



Resocialisation and reintegration measures for VETOs' post prison-release in the Western Balkans

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Introduction

The Western Balkan countries have a complex history intertwined with violent extremism and terrorism. These challenges, coupled with misconceptions surrounding the subject and the stigma attached to associated groups, have intensified efforts towards disengagement, resocialisation and reintegration (DRR). To address the issues posed by violent extremist and terrorist offenders (VETOs) and returnees, the Western Balkans have implemented legislative measures and strategies that assign explicit responsibilities to state institutions and agencies in the realm of DRR.

Several institutional mechanisms have been established to address the DRR needs of VETOs and returnees. Noteworthy examples include the DRR division within the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MoIA) in Kosovo,¹ the CVE centre in Albania, the Inter-Ministerial Working Group on the Reintegration of Foreign Terrorist Fighters in North Macedonia, the national Counter Terrorism (CT) coordinators in Serbia and Montenegro and local DRR initiatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

DRR was a new concept for the Western Balkan countries, initially marked by a lack of expertise and experience in executing DRR activities for VETOs and returnees. Through support from international donors and partners, multiple DRR processes have been undertaken to enhance the state capacities at both central and local levels. Remarkable progress has been achieved in this area, especially with the active involvement of the Western Balkans, USA and other partners in repatriating their citizens from conflict zones. Approximately 500 individuals from the Western Balkans have been repatriated from Syria and Iraq, with a majority of them participating in DRR programmes and activities.

This paper delves into the concept of violent extremism within the Western Balkans, offering insights into the historical backdrop. It also provides an overview of deradicalisation, disengagement, and resocialisation practices, highlighting the challenges and gaps encountered during the post-release phase. Furthermore, it highlights specific DRR practices.

The implementation of DRR programmes in the Western Balkans comes with its own set of challenges. These encompass issues such as inter-institutional cooperation, prejudice and discrimination against VETOs and returnees. Effective cooperation between local and central levels remains elusive due to the limited capacities of local municipal institutions to engage with VETOs and returnees. Civil society organisations have played a pivotal role in DRR projects, actively contributing to initiatives aimed at these individuals. Prominent donor initiatives, such as those from the European Union, Council of Europe, Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) and the Global Community Engagement and Resiliency Fund (GCERF), are at the forefront of supporting and/or executing various DRR projects. They work directly with vulnerable communities and returnees, organising DRR, vocational and professional training programmes. Notably, VETOs and returnees have benefited from grant schemes facilitated by donors in close cooperation with the Western Balkan state authorities.

Additionally, this paper examines the waves of repatriation from conflict zones and explores emerging forms of violent extremism in the region. It concludes by proposing practical steps to

¹ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

enhance DRR efforts and provides recommendations for key institutions to effectively address challenges arising from violent extremism.

Methodology

The methodology used in this paper is comprised of semi-structured interviews conducted with stakeholders, desk research and document analysis (including, but not limited to official reports of relevant institutions). Interviewed stakeholders were primarily from Kosovo, North Macedonia and Albania, including representatives from the Islamic Community in Kosovo, the Kosovo Probation Service (KPS), the Kosovo Correctional Service (KCS), as well as NGO experts from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and North Macedonia. Document analysis was done relying on official reports from state institutions in the Western Balkans, reports from local and international non-governmental organisations, and media articles related to countering and preventing violent extremism and Deradicalisation, Disengagement and Resocialisation of Violent Extremist and Terrorist Offenders.

The paper is structured around several main points related to DRR in the Western Balkans, starting with the introduction and background of violent extremism, including the repatriation waves from conflict zones. DRR practices and challenges, as well as gaps in the post-release period, are addressed together with practical steps to be taken forward in relation to DRR. Key recommendations for key institutions conclude the paper.

By exploring these points, the paper aims to shed light on the current state of DRR practices in the region and offer insights for improvement and strengthening of initiatives to counter violent extremism and promote successful rehabilitation and reintegration of VETOs.

Violent extremism in the Western Balkans

Over the last 12 years, terrorism and violent extremism² has constituted the biggest security threat to the Western Balkans. For decades, the Western Balkans have proved to be a fertile ground for spreading various forms of violent extremism and terrorism. The history of ethnic, religious, and civil strife has created a vulnerability to terrorist recruitment and the spread of violent extremist networks in the region. The turmoil brought on by the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the subsequent ethno-nationalist wars and political conflict in the countries of the Western Balkans have fed the underlying grievances and have created new ethnic divisions. These divisions and the lack of cooperation between states and societies across the Balkans is a contributing driver to the presence and growing trends of different forms of extremism in the region.³

While in recent years the attention has been focused on preventing and countering Islamist extremism in the region, other forms of extremism emerged in the region, including ethnonational movements, far right and former war veterans' extremist movements from the wars in former Yugoslavia.⁴ The evolution of the different extremist groups in the Western Balkans could foster 'cumulative extremism' or 'reciprocal radicalisation', in which these radical

² The Council of Europe 'Guidelines for Prison and Probation Services Regarding Radicalisation and Violent Extremism' defines violent extremism as behaviour promoting, supporting or committing acts which may lead to terrorism, and which are aimed at defending an ideology advocating racial, national, ethnic or religious supremacy.

³ Hazinovic Regional Report. 'Understanding the Violent Extremism in Western Balkans'. British Council. June 2018.

⁴ Ibid.

movements feed off one another making their potential destabilising impact even greater.⁵ This notion of cumulative and reciprocal extremism is present in many communities in the Western Balkans. Its presence is noted in the northern part of Kosovo (the municipalities of Mitrovica North, Leposavic, Zvecan and Zubin Potok), Bosnia and Herzegovina (the Bosniak community and Serbs in Republika Srpska entity), and North Macedonia (Albanian Islamist⁶ radical groups as well as orthodox and far-right violent groups.

Compared to other forms of violent extremism, the phenomenon of Islamist-inspired terrorism and violent extremism is still present in Kosovo, North Macedonia, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which are mostly affected by the number of citizens who have joined terrorist organisations in Syria and Iraq and the level of support towards these terrorist organisations within their community.⁷ Furthermore, Serbia is challenged by the emergence of far right extremism and ethno-nationalism extremism movements, reflected by the number of individuals who have joined the paramilitary Russian forces since 2014 and who are fighting in Ukraine. Far right extremist movements from Serbia and elsewhere are also organising and participating in violent protests in areas such as Kosovo, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Even though the right-wing violent extremism is on the rise in the entire region, it is dominant in Serbia and Montenegro. Both countries in the last ten years have had cases when their citizens joined violent extremist organisations such as Daesh in Syria and Iraq, and others who have joined far-right Russian paramilitary groups and armed organisations like WAGNER in Ukraine. The Ukrainian embassy in Serbia estimated in 2019 that about 300 citizens from Serbia were fighting alongside pro-Russian paramilitary groups in Ukraine in the eastern Donbass region.⁸ Since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2012, based on open data and official estimates from the Western Balkans, around 1075 individuals (878 men and women and 197 children and elderly) have travelled to Syria and Iraq. Figures 1 and 2 below list the number of citizens from Western Balkan countries who travelled to Syria and Iraq and the number of those who were repatriated. These numbers include only men and women who joined terrorist organisations in war zones, and not all the VETOs who are convicted with terrorism offences, due to the lack of the official data.

Figure 1:
Western Balkan citizens who have joined the conflicts in Syria and Iraq⁹

| Country | Men | Women | Total |
|------------------------|-----|-------|-------|
| Albania | 96 | 13 | 109 |
| Bosnia and Herzegovina | 177 | 63 | 240 |
| Kosovo | 255 | 48 | 303 |
| North Macedonia | 140 | 14 | 154 |
| Montenegro | 18 | 5 | 23 |
| Serbia | 37 | 12 | 49 |

⁵ Ramadan Ilazi, Ardit Orana, Teuta Avdimetaj, Bledar Feta, Ana Krstinovska, Yorgos Christidis and Ioannis Armakolas (2022). Online and offline (de)radicalisation in the Balkans. Working paper 5. PAVE Project Publications.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Vlado Hazinovic Regional Report. 'Understanding the Violent Extremism in Western Balkans'. British Council. June 2018.

⁸ DW news agency. 'Serbian and Croatian volunteers are fighting in Ukraine' (1-31-2023).

⁹ GCERF Report. Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters (RFTFs) and Their Families in the Western Balkans. 2020. [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.gcerf.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/GCERF-RNA-Western-Balkans-final.pdf](https://www.gcerf.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/GCERF-RNA-Western-Balkans-final.pdf)

| | | | |
|-------|-----|-----|-----|
| Total | 723 | 155 | 878 |
|-------|-----|-----|-----|

It should be noted, though, that Kosovo is believed to have the highest percentage of reporting, which can potentially reflect the high numbers of men and women joining the conflict in Syria and Iraq.

The repatriation waves and difficulties in the Western Balkans

Until 2012, the conflicts in the Middle East were considered as remote events with no WB citizens officially reported to have been engaged as foreign terrorist fighters.¹⁰ This has changed in 2013 and 2014, when the number of men and women travelling to Syria and Iraq was in its peak. After 2015, the law enforcement agencies in the Western Balkans have criminalised the participation in foreign conflicts and have started to arrest individuals who have participated, supported or financed terrorist organisations active in Syria and Iraq. In 2014 and 2015, Kosovo law enforcement institutions started mass arrestment of individuals who have been part of terrorist organisations in Syria and Iraq: in July 2014, Kosovo Police arrested around 65 VETOs, including 15 religious leaders for participating, financing and recruiting for terrorist organisations in Syria and Iraq. During the same month, North Macedonia, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina authorities arrested and prosecuted dozens of people for their participation in terrorist organisations.¹¹

After the defeat of Daesh in Syria and Iraq and loss of the IS-held territory, thousands of men, women and children were detained and held in camps monitored by Kurdish forces inside Syria and Iraq.¹² The physical defeat of Daesh increased focus on the need of DRR measures and programmes for VETOs. Western Balkans, in close cooperation with the US, designed plans on how to bring back VETOs and children from camps in Syria and Iraq to their countries of origin. In this regard, in April 2019 Kosovo was among the first to repatriate its citizens (110 people) from Syria and Iraq through a government-sponsored initiative. Out of those repatriated, there were 4 men, 32 women and 74 children.¹³ Repatriated women and children were initially accommodated in the government-run centre for asylum seekers for 48 hours. During their time in the asylum seekers' centre, authorities interviewed women returnees and identified their needs for integration back in community. The four men RFFs were detained upon arrival, and after the investigation process, they were sentenced by the courts.

The second operation to repatriate individuals was conducted in July 2021, in a joint operation of Kosovo and Albania. Eleven (11) citizens were repatriated to Kosovo, while 5 were repatriated to Albania. That same year, in August 2021, 5 women and 14 children were also repatriated to Albania.¹⁴ The returnees were subjected to regular health check-ups and evaluation, including an effort to identify their needs. After their initial interviews and

¹⁰ According to the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014) S/RES/2178: 'A foreign fighter is an individual who leaves his or her country of origin or habitual residence to join a non-State armed group in an armed conflict abroad and who is primarily motivated by ideology, religion, and/or kinship'.

¹¹ Vlado Hazinovic (2018). Regional Report 'Understanding the Violent Extremism in Western Balkans'. British Council.

¹² Perteshi Skender. Beyond the triggers: New threats of Violent Extremism in Kosovo'. KCSS, Prishtina 2018. <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/https://qkss.org/images/uploads/files/violent-extremism-eng_611603.pdf>

¹³ Teuta Avdimetaj. 'Stakeholders of (De) Radicalisation in Kosovo'. D.RAD 3.1 report conducted under the Horizon 2020 project 'Deradicalisation in Europe and beyond - Detect, Resolve and Re-Integrate' (2021). chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/https://qkss.org/images/uploads/files/Kosovo-D3.2-country-report_208701_.pdf

¹⁴ Perteshi, S. and Ilazi, R. (2021). Unpacking Kosovo's Response to Returnees from the War Zones in Syria and Iraq. Kosovo Centre for Security Studies (KCSS): https://qkss.org/images/uploads/files/violent-extremism-eng_978757.pdf

assessment, the institutions designed rehabilitation and reintegration (R&R) interventions for returnees, including, among others, medical support and accommodation for those in need.

Similarly, in August 2021, the North Macedonian government repatriated 23 citizens from conflict zones. Out of 23 repatriated citizens, there were 5 women, 4 men and 14 children.¹⁵ In May 2022, 13 Albanian citizens were repatriated to Albania and 2 men were repatriated to Kosovo.¹⁶ Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro have also repatriated their citizens from Syria and Iraq. In December 2019, 24 Bosnian citizens were repatriated with the assistance of the US authorities. Ten (10) citizens from Montenegro and 12 from Serbia were returned or repatriated from conflict zones of Syria and Iraq.¹⁷ To date, Kosovo holds the highest record of repatriated individuals from the former Daesh-held territory.

**Figure 2:
Number of Western Balkan citizens repatriated from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq¹⁸**

| Country | Men | Women | Children | Total |
|------------------------|-----|-------|----------|-------|
| Albania | 30 | 7 | 8 | 45 |
| Bosnia and Herzegovina | 56 | 11 | 27 | 94 |
| Montenegro | 8 | 1 | 1 | 10 |
| Kosovo | 124 | 38 | 80 | 242 |
| North Macedonia | 73 | 1 | 2 | 76 |
| Serbia | 9 | 1 | 2 | 12 |
| Total | 300 | 59 | 120 | 479 |

In general, despite the differences in numbers of returnees among countries (see examples above), the Western Balkan countries have demonstrated willingness to repatriate their citizens who joined Daesh in Syria and Iraq. The state institutions responsible for DRR of VETOs and returnees have allocated resources to enhance their professional capacities and dedicated mechanisms for successful rehabilitation and reintegration. Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania and North Macedonia, which have the highest number of foreign terrorist fighters in the Western Balkans, have developed various programmes within prisons and at the community level to address the needs of repatriated individuals. Montenegro and Serbia have also implemented DRR programmes even though they have a limited number of citizens who have travelled in conflict zones in Syria and Iraq.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ AP NEWS. '23 Albanians, others from Kosovo are repatriated from Syria'. May, 28, 2022. <https://apnews.com/article/islamic-state-group-middle-east-syria-albania-iraq-57d8b19ef5cafef5a63e8180d0d1346f>

¹⁷ Hazinovic Regional Report. 'Understanding the Violent Extremism in Western Balkans'. British Council. June 2018.

¹⁸ Ibid.

DRR in the Western Balkans in post-release of VETOs

Institutional reforms

The process of DRR is complex and requires the involvement of various stakeholders. One of the main challenges in the DRR process of returnees from conflict zones is the need for collaboration among institutions and agencies responsible for implementing DRR activities. Over time, the Western Balkans have undergone institutional reforms and established new mechanisms with the aim of enhancing cooperation among different stakeholders involved in DRR of returnees. These efforts are crucial to effectively address the needs of individuals returning from conflict zones and to promote successful reintegration into society.

Albania has created the National Centre on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE centre) responsible for coordinating preventing and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE) activities in the country and to lead the process of DRR of Albanian repatriated individuals from conflict zones. For better coordination among the Albanian stakeholders on DRR, the government of Albania has created the Reception Centre for the Treatment of Returned Cases from Syria and Iraq, which conducts different assessments to evaluate repatriated individuals.¹⁹ North Macedonia established the National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism that is led by a national coordinator responsible to design, coordinate and implement DRR policies and activities in North Macedonia. Additionally, the government set up an Inter-Ministerial Working Group on the Reintegration of Foreign Terrorist Fighters in 2021. The working group was mandated to develop a detailed action plan for institutions to provide adequate health treatment, education and security, as well as psychosocial, socio-economic and legal support to terrorist convicts to avoid stigmatisation.²⁰ This mechanism has also signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the local authorities for implementation of DRR programmes with the returnees. Yet, despite the efforts of the authorities of North Macedonia to coordinate between different stakeholders in DRR, the track of cooperation in practice remains very low,²¹ also at ministerial level. There are no staff training modules that help practitioners to work directly with those returned or those who are in the process of DRR back in community. There are no formal DRR plans for repatriated individuals. Furthermore, there are no special protocols for social workers working with VETOs.²² In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Ministry of Security in cooperation with other ministries and state agencies has set up mechanisms for R&R which also concerns repatriated citizens from conflict zones. The Government of Serbia published Decision No 58-2023 in July 2023 to establish a national body for the prevention and fight against terrorism, as well as appointing a national coordinator for the prevention and countering of terrorism. This body coordinates the implementation of R&R and P/CVE activities in Serbia. Despite many internal mechanisms created with aim to coordinate activities on P/CVE and R&R, collaboration among the institutions and law enforcement agencies remains a challenge.

Compared to other regional examples, Kosovo has undertaken numerous institutional reforms towards combatting terrorism, as well as in the field of disengagement, rehabilitation and reintegration. Kosovo has established the Division for Prevention and Reintegration of

¹⁹ Training Manual for Frontrunners. 'Mapping of R&R services for persons returning from conflict areas'. IDM, 2021.

²⁰ 'Disengagement, Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Foreign Terrorist Fighters'. Project funded by the European Union's Internal Security Fund – Police. March 2022.

²¹ Interview with TCT-CVE expert in North Macedonia (13 April 2023).

²² DRIVE report 2021.

Radicalised Persons (DPRRI), responsible for the coordination of national P/CVE and DRR policies for repatriated individuals from conflict zones.²³ Furthermore, Kosovo has conducted many institutional reforms within the Kosovo Correctional Service (KCS) regarding the CT and DRR. KCS reforms regulated that all prisoners convicted with terrorism offences should be placed into two prison facilities. Those who were categorised with low and medium security threat were sent to one pavilion in Dubrava Detention Centre, and those who were categorised as a high security threat were sent to a specific pavilion in the high security prison in Gerdovc, Prishtina.²⁴ Another important initiative of the KCS was the organisation of lectures by the Kosovo Islamic Association for the VETOs prisoners, based on the MoU agreement between the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and the Kosovo Islamic Association (BIK). According to an official from KCS, half of the prisoners convicted of terrorism cases categorised as a low and mid-level security threat were part of the programme, while the others categorised as high security threat did not attend the lectures.²⁵ In 2019, the KCS established two internal units specialised in P/CVE and R&R management, namely the unit on the Management of Violent Extremism within the KCS and the unit of Intelligence and Analysis.²⁶ Both mechanisms are still operational and are essential bodies of the KCS.

DRR and practices in the region of the Western Balkans

There are several donors that drive DRR initiatives in the Western Balkans supporting state efforts in the process of DRR for the VETOs and other repatriated individuals in post-release period. The International Organisation of Migration (IOM) is among the first organisations that set regional projects on DRR in Western Balkans countries. Initially, the IOM conducted baseline assessments on the needs of the returnees from Syria and Iraq. The IOM in Kosovo, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina delivered food and clothing to returnees and VETOs, as well as their families after their return in the community.²⁷ IOM supported VETOs and returnees and their family members with dozens of grants to start their individual businesses (such as farming, construction works, electrical installations, car wash, etc.). Based on the MoIA representatives in Kosovo, the IOM assistance was essential in helping Kosovo authorities in the reintegration process of returnees back into the community.²⁸

Alongside IOM projects, the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF) has supported local NGOs in the region for implementation of several projects with the aim to support DRR of the VETOs.²⁹ In the case of Kosovo, non-governmental organisations such as the Community Development Fund (CDF), with the GCERF's support, provided training for professional skills, leadership training, and cultural and sport activities for individuals and communities affected by violent extremism. Through these initiatives, the GCERF aims to create a safe and suitable environment for reintegration of returnees from war zones. Moreover, the Community Development Fund supports VETOs with training for professional skills on business ideas. Around 30 women returnees have been trained in tailoring. These women were also supported through the purchase of sewing machines.³⁰ The CDF is also in

²³ Teuta Avdimetaj. 'Stakeholders of (De) Radicalisation in Kosovo'. D.RAD 3.1 report conducted under the Horizon 2020 project 'Deradicalisation in Europe and beyond - Detect, Resolve and Re-Integrate' (2021).

²⁴ 'Disengagement, Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Foreign Terrorist Fighters'. Drive, Project funded the European Union's Internal Security Fund – Police. March 2022.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Interview with senior representative of the Division for Rehabilitation and reintegration of repatriated citizens from Syria and Iraq. MoIA. March 22, 2023, Prishtina, Kosovo.

²⁸ Interview with senior representative of the Division for Rehabilitation and reintegration of repatriated citizens from Syria and Iraq. MoIA. March 22, 2023, Prishtina, Kosovo.

²⁹ Perteshi Skender and Orana Ardit. 'Disengagement, Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Foreign Terrorist Fighters'.

³⁰ Ibid.

the process of delivering the second wave of grants for the VETOs. The Kosovo Centre for Security Studies (KCSS), with the support of the embassies of the United Kingdom and the Kingdom of Netherlands in Kosovo, has organised vocational training for 20 women VETOs on how to use social media to promote their business ideas and their products. This training is helping women returnees to bring their products closer to their target audience and potential clients.

GCERF has also supported the efforts of local NGOs in Bosnia and Herzegovina in VETOs' and foreign terrorist fighters' (FTFs) DRR. In addition to the direct support to VETOs, returnees and their families, local Bosnian NGOs have strengthened the capacities of frontline workers and have nurtured an enabling environment for the rehabilitation and reintegration to take place.³¹

GCERF has also supported four NGOs in North Macedonia and Albania, such as the Young Layer Association, the Institute for Democracy and Mediation, and Terre de Hommes Albania. The projects supported by the GCERF in both countries did not specifically focus on the VETOs released from the prison. The projects also had other DRR components, such as training local authorities on DRR and increasing the state capacities in using the risk assessment tools for VETOs. The Council of Europe is also implementing a regional project on DRR aimed at increasing the capacity of correctional and probation authorities in the Western Balkans in dealing with VETOs and the DRR process.³²

There are also other initiatives that have contributed to the process of R&R in the Western Balkans. For instance, the Islamic Association of Macedonia created a specific body for R&R of the returnees and prevention of violent extremism in North Macedonia. This body has done an important job in helping state authorities in the process of DRR by filling an important gap and acting as a trusted mediator between VETOs and state institutions in North Macedonia.³³ Islamic Associations in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo have also played an important role in the R&R process of the returnees. The women forums of Islamic Associations in both countries have helped the VETOs with food packages, accommodation and religious education in close coordination with the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MoIA).³⁴

When addressing DRR programmes and their implementation, differences among men and women returnees can be noticed. Compared to men, women returnees were more willing to participate in DRR programmes implemented by local and international organisations. The repatriated women were certified by the professional companies and are working to match their knowledge with the market needs in order to increase their family incomes. Equipment and grants were provided to women who have participated in the training.³⁵

Prosecution of VETOs

The evidence for prosecution of VETOs has proved difficult to find for law enforcement agencies and other security authorities. Each country has faced significant challenges in

³¹ GCERF report: 'Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters (RFTFs) and Their Families in the Western Balkans'. April 2020.

³² Data gathered from GCERF official website. Accessed April 2023.

³³ Data gathered from GCERF official website. Accessed May 2023

³⁴ Interview with senior imam from Kosovo Islamic Association. 14 March 2023, Prishtina.

³⁵ Interview with senior officer from the Division for Rehabilitation and Reintegration of radicalised individuals. March 22, 2023.

dealing with foreign fighters and their families who returned or were repatriated from conflict zones. The prosecutors faced difficulties in prosecuting the cases before the court, and the judges faced difficulties in deciding about the level of sentence due to limited information and evidence of VETOs' participation in conflict zones in Syria and Iraq.³⁶

Different practices were used in the process of sentencing VETOs by the judicial authorities in the Western Balkans, and not all are in line with the sentencing practices of EU countries. There are differences in average prison sentences in the Western Balkans compared to those of EU countries. The average sentence for terrorism offences in EU countries is seven years in prison, while in the Western Balkans it is between 2.5 to 3 years in prison.³⁷ Kosovo has the highest number of VETOs sentenced for terrorism offences with 125 cases, followed by Bosnia and Herzegovina with 45 cases, North Macedonia with 29 and Serbia with 23 cases. Albania has sentenced 12 imams who have recruited members for terrorist organisations. Albania has not sentenced its citizens who returned from conflicts in Syria and Iraq, which is a unique case compared to other regional examples, due to the lack of evidence to sustain the case before the court and the lack of experience of the Albanian justice sector to investigate cases of terrorism. The Albanian government decided on a softer approach related to the returned FTFs from war zones. Montenegro also has sentenced two cases with terrorism offences. In Serbia, there are differences between convictions for fighting in Syria and in Ukraine. Fighters returning from Ukraine received suspended sentences or house detention, while those returning from Syria received prison sentences ranging from 3 to 11 years.³⁸ Despite the limited information possessed by the prosecution and courts, the judicial sector in the Western Balkans has managed to sentence around 234 individuals for terrorism offences and participation in foreign conflicts as a part of terrorist organisations.³⁹

Figure 3: Number of cases and sentences given to VETOs and returnees⁴⁰

| Country | Sentences | Returnees from Syria | Returnees from Ukraine | Domestic Terrorism | Prison sentence | Suspended sentence or house detention |
|------------------------|-----------|----------------------------|------------------------|--------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------------|
| Kosovo | 155 | 155 | 0 | 0 | 123 | 32 |
| Bosnia and Herzegovina | 45 | 44 | 1 | 0 | 45 | 0 |
| Albania | 15 | Not investigated-sentenced | 0 | 15 | 15 | 0 |
| Montenegro | 2 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| Serbia | 23 | 7 | 16 | 0 | 7 | 16 |
| North Macedonia | 29 | 29 | 0 | 0 | 29 | 0 |

³⁶ OSCE report 2022.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Asya Metodjeva. 'Bringing them back'.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

To date, Serbian courts have sentenced 16 individuals for their engagement in the conflict in Ukraine.⁴¹ All were convicted with a suspended sentence of up to one year.⁴² Montenegro has sentenced one individual for fighting alongside pro-Russian forces in Ukraine.⁴³

A more specific focus was dedicated to developing DRR programmes for repatriated women who were prosecuted for their participation in conflict zones. During the evaluation process of the women returnees from conflict zones, the state authorities did not possess professional skills to identify their DRR needs. Additionally, the authorities did not use any internationally recognised risk assessment tools to measure their level of stress, stigma, PTSD, panic attacks, mental health conditions and other similar challenges. The courts in North Macedonia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania were more lenient in handing out sentences to women participating in conflict zones compared to men. To women returnees who participated in foreign conflict as part of ISIS, the judicial authorities of North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo issued a suspended sentence or house detention, while men foreign fighters were sentenced to prison. The judicial authorities of the Western Balkans argue that soft sentences were given to women because it was difficult to determine the role of the women in the conflict or if the women had participated in fighting. Another reason, according to the judges, is that the women do not pose a threat to the community.⁴⁴ The judges have not set clear rules on what indicators or information they based their decision to issue only a suspended sentence to the repatriated women, nor on how they came to the conclusion that repatriated women are less of a threat to the community than men repatriated from the conflict zones.⁴⁵ This decision was taken because, in most cases, the women were single parents who had to look after their children as their husbands had been killed in the conflict zones.⁴⁶ Furthermore, in the case of Kosovo, the judge expressed his view that most women returning or repatriated were convicted for their participation in logistical support in ISIS, and not for direct participation in combat activities. As a result, the court's perception was that the women returnees did not bear any significant risk to society.⁴⁷

A similar approach was implemented in other cases in the region related to the prosecution of women engaged in terrorism offences. Compared with EU countries such as France, Belgium or Netherlands, where women faced the criminal justice system just as male terrorist fighters and children were assigned to the family of origin or a foster family, the context in the Western Balkans is different. EU countries have well established mechanisms and capacities to treat families and children, whereas Western Balkan countries lack state mechanisms responsible for taking care of orphaned or abandoned children in need. In Western Balkan countries, the mechanisms for providing care to children in need only have capacities and resources to work with a few number of children. Indirectly, this is another reason why the courts in the Western Balkans have issued suspended sentences of up to three years to women RFTFs.⁴⁸

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Radio Free Europe. 'Serb who joined Russian-Backed forces in Ukraine has jail sentence overturned'. January 27, 2023.

⁴³ Balkan Insight analyses. 'Montenegro urged to prevent volunteer fighters going to Ukraine'. March 1, 2022.

⁴⁴ OSCE report 2022.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Interview with senior officer of MoIA in Kosovo and North Macedonia. May 2023.

⁴⁷ OSCE report 2022.

⁴⁸ Interview with senior officer of MoIA in Kosovo and North Macedonia. May 2023.

Gaps and challenges of DRR and of the VETOs in the Western Balkans

The DRR process was a new experience for Western Balkan countries. Despite the general institutional willingness to design and implement these programmes, due to the limited professional capacities and experience in the beginning, the progress in DRR left room for improvement. During the process of preparing and implementing DRR practices and programmes, naturally different challenges arose, such as discrimination and stigma against the VETOs in post-release period, lack of municipal and community involvement, lack of institutional cooperation, gaps in data sharing between agencies, lack of institutional capacities to provide vocational training. Each of these challenges will be dealt with and addressed below.

Discrimination and stigma against the VETOs in post-release period

The released VETOs and other repatriated individuals are afraid of stigma and discrimination from the private sector or community. And they are right to be afraid because citizens are reluctant to receive VETOs and repatriated individuals back into their community. A survey on perception of radicalisation and violent extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina shows that 60% of those surveyed have a negative opinion toward VETOs and returnees concerning their integration back into the community.⁴⁹ The citizens of Kosovo also share a negative perception towards the post-release VETOs and returnees from Syria and Iraq. Based on the Kosovo Security Barometer data for 2022, 58% of the respondents perceive the former VETOs and returnees as a threat, while 21% hold the opinion that they do not present a threat at all.⁵⁰ When it comes to the acceptance of the post-release VETOs, local communities show resistance and rejection. More than 50% of the Kosovo respondents said that they would not receive VETOs or returnees back into their community, or they would not feel safe to live in the same place with the returnees from conflict zones.⁵¹ Because of stigma and discrimination, many repatriated individuals refuse to apply for work in the private sector and, instead, seek opportunities to migrate to EU countries for working purposes or look for opportunities to open their own private businesses.

Lack of institutional cooperation and specialised skills at local level in post-release period

For many years, DRR has remained the mandate of the central institutions in the region. So, it comes as no surprise that cooperation between local level and central authorities involved in P/CVE and DRR remains a challenge. There are several obstacles that prevent the cooperation between central government authorities and municipalities such as: lack of professional capacities of local authorities to deal with the VETOs and repatriated individuals, and lack of knowledge of local authorities on DRR and P/CVE. In the case of the Western Balkan region, the focus of international donors and local governments was to increase the capacities of institutions at central level on the issues of preventing violent extremism and

⁴⁹ Korajlić Nedžad, Kržalić Armin, Kržalić Aida, Plevljak Benjamin, Dulaš Imer (2020). Travellers to Syria: A Criminological and Security Analysis with Special Focus on Returnees from Syrian Battlefronts.

⁵⁰ Kosovo Security Barometer Report 2022.

⁵¹ Ibid.

facilitating the DRR process. Very limited projects were focused on increasing capacities of local municipal bodies on P/CVE and DRR. Despite the willingness of local authorities to help and support the DRR process of VETOs in post-release period, municipalities do not have financial capacities, experience and knowledge on how to contribute towards DRR of the VETOs.⁵² Some progress has been made in the process of increasing municipal capacities on DRR and P/CVE. For example, several trainings have been organised with local municipalities and civil society organisations (CSOs), but more work still must be done in order to involve the municipal level in the post-release of returnees.

Lack of data sharing between agencies

Data sharing in the pre-release of prisoners is of paramount importance, given that it helps the authorities to prepare better individual DRR plans, increase the coordination among the agencies and help the agencies in preparing tailored support services for the needs of the VETOs after release. It also facilitates informed decision-making, enhances public safety and supports the successful reintegration of the individuals back into society.

Yet, it remains one of the biggest challenges. Lack of data sharing among the institutions in the Western Balkans is preventing institutions such as local authorities and probation services to prepare DRR programmes and interventions for individuals who are released from prisons. For example, in the case of Kosovo during the conditional release of FTFs from prisons, the probation authorities should be informed at least three months in advance. In practice, this procedure is not followed by the Kosovo Correctional Service and Ministry of Internal Affairs in relation to conditional release and suspended sentences, which limits the opportunities of the probation service to prepare reintegration plans and activities.

One of the reasons why data sharing among the agencies remains a challenge is the lack of legislative regulation. The countries of the Western Balkans have not managed to prepare a normative framework that will regulate the rules and procedures of data sharing for individuals convicted with terrorism-related offences.

Lack of capacities and focus on vocational trainings in post-release period

In the case of the Western Balkans, the potential for providing DRR interventions and vocational training for prisoners convicted of terrorism offences is facing two main challenges: the limited capacities of state agencies to provide vocational training during the pre and post-release period, and the lack of willingness of the prisoners to participate in the vocational trainings. This is a problem as, in the case of Kosovo, for example, the data show that the majority of VETO prisoners who were categorised as high or medium security threat have not participated in trainings due to ideological reasons or stigma.⁵³

Obstacles, such as a fragmented system and limited financial resources, limit the scope of work for these agencies and the potential to provide quality service for prisoners and VETOs in post-release period. Probation and correctional authorities in the region have not managed to build effective coordination with potential employers in the private sector, which is essential

⁵² Interview with senior MoIA officers in Kosovo and North Macedonia. May 2023.

⁵³ Ibid.

to ensure that vocational training programmes align with the demands of the job market and lead to meaningful employment opportunities for released prisoners. Due to the limited financial resources and knowledge, the post-release R&R programmes are mostly organised by donors through the local CSOs.

Risk assessment tools framework

The unification of risk assessment tools or vulnerability assessment frameworks remains a significant challenge in the Western Balkan region. While security agencies, including police and intelligence, have employed various internationally recognised risk assessment tools, other institutions like the correctional or probation authorities have not implemented risk assessment models to evaluate repatriated citizens from conflict zones. The security and justice institutions in the Western Balkans have not yet established a unified structure and system for risk assessment frameworks for individuals who have been radicalised and convicted of terrorism. The Kosovo government is in the early stages of implementing the vulnerability assessment framework programme (VAF) named 'Channel'. This is a vulnerability risk assessment programme that helps the state authorities measure the level of radicalisation and violent extremism of individuals. This programme helps authorities to prepare interventions for the individuals who go through the Channel programme. Kosovo's MoIA and Kosovo Police regularly use this tool in their work with VETOs and returnees or others who are radicalised. The Channel VAF has started to be used also at local levels in the municipalities of Hani Elezit and Mitrovica. Two multidisciplinary teams have been set up in both municipalities. Members of these multidisciplinary teams are psychologists, doctors, professors, social workers and other representatives based on the case under review. Both teams established at local level are in the training process on how to use the Channel VAF.⁵⁴ With the support of the GCERF and other donors, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania are also looking to apply Channel to their work, based on the Kosovo experience.

Practical improvement steps

As it was made clear in this paper, the post-release management of violent extremist and terrorist offenders is a complex and sensitive process. It requires the engagement of various agencies and stakeholders. This section of the paper provides some practical steps to further improve the existing progress made by Western Balkan countries in P/CVE and DRR:

- *Establish and implement clear guidelines for sharing information and coordinating among security agencies involved in DRR. This coordination will facilitate better case management and intervention design during the post-release period. Particular attention should be given to regulating data sharing and coordination systems regarding VETOs by the police, the Ministries of Security and Interior, correction authorities and probation authorities in the Western Balkans.*
- *Prepare and design steps for community engagement in DRR, including involving local communities, religious leaders and civil society organisations in the rehabilitation and reintegration process during the post-release period. Building strong relationships with local stakeholders is essential for effective DRR of VETOs and other repatriated individuals.*

⁵⁴ Interview with senior representative of MoIA in Kosovo. May 2023.

- *Define training requirements for professionals involved in post-release management, such as prison staff, law enforcement officers, case workers, social workers, education authorities and community leaders. Proper training will enhance the quality of services provided to VETOs, which are essential for DRR process.*
- *Strengthen cooperation with community-based organisations to design and implement rehabilitation and reintegration programmes during the post-release period. Partnering with local CSOs can help launch public awareness campaigns, emphasising acceptance and support for VETOs who have participated in DRR programmes.*
- *Launch public awareness campaigns that highlight the importance of acceptance and support for reformed individuals. Showcase success stories of former prisoners who have successfully reintegrated into their communities.*

Key lessons learned and recommendations

DRR has been a new phenomenon for the Western Balkans. In the initial phase of this process, institutions lacked the professional staff and resources to implement DRR measures. During this process, the Western Balkans have managed to build institutional mechanisms to work with VETOs and returnees. Several successful DRR initiatives have been implemented in prisons and at the community level. Significant progress has been achieved in the process of preventing radicalisation in correctional facilities. Some areas for improvement that need more focus from the political institutions are community involvement in DRR process in the post-release phase of VETOs and the increase of institutional coordination among central level and municipalities in DRR process. Below are several recommendations that can help address the issues related to DRR.

- The Western Balkans should establish special mechanisms for the DRR of VETOs and returnees. Those mechanisms should be created within the Ministries of Security and Interior, correctional and probation authorities and local municipalities and CSO community organisations. These mechanisms will help the Western Balkans to prepare better DRR interventions for the VETOs and returnees. The DRR should decentralise at the local level. This could be achieved by enhancing the professional capacities of municipalities and civil society organisations in DRR. Involving municipal actors can be done by increasing the professional capacities of municipalities and CSOs.
- The main Western Balkan authorities involved in CT and DRR should standardise the risk assessment tools and vulnerability assessment frameworks when working with VETOs and returnees. Using similar standards, frameworks and procedures for risk assessment and evaluation will play a crucial role in managing the cases of VETOs and other returnees. This approach will also assist institutions in better monitoring the behaviours of VETOs, designing DRR interventions based on the data, and it will enhance the multi-agency cooperation on DRR.
- The databases containing information of VETOs that are maintained by law enforcement agencies and state institutions involved in P/CVE and DRR activities should be accessible to the police, the MoI, correction and probation authorities. This process should be regulated based on the local legislation of each country. Data sharing and data exchange among the professionals involved in DRR is essential for better management of VETOs' cases.
- Data sharing of released radicalised individuals among the regional partners should be explored, especially those prison leavers not adhering to any rehabilitation programme. Even if the recidivism rate may be low, there have been terrorist attacks in the EU involving individuals released after serving sentence.

- The governments of Western Balkan countries, along with international donors and local municipalities, should collaboratively develop plans with clear steps and strategies to ensure the sustainability of multidisciplinary teams for preventing radicalisation and violent extremism at the local level. In future, these local mechanisms should not rely solely on foreign donor support, but should be integrated as part of the local municipal body.
- Institutions of Western Balkan countries should use the existing working protocols and standards and adapt them to their needs for monitoring the DRR process of VETOs after their release. Central institutions, in close cooperation with local authorities and communities, should identify the key gaps and challenges of FTFs and other returnees in the DRR process. A comprehensive integration plan should be developed, encompassing concrete interventions to facilitate the reintegration of VETOs and returnees back into the community.
- The P/CVE and R&R programmes of Western Balkan countries are focused on addressing and preventing Islamist extremism, while giving less emphasis to other forms of extremism. It is important for the Western Balkans to target other forms of extremism, such as far-right ideologies and ethno-nationalism.
- The Western Balkans, in particular Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, should be aware of the risks and threats that may arise from the return of fighters from Ukraine. State authorities in those countries should develop comprehensive DRR programmes for RFFs from Ukraine during their incarceration. These DRR plans should be tailored to individuals and their environments and focus on addressing the primary needs and concerns of the VETOs and returning foreign fighters.

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