale up and scale out’ (Levitt & Lamba-Nieves, 2011: 1), in the case of cognitive remittances, these dynamics are in the context of minority–majority relations in the country of origin and in terms of the impact that these shifts in perceptions have for reintegration and re-migration. However, as the Roma are unfavourably positioned in the social and political hierarchy in the country of origin, their ability to diffuse their cognitive remittances and generate social change is weak; therefore, re-migration is seen as a route out. The fact that most returnees seem to plan to migrate again the minute they can should be calibrated against any impact that ‘cognitive remittances’ can have on their ‘homeland’; the effects of

cognitive remittances in the current socio-political climate appear to be more significant in compounding a 'culture of migration'.

Time in the context of social remittances is seen as linear, as quantitative time; in the framework of cognitive remittances, time has a qualitative dimension based on the nature and intensity of interactions during migration, which reveal the opportunities that emerge once minorities are removed from a system that puts them at the bottom of social hierarchies. Temporalities of cognitive remittances are therefore experiential rather than chronological, as the quality of the experiences rather than the length of stay abroad appears to make the most significant difference. We see the temporal dimension also in combination with the extent of difference perceived between the sending (Albania and Kosovo) and receiving countries (old EU member states) (Levitt, 2001). Since the extent of the difference is significant, this plays a role in the emergence and intensity of cognitive remittances. However, as White (2021) points out, the sending–receiving country dichotomy is based on a hegemonic understanding of context. The positionality of the Roma in these different contexts, in combination with socio-economic and political factors and individual circumstances, are the factors that more directly affect cognitive remittances.

The note on experiential time as linked to the quality of the experiences in the different Western EU member states comes with two caveats. First, Roma attitudes towards *temporality* and the creation of an expansive present is already documented and is due to the experience of extreme marginalisation and social exclusion and the high level of symbolic violence that is involved in the process (Day et al., 1998; Sardelić, 2016, 2017). Secondly, the level of structural racism against the Roma in some Western states is not lower than in the Balkans. Evidence points to harsh discrimination in terms of housing for example (Van Baar, 2016). As our findings show, many Roma have been forced to work in the informal economy in host societies for years and before finally being aggressively and abruptly deported in ways that reveal the racist treatment to which they are subjected in the mindset of employers, state agents and policymakers in the 'West'. Most Western EU states are merely treating the Roma according to the legal framework that prescribes and obliges this treatment and it is the third sector that is filling the gaps and helping migrants to progress on issues such as employment, schooling, social benefits and broader social inclusion matters (Vrăbiescu & Kalir, 2018).

The key question to ask is: What should be done in order for the reintegration of Roma returnees to be a successful and dynamic process and for their cognitive remittances to generate social change? It is abundantly clear that removing structural inequality (Rostas, 2019) and better services in the field of social protection are desirable as general policy objectives for Albania and Kosovo. There should also be a stronger and more effective legal framework directed at protecting from discrimination all members of the Roma community, irrespective of whether they are returnees or non-migrants; reintegration should not be viewed in ethno-national frames that demarcate belongingness to a national body as a privilege to be gained by minorities (Magazzini, 2020). Rather, the participation of the Roma in policy-making debates is needed, alongside an effective coordination between the central and local administration and consistent monitoring and evaluation (Rostas, 2019).

To conclude, cognitive remittances refer to the individual reappraisal of one's group political identity that is triggered by the observation of the varying statuses of the group across different socio-political systems. The transmission and diffusion of these would need the channelling of the political capital of the minority-origin returnees through coherent and impactful policies that enhance the rights of the Roma and close the minority–majority gap.

Notes

1. For accessible accounts of Albanian and Kosovan history and geopolitics, see Vickers and Pettifer (2000).
2. For more detail on the history and distinctions between the various Roma or 'gypsy' communities of Albania and Kosovo, see the entries on Albania, Ashkali, Egyptians, Kosovo and Roma in the Minority Rights Group International's (MRG, 2021) *World directory of minorities and indigenous peoples*.
3. The Schengen visa allowed Albanians and other citizens of Western Balkan countries to remain for 90 days within any 180-day period.
4. According to data from the European Asylum Support Office (EASO, 2013), around 20% of asylum-seekers from Kosovo are from RAE communities. However, Roma living in Serb-controlled areas (as opposed to the Ashkali and Egyptian groups who are seen as being closer to ethnic Albanians) are less likely to migrate as they receive welfare support from the Serb authorities.
5. Many returned asylum-seekers are unaware that they cannot move within the Schengen area for at least 10 months if they have returned voluntarily or 30 months if they have been deported.

Funding Research for this paper is based on two projects funded by the World Bank and the IOM.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Anghel, R., Fauser, M., & Boccagni, P. (Eds.). (2019). *Transnational return and social change: Social hierarchies, ideas and social identities*. Anthem Press.
- Boccagni, P., & Decimo, F. (2013). Mapping social remittances. *Migration Letters*, 10(1), 1–10.
- Cassarino, J.-P. (2008). Conditions of modern return migrants. *International Journal on Multicultural Societies*, 10(2), 95–105.
- Cerese, F. P. (1974). Migration and social change: Expectations and reality. A study on return migration from the United States to Italy. *International Migration Review*, 8(2), 245–262.
- Cleton, L., & Schweitzer, R. (2021). 'Our aim is to assist migrants in making a well-informed decision': How return counsellors in Austria and the Netherlands manage the aspirations of unwanted non-citizens. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 47(17), 3846–3863.
- Day, S., Papataxiarchis, A., & Stewart, M. (Eds.). (1998). *The lilies of the field: Marginal people who live for the moment*. Westview Press.
- EASO. (2013). *Asylum applicants from the Western Balkans: Comparative analysis of trends, push-pull factors and responses*. European Asylum Support Office.
- Gëdeshi, I., & King, R. (2022). Albanian returned asylum-seekers: Failures, successes and what can be achieved in a short time. *Journal of Balkan and near Eastern Studies*, 24(3), 479–502.
- Gëdeshi, I., Mykerezhi, P., & Danaj, E. (2017). *Mapping of skills, employment and entrepreneurship opportunities of Roma and Egyptians in the project sites of Tirana, Durrës, Berat and Shkodra*. Tirana: UNDP.
- Government of Kosovo (2008). *Strategy for the integration of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities in the Republic of Kosovo, 2009–2015*. Prishtina: Government of Kosovo.
- Grabowska, I., & Garapich, M. P. (2016). Social remittances and intra-EU mobility: Non-financial transfers between UK and Poland. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 42(13), 2146–2162.
- Huenekes, J. (2018). Emotional remittances in the transnational lives of Rohingya families living in Malaysia. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 31(3), 353–369.
- INSTAT (2012). *Preliminary results of the census of population and housing 2011*. Tirana: INSTAT
- Isaakyan, I., & Triandafyllidou, A. (2017). 'Sending so much more than money': Exploring social remittances and transnational mobility. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40(15), 2787–2805.
- Katigbak, E. (2017). Manifesting shame in a Philippine migrant village. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 22, 36–42.
- Knezevic, J. K. (2019). Contesting the structural constraints: A case study of Roma asylum seekers from Serbia. In T. Magazzini & S. Piemontese (Eds.), *Constructing Roma migrants* (pp. 195–208). Springer.
- Kóczé, A. (2018). Race, migration and neoliberalism: Distorted notions of Romani migration in European public discourse. *Social Identities*, 24(4), 459–473.
- Levitt, P. (1998). Social remittances: Migration driven local-level forms of cultural diffusion. *International Migration Review*, 32(4), 926–948.
- Levitt, P. (2001). *The transnational villagers*. University of California Press.
- Levitt, P., & Lamba-Nieves, D. (2011). Social remittances revisited. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 37(1), 1–22.
- Magazzini, T. (2018). What's in a name? Causes and consequences of labelling minorities as 'national' or 'migrant': Roma in Italy and Spain. *International Migration*, 56(3), 203–220.
- Magazzini, T. (2020). Integration as an essentially contested concept: Questioning the assumptions behind the national Roma integration strategies of Italy and Spain. In S. Hinger & R. Schweitzer (Eds.), *Politics of (Dis)integration* (pp. 41–59). Springer.
- Messing, V. (2019). Conceptual and methodological considerations when researching 'Roma migration.' In T. Magazzini & S. Piemontese (Eds.), *Constructing Roma migrants* (pp. 17–30). Springer.
- MRG. (2021). *World directory of minorities and indigenous peoples*. Minority Rights Group.
- O'Higgins, N. (2012). *Roma and non-Roma in the labour market in Central and South-Eastern Europe*. Bratislava: UNDP.
- Paasche, E. (2016). A conceptual and empirical critique of 'social remittances': Iraqi Kurdish migrants narrate resistance. In M. Nowicka & V. Šerbedžija (Eds.), *Migration and social remittances in a global Europe* (pp. 121–141). Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Robayo-Abril, M., & Millán, N. (2019). *Breaking the cycle of Roma exclusion in the Western Balkans*. The World Bank.

- Rostas, I. (2019). *A task for Sisyphus: Why Europe's Roma policies fail*. Central European University Press.
- Sardelić, J. (2016). *The fringes of citizenship: Romani minorities in Europe and civic marginalisation*. Manchester University Press.
- Sardelić, J. (2017). In and out from the European margins: Reshuffling mobilities and legal statuses of Romani minorities between the post-Yugoslav space and the European Union. *Social Identities*, 24(4), 489–504.
- Schuster, L., & Majidi, N. (2013). What happens post-deportation? The experience of deported Afghans. *Migration Studies*, 1(2), 221–240.
- Sigona, N. (2012). Between competing imaginaries of statehood: Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian (RAE) leadership in newly independent Kosovo. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 38(8), 1213–1232.
- Solari, C. D. (2019). Transnational moral economies: The value of monetary and social remittances in transnational families. *Current Sociology*, 67(5), 760–777.
- Stewart, M. (2013). Roma and gypsy 'ethnicity' as a subject of anthropological inquiry. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 42, 415–432.
- Surdu, M. (2016). *Those who count. Expert practices of Roma classification*. Central European University.
- Tabar, P., & Maalouf, W. (2016). The emergence of a 'diasporic political field': A case of political remittances. In M. Nowicka & V. Šerbedžija (Eds.), *Migration and social remittances in a global Europe* (pp. 99–120).
- Van Baar, H. (2016). Evictability and the biopolitical bordering of Europe. *Antipode*, 49(1), 212–230.
- Van Baar, H. and Kóczé, A. (2020). Introduction: The Roma in contemporary Europe. In H. van Baar & A. Kóczé (eds), *Struggling for identity at a time of proliferating identity politics. The Roma and their struggle for identity in contemporary Europe* (pp. 3–45). Berghahn
- Vickers, M., & Pettifer, J. (2000). *Albania: From anarchy to a Balkan identity*. Hurst.
- Vrăbiescu, I., & Kalir, B. (2018). Care-full failure: How auxiliary assistance to poor Roma migrant women in Spain compounds marginalization. *Social Identities*, 24(4), 520–532.
- White, A. (2021). Migration impact inside-out: Stayers, sociology and social remittances. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 47(13), 3190–3208.
- World Bank. (2016). *Migration and remittances factbook 2016*. The World Bank.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.