CONCLUSION PAPER
RAN in the Western Balkans – Regional small-scale expert workshop
Working with violent extremist or terrorist offenders along the prison-exit continuum
30 March 2022, online

Working with violent extremist or terrorist offenders along the prison-exit continuum

Key outcomes

Dealing with imprisoned or recently released violent extremist or terrorist offenders (VETOs), including returned foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs), is a relatively new challenge for the societies in the Western Balkans. The region has been dealing with a number of challenges concerning VETOs and FTFs, including prison radicalisation, implementing effective rehabilitation and disengagement measures in the prison system, lacking a gender perspective, and overall weak capacities and know-how in dealing with VETOs and FTFs in the prison system. However, there is a growing understanding of these challenges and the ways in which coordination, cooperation and communication between government authorities, religious institutions, faith-based organisations, civil society and community can improve the process of managing the prison exit of VETOs and FTFs.

The prison-exit continuum of VETOs and FTFs is important for disrupting and weakening the potential of recidivism. This conclusion paper provides a summary of the discussions from the regional small-scale online expert workshop “Working with violent extremist or terrorist offenders along the prison-exit continuum” held on 30 March 30 2022. Practitioners working along the prison-exit continuum from the EU and Western Balkans attended the workshop. Some of the key takeaways from this workshop include:

- **Reluctance of VETOs to cooperate with prison staff and other professionals remains a major challenge** in the region. Investing in human capacity is key and prison staff should receive targeted training to enable them to apply individualised approaches towards VETOs, including on how to build rapport and understand the mechanics of trust. This should include human rights-based investigative interviews and dynamic security as ways to build a positive professional relationship with the client. Trainings should be assessed more systematically for sustainability and effectiveness.

- **Prison conditions** are also important to improve involuntary client relationships — prison should be normalising life and providing a healthy environment in which the offender starts to see opportunities for rehabilitation after release and would be more likely to engage in relevant programmes. In this context, the experience of the Western Balkan countries shows that trust of the prisoners in the credibility of reintegration and deradicalisation programmes is important. This is to say that the prisoners should have the confidence that such programmes are truly there to support them.
• **Reaching out to family members of VETOs and providing them with support** (educational, socioeconomic, medical, mental health) has proven to be very effective in gaining trust, prioritising concrete steps for the post-release period and preparing for transition into the community. This might look like identifying one person from the family who is reliable and helpful to the rehabilitation process of the VETO, and offering them support. It is equally important to **work with communities to prepare them for the reintegration of released VETOs**, including through empowering civil society organisations (CSOs) to take on this work. Communication is important — practitioners need to avoid being “pushy”, and instead demonstrate they are there to help.

• There is a clear need to **bridge the gap between security staff working with VETOs in prison and practitioners providing treatment in the post-release phase**. Social workers and psychologists need to be allowed to access VETOs while still in prison, as part of the preparation for release. Prisons should not be left alone with the responsibility for VETOs, but they also need to open up for other professionals providing treatment and support.

### Highlights of the discussion

**Prisons in the Western Balkans are still learning how to deal with VETOs and FTFs**

VETOs and FTFs are a relatively new phenomenon for prisons in the Western Balkans and therefore the system is still learning and adapting to dealing with the challenges they pose. This resulted with the prisons becoming vulnerable to radicalisation. Government authorities in the Western Balkans realise that a “one size fits all” approach simply does not work concerning the prison-exit continuum of VETOs and FTFs. For instance, in Kosovo* (1) the correctional service only started to train their personnel in dealing with VETOs and FTFs and develop a rehabilitation and resocialisation programme in 2016. Accordingly, there are challenges with the lack of capacities, and in some cases also insufficient resources to deal with VETOs and FTFs in prison and after their release. Personnel in the prison system are inherently trained to approach their job in terms of security and often lack the necessary skills and know-how to conduct complex tasks such as assessing the extent of radicalisation and commitment to violent extremism of VETOs and FTFs. In addition to this, VETOs and FTFs are inherently suspicious and not cooperative with the state institutions, during and after their detention period. Stronger engagement with the community and families of VETOs and FTFs as well as joint efforts with civil society could help to improve the situation.

Confidence building measures between VETOs/FTFs in the prison system and the personnel assigned to work on deradicalisation and rehabilitation is key. Frequent changes in personnel in the prison system present a challenge to building trust with VETOs and FTFs. It is essential to allow correction officers more time to understand the dynamics and build a rapport with VETOs and FTFs, which can lead to a higher degree of participation in deradicalisation and rehabilitation programmes, as well as a more constructive and cooperative approach with public institutions after release. Overall, conditions in prisons in the Western Balkans need to be conducive to the goal of rehabilitation and deradicalisation.

**Approaches to dealing with VETOs and FTFs lack a proper gender perspective**

There are very few cases of convicted women VETOs, because the general approach has been not to prosecute returning women. In Kosovo, the women returnees were not immediately interrogated upon their arrival, however they did not escape prosecution. It is estimated that around 20 women returnees were indicted in Kosovo, and 16 have pled guilty to charges such as “organising and participating in a terrorist group.”

Nevertheless, in a broader preventing and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE) perspective, applying a gender-sensitive approach is crucial in ensuring efficient disengagement and reintegration programmes. This also strengthens the multi-agency cooperation and contributes to trust building between institutions and VETOs. The cases of Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina highlight this issue. Based on the experience of practitioners in the workshop, the programmes in Albania are mainly directed at men and there is lack of knowledge on how to approach

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(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.
women VETOs and FTFs. Participants in the workshop emphasised the significance of socioeconomic support upon release of VETOs/FTFs, along with specialised programmes for supporting women and children, including through education and by providing adequate mental health support. Experiences from Bosnia and Herzegovina show that some returned women related to VETOs are often economically dependent and continue to support them. Hence, the lack of specific resocialisation programmes for these women contributes to deepening the mistrust of VETOs and their families towards the public institutions in general.

The importance of Cooperation, Coordination and Communication for the prison-exit continuum and the post-release phase

Cooperation, coordination and communication between government authorities in the context of managing the prison-exit period of VETOs and FTFs is essential. This means that public institutions that are in charge of monitoring and dealing with VETOs and FTFs after their prison exit depend on quality information from the prison personnel about the respective individuals. While this has improved with experience, the importance of strengthening the transfer of methods, knowledge and approaches in multi-agency settings continues to be present. In this respect, extended cooperation between social services, security institutions and local communities is needed in order to clarify what information should be shared and to what extent non-institutional actors are limited in working with VETOs, without compromising security.

The main challenges and experiences with preparing VETOs for release and in the post-release phase discussed during the meeting include:

- There is a lack of **communication and cooperation between social services, security and prison staff, and communities** in the early stages of returns and convictions of FTFs, while several challenges persist.
  - In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, social services had to work with security agencies for the first time and it was difficult to find a common ground.
  - Institutions and practitioners that deal with the prison-exit continuum (i.e. social welfare centres) need to have access to quality information or intelligence from the prison system about the VETOs and FTFs who are released. For instance, in the case of Kosovo, there are concerns that the reports that are prepared on VETOs and FTFs upon their release tend to be generic, lacking detailed information about the respective individual that can potentially hinder the efforts of the institutions to effectively plan for their support.
- In Kosovo, the Division for Prevention and Reintegration of Radicalized Persons (DPRRP) at the Ministry of Internal Affairs receives through email from the Kosovo Correctional Services (KCS) information and an individual plan for each imprisoned FTF 3 months before their release. Also, the DPR staff have access to the KCS database of FTFs. This is an **example of a mechanism for exchanging information and structures being in place to enable communication**.
- Economic support for VETOs and FTFs from public institutions and civil society is considered crucial for trust building, however challenges in communication between institutions, as well as between institutions and VETOs and FTFs, have occasionally created **unrealistic expectations and perceptions of needs**.
- **Post-release follow-up measures**. There are no special programmes that VETOs and FTFs can access after the detention period in the Western Balkans, but they are encouraged to access existing social welfare programmes for employment and social assistance. These are often limited in time and scope, however. Administrative procedures and criteria make it more complicated for VETOs and FTFs to access such programmes.
  - For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, preparation for discharging VETOs starts only 8 days before the actual release. In some cases, the VETOs can make use of general social welfare measures after release but only for 1 month. This time limitation is also insufficient to prepare professionals who will provide any support and treatment after release. This is often the very first contact between VETOs and social services, with the latter often lacking proper trainings to deal with such sensitive cases.
Gender stereotypes seem to also affect the prison-exit continuum, such as male VETOs being reluctant to work with female social workers.

A clear challenge is related to VETOs released into small and/or rural communities where practitioners have not received training and there is no support.

Possible solutions discussed to the challenges identified include:

- reaching out to families before the release in order to build trust and offer socioeconomic support;
- allowing social workers and other professionals (such as mental health workers) to access the VETOs already in prison;
- participants stressed that cooperating and communicating with the religious leaders and faith-based organisations is key for dealing with VETOs and FTFs after their prison exit.

The case management put in place for the reintegration of women and children returnees can be used further when VETOs are released into communities to strengthen multi-agency cooperation. Reintegration measures for families (such as support to start a business) can be further applied.

**Recommendations**

1. **Develop capacities of prison personnel and other relevant officials in the prison-exit continuum through trainings, experience sharing and knowledge management.**

   - Trainings are necessary for existing personnel, but also employing qualified and professional experts in the prisons. Training curricula for prison and probation personnel should be updated on a regular basis.

   - Furthermore, there is the need to create more systematic opportunities for exchange of experience in dealing with VETOs and FTFs amongst the prison personnel and public officials from the Western Balkans.

   - Equally important in terms of capacity building is for the government authorities in the Western Balkans to improve the process of documenting and collecting methods, approaches and activities related to dealing with VETOs and FTFs, and enable sharing and using of such information for the administration and civil society. In other words, the prison system should be able to provide quality information to public institutions (i.e. social welfare centres, local police) on VETOs and FTFs who are released from prison. Such information is important for planning adequate measures to support their rehabilitation and reintegration. Prisons/Correctional Services should develop means through which social workers and other professionals (including mental health workers) can access VETOs and FTFs while they are in the prison system. This would potentially lead to a better understanding on the part of the institutions that work on the reintegration process with VETOs and FTFs on their needs and the kind of approaches that would be more effective in supporting their rehabilitation and reintegration.

2. **Develop tailor-made programmes for dealing with VETOs and FTFs that also improve economic support for them.**

   - Socioeconomic support for VETOs and FTFs after their prison exit is seen as an important measure for building community resilience towards radicalisation and building trust for public institutions. VETOs should receive socioeconomic assistance and practitioners should work on increasing employment opportunities for VETOs after their release. That said, the public perception on such kind of support is an issue.

   - Increase support for the social welfare centres for more effective involvement in the process of reintegration of returnees in the society. Such support should include both more resources and development of capacities. Build on existing working mechanisms in case management of returned women and children.
3. Improve collaboration amongst state and civil society actors as well as religious institutions.

- Multi-agency cooperation should build on a communication strategy that promotes shared assessment and awareness amongst different institutions, CSOs and the community at large. This would enable the further clarification of the roles of security and non-security actors in the processes of disengagement, rehabilitation and reintegration of VETOs.

- The role of different non-governmental actors playing a role after release, such as religious leaders, family members of VETOs, community leaders and other practitioners, should be integrated in the planning of multi-agency cooperation and intervention planning, including for ensuring a consistent prison-exit continuum.

- Consolidate sustainable and systematic information sharing and cooperation between all involved actors.

- Capacity gaps of actors involved in joint disengagement, rehabilitation and reintegration approaches need to be mapped and addressed early on, for instance through training, to ensure that their interventions are mutually effective. Joint evaluation is another key tool to build effectiveness of collaborative interventions.

### Relevant practices

1. The experience of Bosnia and Herzegovina shows that social welfare centres are an instrumental mechanism for dealing with VETOs and FTFs after prison release and facilitating their reintegration in the society. These centres represent an emerging good practice of cooperation between security and non-security institutions.

2. In Kosovo, the Division for Prevention and Reintegration of Radicalized Persons (DPRPR) is a government division that has established good relations with the community and this has played a key role in the reintegration of repatriated Kosovars from Syria and Iraq. The principle behind such an experience could be fully implemented also in dealing with released extremist inmates.

3. The regional initiative Enhancing penitentiaries capacities in addressing radicalisation in prisons in Western Balkans funded by the European Commission and implemented by the Council of Europe aims to bridge capacity gaps in tertiary prevention and improve prison management in the region. It focuses on training for prison and probation staff, rehabilitation approaches, preparation for release and post-penal assistance.

### Follow-up

First, the discussion in the workshop suggests that government authorities in the Western Balkans would benefit from a workshop on cooperation and coordination between CSOs, community and public institutions in monitoring and managing the prison-exit continuum of VETOs and FTFs. Second, a workshop that enables sharing of experience amongst public institutions in the region in dealing with VETOs and FTFs after the prison exit, including prison personnel, would be beneficial. Last, in a broader P/CVE perspective, government authorities in the region could also benefit from a workshop on gender perspective and cooperation with the private sector for reintegration of VETOs and FTFs, including released inmates.
Further reading

**HF II Regional - Enhancing penitentiary capacities in addressing radicalisation in prisons**: “The main aim of the Action is to enhance regional security by improving the inter-institutional exchange of knowledge and good practices in the region in respect of radicalization in prisons, with a view on providing penitentiary system staff with necessary standards, tools and instruments needed to respond appropriately.”

**Baseline Assessment for the Kosovo Probation Service** by the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies provides a baseline assessment of the challenges that the Kosovo Probation Service faces in managing and supervising VETOs and FTFs. The report is based on in-person interviews with personnel of the Kosovo Probation Service, therefore offering an important insight into the everyday challenges of the individuals dealing with VETOs and FTFs.

**Promoting a Multi-Stakeholder Approach to Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism**: Summary report of roundtable discussions on the National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism in the Republic of North Macedonia. The report highlights the challenge with lack of capacities and know-how on how to manage the prison exit of VETOs and FTFs in order to prevent recidivism.