

Migrant remittances in times of economic decline: Coping with protectionist policies in Slovenia

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Abstract

Faced with financial crisis and recession, many countries may promote return migration as a measure to combat economic decline. This affects the transnational migration and thus likely to contribute to a decline in remittance flows. At the same time, human agency proves the resilience of the migrants' coping strategies, since many migrant workers – though faced with heightened pressure and increased precariousness of their positions – nevertheless persevere and thus sustain the flow of remittances. Drawing on biographical narrative interviews with migrants in Slovenia, this article analyses migrants' position in the time of financial crisis and critically evaluates the governmental measures that restrict the migrants' access to the labour market. We argue that protectionist policies are short-sighted and, rather than combating the crisis, they force many workers into even more vulnerable positions.

Keywords: migrant remittances, crisis, biographical narrative interviews, migrants' coping strategies, Slovenia

Introduction

A growing body of contemporary literature on migration has emphasised the transnational dimension of the phenomenon, highlighting the migrants' abilities for maintaining social ties and networks across national borders (e.g., Bryceson and Vuorela 2002; Westwood and Phizacklea 2000). The transnationalisation of migrants' lives has also put to question assimilationist migration policies, the modernist constructions of the national state and citizenship. Increased time-space compression, fostered by new communication possibilities, allow the workers to migrate and thus choose to earn their livelihood across places, while maintaining their social ties and supporting their family members in their countries of birth. This enables migrants to pursue double or multiple loyalties, to travel back and forth and to work in distant places. Migrant remittances are a prominent way of maintaining contact between migrants and those who stay behind (Suksomboon 2008). The prospect of remitting is often a key element in the motivation to migrate in the first place.

New patterns in labour migration need to be interpreted at the household level, since they increasingly deviate from the traditional approach to labour migration as largely an individual investment (Carling 2008: 581–583). Moreover, remittances are increasingly identified as the crucial contribution to the foreign exchange earnings of many “developing” countries, representing a substantially greater share of financial injections than aid (Panda 2009: 170). Research that positively links migration and development shows how migrants' bottom-up financing contributes significantly to the social and economic development of their country of birth. Migration does not

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necessarily lead to passive dependency on remittances – although it cannot be overlooked that dependency, exploitation, and development distortion are also a possible result of labour export – but may also lead to more intensive economic activities that contribute to an increase in the prosperity of migrant-sending areas, in the longer run (De Haas 2005: 1274–1275). Apart from general estimates that men are more likely to remit and remit larger amounts, while women may remit a larger proportion of their earnings (see Carling 2008: 587), some (Lo 2008) observe that the gendered consequences of remittances, as well as the micro-dynamic and social impact of remittances, have often been overlooked. Drawing on biographical narrative interviews with migrant men and women in Slovenia, this article analyses their position in the time of financial and social crisis, thus concentrating on the micro-level of remittances as financial flows that enhance the migrants and their families' quality of life.¹

The method of biographical narrative interviews (cf. Rosenthal 1993, Wengraf 2006) with migrant men and women in Slovenia is utilised to question current labour market integration measures, applied here to specifically explore the migrants' experiences in the time of crisis. The narratives are a unique window into individual migration experiences, revealing the migrants' transnational modalities of living that point to the shortcomings of contemporary national labour market policies, still predominantly oriented to preserve and secure "the national". Based on this qualitative empirical material, we are able to utilise individual experiences as grounds for proposals for policy change that would benefit both the migrants and the receiving community. Using the life stories of migrants we address the transnational experiences with work and family life of migrant workers, as well as their coping strategies in the time of crisis.

Our data comprises 18 biographical interviews with migrant men (12) and women (6) between 22 and 55 years of age, who have migrated to Slovenia from different countries in the last decade. The migrants in our sample have diverse socio-economic and educational backgrounds, they come from different geopolitical contexts, and currently live and work in various social situations, yet the diversity of the sample at the same time reflects the official statistical trends of Slovenia's current migrant composition (see Table 1). Our sample hence exhibits that the majority of migrants in Slovenia are men and come for reasons of employment, thus most are officially categorised as "short-term" migrants, whose residence is temporary.² At the same time, women's reasons for entry are more often connected to family reunion, though most attempt to enter into the labour market as well.

This article brings together the evaluation of the current situation of financial crisis that affects the transnational migration and thus contributes to a decline in remittance flows, while situating the human agency of migrant workers, caught in the shrinking economy, who exhibit a myriad of coping strategies in order to con-

¹ Biographical narrative interviews were conducted in Slovenia between April and November 2009 as part of the international research project "PRIMTS" – Prospects for Integration of Migrants from "Third Countries" and their Labour Market Situations: Towards Policies and Action, funded by the EC, European Fund for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals "Community Actions" 2007, Directorate-General Freedom, Security and Justice (for more, see <http://prints.mirovni-institut.si/>). Biographical interviews were conducted according to the Research Manual prepared for the PRIMTS project (Pajnik 2009b).

² The legal requirement for a permanent residence in Slovenia is 5 years of legal registered stay in the country.

tinue providing for their families. In assessing Slovenia's policy responses, despite the heightened pressures and increased precariousness of many workers, we argue

Table 1. 18 interviewees by age, arrival to Slovenia, country of birth and status

Pseudonym	Age	Year of arrival	Country of birth	Position at the time of the interview
Filipa	37	2008	Macedonia	Kitchen aide, temporary work visa
Fatlindi	35	2005	Kosovo	Self-employed contractor, temporary work visa (personal work permit) ³
Abdić	29	2004	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Self-employed contractor, temporary work visa (personal work permit)
Fikret	40	1987–1991; 2006	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Builder, temporary work visa (personal work permit)
Huse	22	2007	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Cook, temporary work visa
Bukefal	28	2008	Macedonia	Doctor intern, temporary work visa
Ali	42	2004	Iran	Forklift operator, permanent residence (refugee status)
Lemon Tree	30	2005	Thailand	Masseur, temporary work visa
Marko	27	2009	Serbia	Cook, seasonal work visa
Janez	27	2007	Zambia	Teacher, permanent residence (family reunion)
Milutin (real name)	49	1977; 2008	Serbia	Bus driver, temporary work visa
Tomislav	41	2006	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Machinist, temporary work visa (personal work permit)
Fatima	47	2009	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Undocumented domestic worker, residence status undetermined
Tamara	26	2008	Serbia	Kitchen aide, temporary work visa
Nataša (real name)	55	1996	Russia	Study aide, obtained Slovene citizenship (family reunion)
Aleksandar	27	2007	Macedonia	Agricultural worker, seasonal work visa
Olga (real name)	28	2000	Ukraine	Unemployed, obtained Slovene citizenship (family reunion)
Kristina	27	2000	Ukraine	Unemployed, permanent residence (family reunion)

³ Migrants are only eligible to apply for a “personal work permit” after a prescribed period of time spent working for their initial employer, since this type of work permit grants them formally free labour market access and more social rights (generally this means having to work for one employer for at least 2 years, though the legislation is supposed to change in this regard).

that the state needs to re-think its economic strategies related to migrant workers so that these policies also consider the reality of unequal opportunities for migrants in the labour market.

Migrants' labour in the time of economic decline

Productivity rates in the aging societies of the European Union have long been possible to maintain because of the migrant labour force filling up positions of undervalued and low-paid work. Migrants tend to increasingly occupy precarious jobs, often related to black market economies with no or low levels of job security, low payment and with poor recognition of their skills. In recent years increased shares of migrant workers have come to Slovenia in order to find employment, mostly filling in positions that are habitually unattractive to the "native" workforce, thus responding to very specific job demands, particularly in lower sectors of the economy.

The labour force survey data for Slovenia exhibited increasing trends in activity rates between 2003 and 2007, when ratios rose both for men and women.⁴ It is significant to note that in this period the unemployment rates also fell, both for men and women. However, this trend of decreasing unemployment rates stopped abruptly with the outbreak of the global financial crisis, commencing in autumn 2008. In the fourth quarter of 2009, the employment to population ratio fell below 56 % (62 % for men and 50 % for women). The unemployment rates rose from 4.3 to 6.4 % between the end of 2008 and 2009, while in April 2010 the registered unemployment rate was already 10.6 %. Significantly, the number of persons in employment in construction has been falling, as has the number of persons in employment also decreased in wholesale and retail trade, repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles and in manufacturing – all prominent sectors of migrant employment.

The share of foreign citizens in Slovenia represents over 3 per cent of the total population, and the majority are so-called "third country" migrants, most of whom are citizens of Yugoslavia's successor states (particularly Bosnia and Herzegovina).⁵ Figures point to a large disproportion in gender distribution since men represent the majority (74 %) and women make up 26 % of the total foreign population. As much as half of all the migrant workers in Slovenia are employed in construction, a sector that would not be able to function and operate without the cheap and hard-working migrant labour force. This is followed by manufacturing, motor and traffic storage, commerce, and accommodation and food service activities. Despite the fact that male migrant workers are in much higher demand and represent a majority, migrant women are often filling in positions in the informal sectors of work, particularly the invisible domestic work and care work.

Since one of the key conditions for issuing work permits is the general situation on Slovenia's national labour market, migrants are frequently subject to quota re-

⁴ 67 % of the male population was active in 2007, compared to 54 % for women's activity rates. The total employment to population ratio for 2007 was 58 % (64 % for men and 51 % for women). For more, see Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (<http://www.stat.si/eng/index.asp>).

⁵ In line with the European Commission terminology, "third country nationals" are persons who are not citizens of an EU member state or, more specifically, citizens of countries that do not belong to the EU or the European Economic Area and Switzerland. It is a legal category that profoundly influences the migrants' particular status and a term that has been described as pejorative by some of our interview partners.

strictions; meaning unused quotas and non-existence of adequate “native” unemployed persons. Data of the Employment Service of Slovenia show that the period between 2004 and 2008 saw a rise in quotas from 17,100 in 2004 to 32,000 in 2008. The crisis, however, resulted in the lowering of quotas for 2009 to a maximum of 24,000, while the recently set quota of only 12,000 for 2010 shows a 62.5 % decrease in the last two years. Also, the unemployment rates have been rising because of the crisis, and the migrant workforce is the first to face layoffs. Jobless migrants face termination of their residence permit and are hence forced to leave the country or venture into informal segments of the labour market and the “illegality” of stay. In addition, the precariousness of many migrants on the labour market has increased with the crisis, since they are willing, more than ever, to work for low wages, without social security and benefits, and for long working hours in hopes of retaining their jobs. As a result of the crisis, migrants have a greater dependency on their current employers, thus the power that employers possess over the (foreign) workers has been reinforced.

Expectedly, the crisis has also exacerbated the migrants’ experiences of de-skilling, language barriers, discrimination in the workplace, as well as racist and xenophobic attitudes. The crisis additionally resonates in actual anti-migration policies, such as the banning of visas, tightening of border controls or limiting employment of migrants to allegedly “protect” the national labour force. This is used as a ready-made excuse for downsizing, while policies that protect the “national” workforce (i.e., quotas) prevail at the expense of migrant workers. In addition, the actual demand for migrant labour remains poorly reflected in state policies, which define and regulate the migrants’ positions primarily in terms of limitations. The current migration and integration policies that are accompanied by populist rhetoric and anti-migration discourses sustain migrants in “rightless” positions where not only are their human rights not respected but they are not even allowed to claim them (Pajnik 2009a).

The financial crisis places great pressures on Slovenia’s labour market, resulting in high unemployment rates. One of the government’s responses was to adopt the *Decree on restrictions and prohibition of employment and work of aliens* in June 2009. No comparable protectionist policies were in place before the crisis, for the decree substantially limits the employment and work of “foreigners”, justifying these changes with increased unemployment of “domestic” workers. Among others, it prohibits migrant seasonal work, severely limits the employment of citizens of Kosovo, and by prohibiting issuing work permits for certain occupations it factually prevents “third country nationals” from employment in the so-called entertainment sector.⁶ As a result of such protectionist governmental policies, supposedly aimed at combating recession, the employers need to advertise all jobs to “domestic” workers before offering a vacancy to “foreigners”. This is particularly relevant because the crisis has strongly affected the sectors in which mostly migrants are employed.

Remittances as a lifeline

⁶ This provision is highly gendered, since it mainly affects female migrants from “third countries”, who used to be able to enter Slovenia based on visas and work permits for nightclub dancers. The reasons for this measure lie in the suspicion that especially women from “third countries” are victims of criminal acts of forced prostitution or human trafficking.

Recent research shows that migration often results from a collective decision-making, notably it is a family decision (cf. Panda 2009). The very act of migrating is almost always in at least some way connected to one's family life, be it migrating for reasons of intimacy, such as family reunion, marriage migration or moving on account of taking care of a family member, but also because a person decides to extricate themselves from a family surrounding that they consider oppressive or dysfunctional, or simply because they lack any significant family ties and thus decide to migrate. Most of the migrants in our sample, however, relate their migration to reasons of searching for better job opportunities. This is often tied to the fact that their employment represents the only means of financial resources for their family, or their family members earn much less and the combined income is necessary for the family's comfortable existence, sometimes even sheer sustenance. Many migrants in our sample hence express dissatisfaction with the political, economic, and social situation in their countries of birth, also mentioning corruption or the ineffectiveness of the judicial system as reasons to migrate. High levels of unemployment and lack of job opportunities are listed as the main reasons to seek opportunities elsewhere. Most of our migrant interview partners note that the wages they used to earn in their country of birth, if they had a job, were not enough to support their families. Thus many migrants come to Slovenia with the purpose to work and their main motive for the move is the expectation of higher earnings that are to provide an opportunity to afford a better life for them and their families.

I am here in Slovenia because to survive. To work, I mean like, fair. And to have, you know, some standard for myself, for my family. [...] When you don't have your family close, I think, you have non-stop a little, you know, I mean you're not normal person, when you think non-stop about there [...] It's the same for family down there, they think of me, I think of them [...] If I speak of my family, I might cry. Huh, when I speak to someone about kids, it's, you know, it's hard for me. (Fatlindi, 35, construction worker, Kosovo, 11 April 2009)⁷

In Macedonia you earn 100 Euro, 150 Euro tops. And you have to work all month to earn this much. And you also have a family, you understand. And my daughter needs 200 Euros per month, you understand, but I was earning 100 and my wife doesn't work. [...] It's really becoming tough for me to be without them. My little one is almost 2 years old and we talk all the time, but you know how hard it is without them. They're there, I'm here, a separate life. [...] Really, it's hard for me to be without my family. It's difficult to live without family. (Aleksandar, 27, seasonal worker, Macedonia, 9 October 2009)

The above narratives provide prominent examples of male migration patterns whose earnings help support their families back home by contributing to their income through remittances; as Fatlindi supports his unemployed wife and four children in Kosovo and Aleksandar is providing for his family in Macedonia. As a rule, women have generally remained invisible in male-initiated migration, however, women's narrations in our sample resonate with the rising number of studies on

⁷ All the citations of the migrant narratives were translated into English (interviews were mostly conducted in Slovene or in the migrant's mother tongue) and every effort has been made to preserve their particular speech.

the feminisation of migration, particularly case studies of one parent families, where women are the sole providers for their children.⁸ Kristina, for instance, speaks of having to rely on financial aid from the Employment Service of Slovenia because she lost her job due to the recession. Since she is registered as unemployed based on her last salary that was merely minimal, she is only entitled to receive a small amount of financial aid. As a single mother, she is searching for a new job that would allow her to better provide for her child:

I'm now divorced and alone providing for my child. And what I get from the [Employment] Office is very little. Because I'm registered for a minimum pay. I got 300 Euro from the Office. You can't live on that. (Kristina, 27, unemployed, Ukraine, 23 November 2009)

Reflecting the findings of migration research that sending home financial remittances is a prominent element of keeping connections with the migrants' "stay-behinds" (Muller 2008), several of our interview partners mention sending home remittances to their family and loved ones:

When I get my pay, I send half down [to Macedonia] because I have to, and not just to my own kids, also to all others because I have relatives who, ten Euro costs the Internet monthly, but they don't have money to pay this. They don't, can't take away ten Euro. (Filipa, 37, kitchen aide, Macedonia, 11 April 2009)

Well, I'm waiting for my first salary, waiting for my first salary to send some money to Serbia because, well, there's bills to pay there as well and my girlfriend doesn't have a job. (Marko, 27, cook, Serbia, 6 August 2009)

I decided and came here [to Slovenia]. It's better now, in a sense that I can, that I earn for them and give them 300–400 Euros, but we don't see each other for 4 months. (Milutin, 49, bus driver, Serbia, 11 September 2009)

In Filipa's case, she initially lived the life of a transnational family with the children in Macedonia, while her husband was working in Slovenia, financially helping his family at home. Even though they were financially looked after by her husband sending home remittances, Filipa describes this arrangement as taking too high a toll on their family life, while the remittances were still insufficient, thus she decided to migrate as well. This example points out the necessity to look beyond the sheer financial value of remittances and understand migration as a multifaceted and complex web of transnational choices and individualised experiences. As confirmed in other narrations, separation from the family also requires a significant emotional effort and the migrants speak of employing various coping strategies.

Migrants' coping strategies

Then I got one job, nearby, I knew the business owner. I worked for him for two years. [...] And after two years there's recession. So, I lost my job again. So I had to start look-

⁸ See, for instance, studies of contemporary female-headed transnational households (e.g., Parennas 2001).

ing for a new job again. In these times it's been really difficult to get a job, I tried somehow to get any kind of job, something appropriate for me, so that I can work. [...] I was invited for an interview, I went there and they took me. But the pay is very low. [...] I'll be here until I find another job. (Ali, 42, kitchen aide and construction worker, Iran, 21 July 2009)

With the crisis, the situation for workers, and for migrant workers in particular, has worsened. Already low salaries have become even lower, while it is also a common practice for many employers to withhold paying the workers altogether, blaming the recession and lack of funds for their lack of payment discipline. This is a particularly potent problem because of sub-contracting (particularly in the construction sector) that puts many migrants in the grip of private entrepreneurs who exploit their vulnerable situation of dependency because of the fact that the work permits tie them to one employer. The migrant workers are therefore often exposed to prolonged periods of not receiving their agreed salary, not being properly registered and thus devoid of social and healthcare provisions, they may also experience harsh living conditions in substandard housing, for which they nevertheless need to pay substantial sums of money. As a result, if they only earn enough to cover their expenses, they cannot afford to save any money, which affects their remitting possibilities:

So how do you live on that? I just can't comprehend that. I have a wife and two children, and I get a salary of around 550 Euros. I have a flat here that I pay 100 Euros, I need 250 Euros for food, how do I support my wife and kids? [...] For the life standard that Slovenia has, the minimum salary should be 1,000 Euros. For this standard of life, so one could be so so, to be content. [...] I guarantee you, 80 per cent of people are in the same situation as me. Because I, for example, if I work for one year and I can't afford myself, if I can't go to the seaside, to go on vacation for 10 days, then that's no life for me, that's how I think. (Fikret, 40, construction worker, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 29 June 2009)

Now it's almost the same for me. I could now earn almost as much down [in Bosnia]. With my, to be with my family and at home every day, let's say, working 8 hours, 9, you know. It's more difficult, it's also hard to find a job down, but it's possible. If nothing changes, you understand. If it changes, then yes [I plan to stay and work in Slovenia]. But how I see things, it's difficult to change that. (Tomislav, 41, construction worker, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 12 September 2009)

Whereas in Slovenia the average net salary in June 2010 was 960 Euros, migrants, especially construction workers, tend to earn significantly less. In 2009, when the interviews with migrant workers were conducted, the minimum gross salary was below 600 Euros and some of the migrants spoke of receiving even less than the bare minimum.⁹ Migrant workers are caught in the position of having no bargaining potential for improving their work conditions. Devoid of any other alter-

⁹ The average net salary in Slovenia in 2009 was 930 Euro. The minimum gross wage was set at 589,19 Euros between August 2008 and July 2009, when our interview partner Fikret spoke of receiving 550 Euros, and many other migrants in our sample confirmed their salaries to be around 500 Euros. The set minimum gross salary was raised to 597,43 in August 2009 and to 734,15 Euros in March 2010.

natives since their work contracts frequently tie them to one specific employer, who is usually also the one who arranged for their work permit, the migrants need to endure the harsh working conditions in order not to risk losing their job and thus their work permits and consequently their residence as well:

You can complain as much as you want, you'll get nothing, you can only pack your things and, you know what I mean. (Tomislav, 41, construction worker, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 12 September 2009)

The crisis has exacerbated the migrant workers' position. The lowering of work permit quotas and the tightening of conditions for migrant employment have limited their options and forced them to either accept the rules of the game and adapt to the circumstances or face even more insecurity as "undocumented" migrants. While some sectors that are better unionised may provide general protection of employees, migrant workers are frequently the last in line both in terms of job safety and in terms of appropriate working conditions. Precariousness is chiefly apparent for migrants employed by small private firms or individual employers, particularly if the work contract is oral and work illicit or not entirely registered. Still, our sample shows coping strategies employed by migrant workers, who are forced to work long hours, work on weekends, are prevented from taking vacation time or sick leave and so on. The narratives show various techniques that migrants adopt when attempting to cope with their exploitative and discriminatory work arrangements. A prominent strategy, adopted by many migrants tied to one specific employer, is to "stick with it"; bear it out and wait for the prescribed period of time to pass in order for them to leave as soon as they are formally able to get a work permit elsewhere.¹⁰

Since the current policies tie work permits to employers, many of whom make profits out of migrant work, often migrants find themselves in a vicious circle of persevering because of the need to retain their status, even if they are not being paid the initially agreed amount of money. In such cases, the established perspective on remittances becomes reversed, since financial help from friends or family members is often the only lifeline that allows the migrants to endure the situation until they can find a better job. The current crisis, however, forces increasing numbers of migrants to simply return home.

Conclusion

Slovenia's official responses to the current crisis mirror the protectionist policy preferences of other EU member states and as such leave migrants with very little room to manoeuvre as they are forced to accept the even tighter labour market conditions. The recession heightens uncertainties on the labour market and so far the anti-crisis measures presented by the Slovene government have not shown real promise. The impact of the financial crisis on the "third country" migrants in Slovenia is exhibited in the fact that most migrants in our sample worry for their jobs, particularly since more and more people, especially those with short-term con-

¹⁰ The current labour legislation in Slovenia ties migrants' work permits to a specific employer, who is to lodge the initial application. A migrant worker can generally request a personal work permit – which formally allows free access to the labour market – only after being employed by one employer for two consecutive years.

tracts, are being laid off. Many migrant workers find themselves forced to leave the country, while some remain at the risk of “irregularity”. The migrant workforce has seen an additional clamp-down on workers’ rights, since their short-term contracts were the first to expire, while their salaries – often lower than the salaries of the “domestic” workforce – have plateaued or became even lower.

This paper drew on biographical interviews with migrant workers in Slovenia, many of whom have arrived in order to find better paid employment to provide for their families in their countries of birth. Faced with an ever-growing flexibilisation of work relations and labour market, the migrants have become the first victims of the current crisis, which has resulted in rising unemployment and mounting insecurity. Recently, the precariousness of migrants on the labour market has increased, as they are willing, more than ever, to put in long working hours, work for low wages, no social security and no benefits, all in the hope to retain their jobs.

The migrant narratives in our sample show the negative effects of the crisis, particularly in terms of its influence on migrant remittances. Increasingly unable to survive on their low salaries and because of the lack of employers’ payment discipline, many migrants find it impossible to save enough money to send home. Since this affects the financial situation of their families and worsens the situation in migrants’ countries of birth, the migrants find it particularly hard to balance securing continuous remitting flows with their increasingly precarious situations. Ultimately, the crisis forces migrant workers into even more vulnerable positions, some of them are even forced to return home.

Highlighting the negative effects the financial crisis has exhorted especially onto migrant workers in Slovenia, migrant narratives also confirm the resilience of migrant strategies of coping. Yet even though many migrant workers persevere despite the harsh working conditions, heightened pressures and increased precariousness of their position in order to sustain the flow of remittances, it is nevertheless imperative to recognise that labour migration is a part of national as well as global economy and it is therefore high time to implement more enabling policies that will secure a better working environment and the diminishing of migrants’ labour market discrimination.¹¹

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¹¹ Specifically, residence permits should not be tied to work permits and a balanced and fair access to social service and welfare provisions should be ensured, while active steps need to be taken to ensure that public institutions, policies, housing, and services, wherever possible, are open to migrants and cater to their specific needs.

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