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Serbia: Vučić promise to Merkel will drive deported Roma into poverty

Amnesty International urges Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić to rethink his announced plan to introduce legislation to strip failed asylum seekers of their right to social assistance.

The organization considers that these measures will only drive those who are returned to Serbia even more deeply into poverty – and even more likely to leave the country again. Further, such measures would amount to discrimination under Article 21 of the Serbian constitution.

The announcement was made at meeting in Germany on Monday 7 September, held between the Serbian Prime Minister and the German chancellor, during which Angela Merkel reiterated measures to be taken by Germany – including cutting benefits to asylum seekers from the Balkans, who are predominantly from Serbia.

Since the liberalization of visa agreements with the EU, between 2010 and the end of 2014 some 71,740 Serbian citizens have applied for asylum in Germany. Most have been driven by poverty, and - for Roma in particular, who make up an estimated 85% of applicants from Serbia - systemic and institutional discrimination resulting in high levels of unemployment.

Amnesty International's research into forced evictions of Roma in Serbia also found that many Roma forcibly evicted from informal settlements, without any offer of alternative housing, considered they had no option but to leave the country.

In August, Germany announced plans to return up to 90,000 failed asylum seekers, and others with irregular status, to Serbia.

Amnesty International fears that in the absence of any effective support or reintegration package for people deported from EU member states to Serbia, many returnees – in particular Roma – will find themselves homeless, without access to basic services, and – if the proposed measures are introduced – without any means of financial support.

If Serbia is seriously looking for measures which will provide a disincentive to migration and discourage its citizens from leaving the Balkans, then the government should, rather than cutting social assistance, take meaningful and concrete measures to address the human rights violations which drive its own citizens to leave the country, including systemic discrimination against Roma. The EU and its member states, should - through the accession process led by the European Commission - support Serbia in the measures it needs to take to guarantee the rights of Roma, including through targeted financial support.

Amnesty International has urged the EU to refrain from developing a list of "Safe Countries of Origin" which fundamentally undermines access to a fair and efficient asylum procedure, which should consider the individual circumstances of the asylum seeker. It often results in an

excessively high burden of proof being placed on applicants coming from countries considered “safe”. It may *a priori* preclude whole groups of asylum-seekers from refugee status and ultimately result in *refoulement*. It would imply discrimination among asylum-seekers on the basis of their nationality in breach of Article 3 of the 1951 Geneva Convention.

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