

Legally Absent, Socially Excluded: The Case of Returnees in Serbia

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Introduction

The Caritas Counselling Centre for Returnees in Belgrade, where I conducted my research and internship, was established in 2017 through a partnership between Caritas Germany and the Ministry of the Interior and Sports of Lower Saxony. The Centre supports individuals and families who have been deported from European Union countries back to Serbia under the EU Readmission Agreement. Many of them arrive in Serbia after years, or even a lifetime, spent abroad.

The majority of clients belong to vulnerable social groups, including members of the Roma community, single mothers, families with young children, people with disabilities, or those facing serious health problems. Without personal documents such as an ID or birth certificate, they are effectively invisible to the state. This legal invisibility prevents them from accessing essential rights and services such as healthcare, education, employment, and social support.

Methods



Participant observation

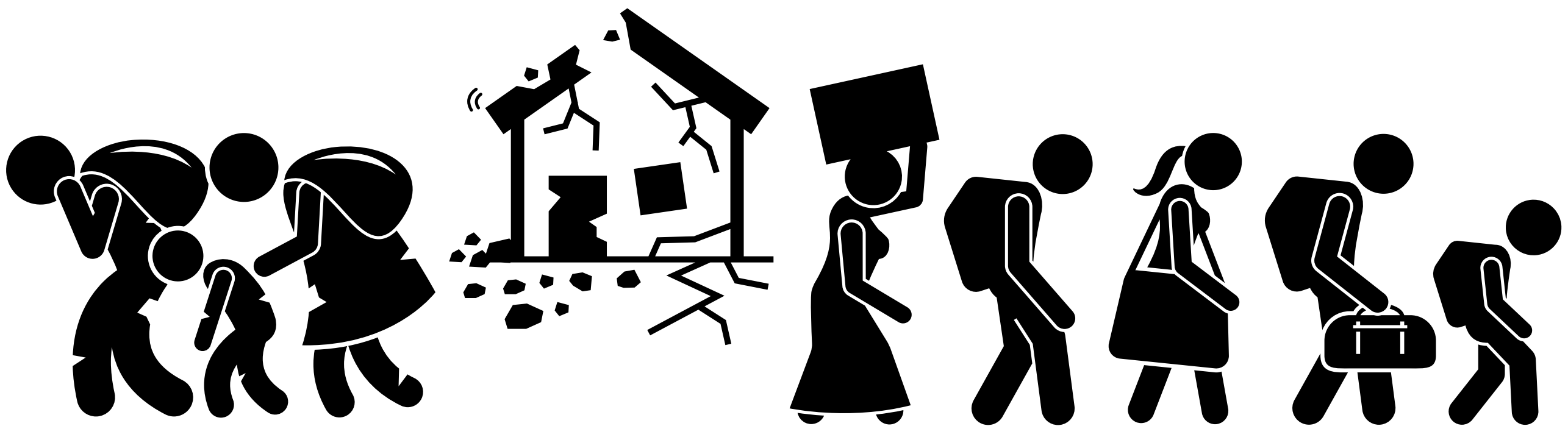


Unstructured Interviews
and Informal Conversations

Expert and Semi-Structured
Interviews



Field visits and
document-based analysis



Theoretical approach

This research builds on the concept of affective economies (Ahmed, 2004), which argues that emotions like fear, shame, and hope circulate socially and become attached or “stick” to certain bodies, such as people with migration experience. These emotions shape how they are perceived, governed, and excluded. Strasser and Sökefeld (2025) extend this framework in their concept of the affective economy of removal, showing how deportation regimes are not only legal systems but also emotional and political structures. Emotions like anxiety, mistrust, and hope are central to how returnees experience deportation and reintegration. Through my fieldwork, I observed how these emotional dynamics reproduce broader power structures, making affect a key mechanism of state control and social marginalization.

Preliminary Results

- Legal invisibility
- Prolonged exclusion
- Cultural and linguistic barriers
- Structural racism
- Fragile reintegration
- Contradiction in EU policy

References

Ahmed, S., 2004. Affective economies. *Social Text*, 22(2), pp.117–139.

Strasser, S. and Sökefeld, M., 2025. The affective economy of removal: ethnographic perspectives on deportation and (in)voluntary return. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 51(4), pp.1–18.

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