



# Repatriated foreign terrorist fighters and their families: European experiences & lessons for P/CVE

Authored by **Anita Perešin** & **Daniela PISOIU**,  
RAN Expert Pool Members

Radicalisation Awareness Network

**RAN**   
Practitioners

# **Repatriated foreign terrorist fighters and their families: European experiences & lessons for P/CVE**

## LEGAL NOTICE

This document has been prepared for the European Commission; however, it reflects the views only of the authors, and the European Commission is not liable for any consequence stemming from the reuse of this publication. More information on the European Union is available on the Internet (<http://www.europa.eu>).

Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2021

© European Union, 2021



The reuse policy of European Commission documents is implemented by the Commission Decision 2011/833/EU of 12 December 2011 on the reuse of Commission documents (OJ L 330, 14.12.2011, p. 39). Except otherwise noted, the reuse of this document is authorised under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC-BY 4.0) licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). This means that reuse is allowed provided appropriate credit is given and any changes are indicated.

For any use or reproduction of elements that are not owned by the European Union, permission may need to be sought directly from the respective rightholders.

## Abstract

Approaches to working with returning foreign terrorist fighters and their families differ across Europe. On the whole, these approaches build on existing programmes, initiatives and legal frameworks that deal with terrorism and radicalisation more broadly and according to local context. This paper presents an overview of general approaches towards repatriation in EU countries and the Western Balkans, with concrete examples of practices, returnee coordinators and various types of multi-agency and national coordination as well as exit programmes and interventions for both adult and child returnees. The paper draws on open-source data and interviews with key players from selected countries. It concludes with a series of existing challenges and presents key learnings on institutional cooperation, local level measures and individual reintegration.

## Introduction

The debate around repatriation often centres on a number of political, legal and ethical arguments: these include humanitarian concerns over the dire conditions in camps in north-eastern Syria and the risk of further radicalisation, the long-term risk of delaying repatriation, and settling who should take responsibility for the management of those people.

Numerous reports attest to the dire conditions under which European women and children are being detained in Syria and Iraq after the collapse of Daesh (the so-called Islamic State (IS)), as well as the overall conditions in which highly radicalised female Daesh supporters who still endorse the caliphate try to control life in camps and preserve Daesh's rules and ideology<sup>1</sup>. Some EU Member States have been reluctant to actively repatriate foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and their families, and there is still ongoing political and legal debate over whether Member States are in fact obliged to do so. Exceptions have been made in some countries, in cases of young and/or orphan children who have been brought back individually, and mostly with state support, on private family initiatives or as a matter of concerted action. France, for example, has brought back **28** children since the demise of Daesh in March 2019<sup>2</sup>. Decisions are mostly taken on a case-by-case basis, and no stable national programmes exist to date that systematically identify and actively return EU citizens from Syria and Iraq, although some measures and procedures are in place.

The overall approach has been different in the Western Balkans, where efforts have been set in motion to actively bring back all FTFs and their families. For example, **110** individuals in Kosovo and **25** in Bosnia and Herzegovina (mainly women and children), have already been brought back home in a single operation; Albania<sup>3</sup> and North Macedonia<sup>4</sup>, with 5 and 3 repatriated individuals respectively, are currently working on initiatives to return all remaining nationals from Syrian camps. The repatriation process of their other nationals has been prolonged due to the Covid-19 pandemic, but national plans have been prepared and incorporated to ensure the overall repatriation system is established at national and local level.

In sum, EU approaches – with some exceptions – have generally built on existing programmes and structures intended for homegrown radicalised individuals or minors in need of protection, and have adapted these to address the specific challenges presented by returnees. This is because homegrown radicalisation and terrorism posed a serious challenge in the EU even before the FTF phenomenon. Few entirely new institutions and/or procedures have been created to this end. In general, the Western Balkans approach differs in this sense – several institutions and procedures have been designed for the specific purpose of dealing with returnees.

---

<sup>1</sup> Speckhard & Shajkovci, Waiting for return of the caliphate among ISIS enforcers in Syria's al Hol, Ain Issa and Roj camps.

<sup>2</sup> Jeannerod, La France a rapatrié d'autres enfants du nord-est de la Syrie. See <https://www.hrw.org/fr/news/2020/06/24/la-france-rapatrie-dautres-enfants-du-nord-est-de-la-syrie>

<sup>3</sup> A woman with four children. See Erebara, Albanian children to be returned from Syrian refugee camps.

<sup>4</sup> Rosand, Ellis, & Weine, *Repatriating ISIS family members: A North Macedonia model?* See <https://www.justsecurity.org/72420/repatriating-isis-family-members-a-north-macedonian-model/>

This paper outlines general approaches and experiences in the EU and the Western Balkans, followed by some specific practices as well as lessons learned.

According to a recent estimation citing European intelligence sources, around **5 300** men and women from Europe have left for Syria and Iraq since 2012. It is further estimated that around **1 000** children left together with their parents, and that some 600 were born there. Taking into account the several waves of returnees, the war casualties and the fighters who left to join other war theatres, around **2 500** of 5 300 people are believed to still be in these territories. Importantly, the ratio of children returning is much lower: around **1 400** of 1 600 are estimated to remain (not considering war and famine casualties). Arguably, it has been more difficult for families, women and children to return; currently, **most Europeans still remaining in former Daesh territories are in fact women and children** <sup>5</sup>.

## Managing repatriations and working with returnees

Approaches to returning FTFs and their families in Europe vary <sup>6</sup>. Such approaches are typically built on pre-existing programmes, initiatives and legal frameworks designed to deal with terrorism and radicalisation more broadly and depending on local context.

Three broad categories of returnees can be distinguished, as explained below.

- Individuals returning **on their own**. There are several waves in this category: individuals (both male and female) but also families who returned in the early years of the Syrian conflict (2012–2013); next, those who returned during the period of the caliphate; and finally, the individuals returning after its fall. The criminalisation of various additional activities relating to involvement in terrorism (including specific aspects of foreign fighting) was only implemented in 2014 and 2015 in the EU <sup>7</sup> and in the following years in most Western Balkan countries, after amendments to the criminal codes. While ‘membership in a terrorist organisation’ was previously regarded as a criminal offence, the threat associated with such leavers was considered lower from 2012 to 2014. So early returnees usually remained outside the judicial system; at the time, there was relatively little awareness among leavers about the Daesh atrocities to come, and most returned after a relatively short time.
- Individuals including children (with or without their mothers) who were **actively repatriated** from Syria (the percentage is higher in the Western Balkans; in the EU, the number is limited, and usually involves only young and/or orphan children, and very rarely, their mothers).
- Individuals for whom **secure return** is ensured **from Turkey**.

The two latter categories of repatriation involve specific procedures hinging on diplomatic channels that – for specific countries – are unavailable in the case of Syria. This is flagged by some governments as an obstacle to repatriations.

<sup>5</sup> Renard & Coolsaet, *Children in the Levant: Insights from Belgium on the dilemmas of repatriation and the challenges of reintegration*.

<sup>6</sup> All information which has not been referenced is sourced from expert interviews in Belgium, France, Germany, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Kosovo.

<sup>7</sup> This refers to the implementation of Council Framework Decision 2008/919/JHA that includes three new offences: public provocation to commit a terrorist offence, recruitment for terrorism, and providing (but not receiving) training for terrorism. See Directive (EU) 2017/541 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 March 2017 on combating terrorism and replacing Council Framework Decision 2002/475/JHA and amending Council Decision 2005/671/JHA (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2017/541/oj>) concerning a number of terrorist offences and offences related to a terrorist group, as well as offences related to terrorist activities, such as public provocation to commit a terrorist offence, recruitment for terrorism, providing training for terrorism, receiving training for terrorism, and travelling for the purpose of terrorism.

In **Germany**, for example, concrete cases of the return of individuals in detention pending deportation in Turkey involve the following steps. The German embassy is contacted by the Turkish authorities; the person is placed on the plane and can be accompanied by German authorities. For child returnees, security authorities and the Youth Welfare Office make a first assessment at the airport of the child and the family with regard to child welfare. If the child's welfare is endangered, they become the charge of the Youth Welfare Office; minors additionally have a health evaluation and may be treated in hospital afterwards. Depending on the case, the following step is either imprisonment or a recommendation to contact counselling organisations and carry out health checks.

For FTFs returning to **Belgium** from Turkey, an administrative procedure (known as the Hotspot procedure), organised by the Belgian Federal Public Service of Foreign Affairs ensures a secure return. The Hotspot procedure involves the security and intelligence services and takes into account the risk and threat assessment of each individual concerned. Arrival in Belgium is managed by the federal police and the prosecution. Turkey considers this operation more as a deportation.

Three broad phases can be distinguished for adult returnees:

- 1) **risk assessment** by intelligence services or an investigating judge, supported by police and intelligence services;
- 2) **prosecution, incarceration and rehabilitation**;
- 3) **reintegration** back into society <sup>8</sup>.

In some cases, prosecution is not possible, due to lack of evidence. In principle, the measures applied to returning and repatriated FTFs are the same as for 'regular' homegrown terrorists, with some differences in content, such as the inclusion of certain aspects related to travel and activities in Syria and Iraq as part of the **risk assessment**.

With regard to **prosecution**, EU Member States do not differentiate between women and men; **women** have recently been treated as individuals with full agency. In Germany, for example, although female radicalisation processes initially received little attention in this context, it has since been recognised that women are not only victims but also perpetrators. Consequently, Daesh female returnees have only recently been prosecuted. In the Western Balkans, the understanding of the threat that women may pose is still likely influenced by entrenched social biases that risk to underestimate the agency of women. In many cases, female Daesh returnees to the Western Balkans have been regarded mainly as victims lacking any agency in following their husbands to Syria or Iraq, and these female returnees have experienced a more lenient approach than men upon arrival (e.g. receiving lower charges than men for participation in a terrorist group). The same is generally true for **prison, probation and exit programmes**, except when gender aspects are considered in some programmes <sup>9</sup>.

Pre-existing **deradicalisation** programmes and initiatives in and outside prison as well as family programmes are usually implemented for FTFs, too. Approaches to rehabilitation and reintegration commonly begin by concentrating on changing behaviour, although many have the long-term objective of working on the underlying mindsets and ideology in addition to behavioural change <sup>10</sup>. Various types of socio-psychological approaches are employed, some building on experiences with criminal offenders or right-wing extremists. Depending on the country and individual circumstances, various prison regimes are adopted including ordinary confinement, separation in dedicated units and/or prisons, and isolation. Exit programmes like those being run in **Denmark** (see below) have been set up or adapted specifically for FTFs.

<sup>8</sup> Needs assessment and psychological support are part of steps 1) and 2).

<sup>9</sup> For example, a number of gender-sensitive counter-radicalisation initiatives aimed at female violent extremist prisoners have been implemented in France, such as in the women's prison in Fresnes. See United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Handbook on gender dimensions of criminal justice responses to terrorism*, p. 105.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the Radicalisation Awareness Network, *Rehabilitation Manual. Rehabilitation of radicalised and terrorist offenders for first-line practitioners*, pp. 15-16.

The issue of **citizenship** of adult returnees has played a role in individual cases in the EU, where citizenship has been revoked or responsibility for the return has not been assumed by the country because the individual did not hold the citizenship of that EU state while living there. One of the major challenges for Western Balkan authorities is confirming the identity of Syrian-born children of their citizens, especially when the mother has another child or children with father(s) of a different nationality. The legal status of these children remains unresolved in most of the relevant countries, presenting a significant barrier to their full reintegration and resocialisation into society.

**Child returnees** are considered primarily victims; psychological support in processing traumatic experiences and securing normal life in the family environment and education are paramount. At the same time, there is an awareness that reintegration is more challenging for children (chiefly for boys older than 9) who have been indoctrinated or even militarily trained. Despite such concerns, repatriation plans in the region include the return of all minors from Syrian camps.

## A closer look: specific approaches and experiences in work with returnees

### 1. Coordination mechanisms

This section describes specific coordination mechanisms operating at various administrative levels and provides examples. The following topics are covered:

- **returnee coordinators** of activities in the reintegration process;
- **national coordination through specific institutions**, either through designated P/CVE coordinators who also deal with broader issues related to P/CVE, or through other types of state institution associated with counterterrorism work;
- **national action plans** for return and reintegration.

#### 1.1 Returnee coordinators at regional level

The **returnee coordinator** approach is quite new; it relates directly to the multi-agency, whole-state and whole-society approach of reintegration and deradicalisation, which calls for the involvement of all relevant state institutions and civil society actors. An existing good practice in the roles and activities of returnee coordinators operates in **Germany**, where the Conference of Interior Ministers decided that apart from criminal prosecution measures, deradicalisation and reintegration measures are also essential for returnees<sup>11</sup>. Given the heterogeneous nature of the returnees, they decided to involve a range of authorities at regional level: not only the police, intelligence services, law enforcement, courts and probation officers, but also a number of social services such as child protection services, schools, counselling and employment services as well as deradicalisation programmes (e.g. of civil society organisations) and psychological and psychotherapeutic support programmes. In Germany, the Advice Centre on Radicalisation at the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) coordinates the activities of several civil society partners who provide counselling to radicalised individuals and their families.

Seven of the federal states most affected by this phenomenon are currently hosting the returnee coordinators, who are placed under various authorities. For example, in Berlin, the coordination office is hosted in the Senate Department for the Interior and Sport. In other federal states, the returnee coordinator is hosted by the police, the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, or other authorities. Returnee coordination has been funded as a pilot project since 2019 by the National Prevention Programme against Islamist Extremism (NPP).

---

<sup>11</sup> Bundesministerium des Innern, für Bau und Heimat, Umgang mit Rückkehrern aus jihadistischen Kampfgebieten.

**Establishing the returnee coordinator office** in Berlin involved the following steps:

- bringing the subject of the returnees to the attention of relevant authorities and services in areas such as security, family, education, employment and health care;
- identifying relevant contact persons (single point of contact or SPOC) in governmental administrations and in their subordinated institutions, as well as civil society partners like counselling organisations, e.g. Violence Prevention Network (VPN) and Grüner Vogel;
- establishing a multi-professional and interdisciplinary network in which responsibilities are defined, case-related information is shared, and individual measures are taken;
- establishing a reporting chain within this network that ensures flawless communication and information-sharing;
- summoning case-related round-table meetings of all relevant actors before and after the returnees' arrival, to discuss measures and progress.

The returnee coordinators meet several times a year with BAMF to evaluate and identify challenges and lessons learned. The coordinators act as the interface between security institutions, regional coordinators, civil society, and relevant federal and regional institutions, and if necessary, cooperate at federal level in individual cases as well. Their main task is to initiate deradicalisation initiatives in individual cases wherever possible, and support deradicalisation work in relation to returnees, in a sustainable manner. They keep an overview of the situation on the ground and of the numbers and types of individuals returning, monitor and follow up on measures, identify good practices, challenges and problems as well as possible solutions, and are effectively a communication node among the various institutions involved. For instance, this might take the form of round-table meetings or case conferences that include specific actors in deradicalisation work (security authorities, child protection services, schools and counselling organisations, etc.). These meetings are held on a regular basis (depending on individual case needs) and facilitate information exchange and decision-taking on possible measures and objectives as well as interventions in critical situations.

In order to ensure the comprehensive exchange of information and plan measures effectively, first measures such as case-related round-table meetings are usually initiated before the returnees' arrival. The returnee coordinators are informed by the security authorities of the respective federal states, who in turn are informed by the Federal Foreign Office or the local German consulate.

## 1.2 National coordination through specific institutions

Apart from establishing bodies for the specific coordination of activities relating to returnees, existing institutions responsible for broader coordination in counterterrorism and P/CVE are also tasked in this area. National P/CVE coordination institutions are used in some EU Member States like the Netherlands, and are also widely used in Western Balkan countries. There are several examples of good practices from **Western Balkan countries**, describing how to set up and run an organised multi-agency structure at national and local level, coordinated by one governmental institution, to support the repatriation and reintegration of returnees from Syria and Iraq.

- **The Coordination Center for Countering Violent Extremism (CVE Center) (Albania)**

This centre is a hub for the coordination and capacity development of local stakeholders and frontline practitioners involved in efforts to counter violent extremism in Albania and the region, by sharing best practices and developing evidence-based responses. The CVE Center regularly engages with communities, policymakers and practitioners in Albania, in the region and internationally to better inform its policies and activities. It is also responsible for coordinating the repatriation and rehabilitation of FTFs and their families from Syria and Iraq. Fully operational since 2018 and reporting directly to the Prime Minister's Office, the CVE Center presents an example of a different, 'softer' approach to the repatriation and reintegration of returnees. By primarily employing expert advisers with multidisciplinary

instead of security backgrounds (e.g. in public affairs, justice, human rights, psychology, public relations and diplomacy) this coordinating body aims to provide all necessary support to returnees, from pre-arrival to the reintegration phase (<http://www.cve.gov.al/>).

- **Division for Prevention and Reintegration of Radicalised Persons (DPRRP)<sup>12</sup>, Ministry of Internal Affairs (Kosovo)**

The decision of the Kosovan government to organise the return of FTFs and their families in an orderly way led to the creation of a dedicated action plan, approved by the government, and the subsequent creation of the Division for Prevention and Reintegration within the Ministry of Internal Affairs and an interinstitutional working group. It included, among others, the following bodies: the University Clinical Centre of Kosovo, the police, the departments of Citizenship and of Integration, the Public Prosecutor's Office, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Social Welfare and the Sanitary Inspectorate.

- **National Counterterrorism Coordinator Office (North Macedonia)**

The office coordinates the work of the interministerial working group responsible for the process of returning and providing systematic support and treatment to returnees whose repatriation is approved by the government, according to the National Plan for Returnees adopted in March 2020. The working group comprises representatives from the Cabinet of the Prime Minister, the General Secretariat of the Government, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Interior, the National Security Agency, the Intelligence Agency, the Basic Public Prosecutor's Office for Prosecution of Organized Crime and Corruption, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Local Self-Government, the Ministry of Health, the State Sanitary and Health Inspectorate, the Center for Public Health, the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, the Employment Agency, the Ministry of Justice, the Sanctions Enforcement Administration, the Administration Registry, the Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Religious Groups, the Agency for Youth and Sports, the Reception Center for Asylum Seekers and the Red Cross.

In the EU, **Belgium** serves as an interesting example of how **multi-agency coordination**, including on the management of returnees, can be carried out at **several administrative levels** and depending on the overall approach and institutional traditions of the authorities dealing with the issue. The **National Radicalisation Action Plan (Plan R)** foresees the procedures and structures to be engaged to deal with violent radicalisation, the partners to be involved and the platforms to be used. The **national task force** is a strategic organ that assures the coordination of all the different platforms and working groups represented in Plan R at national level. There are two kinds of **local task force**: **Local Task Forces (LTFs)**, which function at the repressive/security level; and **Local Integrated Security Cells on Radicalism (LISC-R)**, which function at the preventive level. Within LTFs, information is exchanged, cases are evaluated individually and continually over time and decisions are made on whether cases will be followed up by security or socio-preventive measures. The LISC-R involve actors from different socio-preventive services that support individuals to reintegrate (back) into society: social services, the information officer from the local police, and other relevant actors. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are partners in the socio-preventive work and they have developed different working methods, depending on the region. The exchange between the security and the socio-preventive task forces (LTFs and LISC-R) is ensured through a partner connecting the two structures, namely the **information officer**, who is a local police officer. Before information can be exchanged between the two task forces, there needs to be agreement within the respective structure on this issue, and the information exchange will take place according to the legal framework.

Task forces deal with all radicalised individuals with a certain status: FTFs, homegrown TFs, propagandists, potentially violent individuals and convicted individuals, as well as others not holding such a status but who nevertheless present the potential to pose a risk. Assessments can change over time and lead to different

<sup>12</sup> Avdimetaj & Coleman, *What EU Member States can learn from Kosovo's experience in repatriating former foreign fighters and their families*. See [http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Policy\\_Brief\\_Kosovo\\_experience\\_repatriating\\_former\\_foreign\\_fighters\\_May\\_2020\\_998547.pdf](http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Policy_Brief_Kosovo_experience_repatriating_former_foreign_fighters_May_2020_998547.pdf)

measures directed at security and/or integration. The approach is individualised and involves the collection and exchange of information within the platform and between the two levels.

The LISC-R are activated by the communal or local administration or by the prevention officer, to help with reintegration work. If suggested by partners such as school or work, radicalised/radicalising individuals could also be approached by the local police before entering the judicial system. Discussions within the LISC-R may indicate, for instance, whether a partner who has a positive relationship with the person in question is likely to help them to disengage, or if a threat is perceived, and this will ensure the local security task force is informed.

### 1.3 National action plans

**Kosovo** has one of the highest rates of mobilisation into terrorist organisations in Europe relative to population size. In addition, Kosovo currently has the highest concentration of returned FTFs and their families in Europe, with about **242** returnees<sup>13</sup>. With **110** citizens repatriated all at once in April 2019, Kosovo stands apart as one of the few countries in the world that has been active in repatriating its nationals from Syria in such a great percentage in a single operation.

Instead of the appointment of a single returnee coordinator, the planning and implementation of the repatriation of FTFs and their families was based on a **72-hour emergency action plan**<sup>14</sup> covering the immediate period upon arrival of the returnees. The plan was coordinated by the Division for Prevention and Reintegration (the specialised interinstitutional and multi-agency division mentioned earlier). The period was to be predominantly used to run medical, psychiatric and psychological assessments as well as referrals to hospital, if necessary.

The plan provided for different approaches and treatments of male, female and child returnees. The 4 men (out of 110 individuals) repatriated in April 2019 were detained upon arrival, pending prosecution. Women and children were held in a detention centre to undergo medical check-ups and additional needs-assessment procedures. Psychiatric and psychological assessments were carried out to analyse the children's mental states and their living circumstances of the past months and years. Following the Department of Public Health's approval, women and children were released to their families. Although all the families involved initially agreed to take back their repatriated relatives, tensions were reported to be running high, especially in the first weeks. Issues like overcrowding and resurfacing family conflicts from the past led to several families requesting psychiatric counselling and support, or even alternative housing in some cases. The psychiatric unit responsible for the supervision and treatment of the women and children was available for families and returnees to call 24/7; it provided counselling on how to handle such emotional and stressful situations and reduce tension.

There are many similarities in the national action plans that have been adopted in other Western Balkan countries and are dedicated to the management of returnees.

For example, in **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, a **national action plan** has been developed, comprising the following three phases.

- 1) **Pre-arrival phase.** This entails the preparation of all involved actors at the level of institutions, families and society and all responsible bodies at national and local level, for the process of repatriation and reintegration of returnees. The entire process is coordinated by the Ministry of Security, and at national level involves the security and intelligence agencies, the ministries of Public Affairs, Human Rights, Internal Affairs and the Public Prosecutor's Office. At local (entity) level, it involves practitioners in social work, health, education and the local police.
- 2) **The reception process.** This refers to all actions related to the reception of returnees and the provision of appropriate interventions, including identification, health and psychological evaluation,

---

<sup>13</sup> Avdimetaj & Coleman, *What EU Member States can learn from Kosovo's experience in repatriating former foreign fighters and their families*.

<sup>14</sup> Radicalisation Awareness Network, *Study visit: Returned women and children – studying an ongoing experience on the ground*.

initial interrogation and risk assessment, as well as temporary accommodation in a reception centre (up to 10 days).

3) **Reintegration phase.** This includes the following inspiring practices.

- A **mobile consultant team**, coordinated by the Ministry of Security and comprising expert advisers in security, social work, psychology and theology. This team is set up with the aim of providing additional support primarily to institutions and their practitioners working with returnees at national and local level. The team's main task is to provide additional training and education on how to deal with returnees and the challenges they face upon their return. The team is currently not tasked to work directly with returnees or their families.
- **The Reintegration and Financial Support Fund for Returnees and their Families**, established in cooperation with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), with the aim of supporting returnees and their families to start new jobs and achieve financial independence.

In **Albania**, an interinstitutional **Joint Action Plan has been in place** since 2019 to receive returnees from conflict zones, based on close interinstitutional cooperation between the CVE Center, all line ministries, the law enforcement agencies and judicial authorities. All activities related to returnees are based on **three pillars**: (1) community outreach and awareness, (2) countering extremist propaganda while promoting democratic values, and (3) developing long-term comprehensive P/CVE policies. Therefore, the overall efforts consist in raising awareness and evaluating the capabilities of all institutions and actors involved in returnee management, including first-line practitioners and those at local level, with the aim to make them properly equipped to deal with returnees.

- In the pre-arrival preparatory phase, Albania is highly focused on the **training of frontline actors and practitioners**, with the aim to prepare them to deal more efficiently with returnees' deradicalisation, reintegration and resocialisation. In this sense, the CVE Center has achieved significant results in the training of frontline actors with line ministries, i.e. 660 prison and probation officers, about 28 000 teachers and 150 school security officers working with returnees and tracing the first signs of violent extremism in the domestic population. Further, circa 700 community policing officers have received basic training on P/CVE.
- In cooperation with the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, the first questionnaires on the **assessment of institutional capacities** for the prevention and rehabilitation/reintegration of violent extremists were drafted and distributed to family doctors and general physicians, psychiatrists and nurses. These professionals contributed with their knowledge, observations and ideas to the drafting of two guides for psycho-social professionals practicing post-traumatic disorders therapy, to support returnees and their reintegration.
- Free **legal aid** to all returnees to Albania is provided by the Ministry of Justice.

## 2. Adapting existing exit programmes and interventions <sup>15</sup>

Instead of designing entirely new approaches for work with returnees, some countries have chosen to build on their previous programmes and to adapt them based on the specific needs and circumstances of returnees. For instance, exit programmes <sup>16</sup> and interventions in and outside prison have been adapted in **Denmark** specifically for FTFs. **Back on Track** is a mentoring programme for inmates and remand prisoners set up by the Danish Ministry of Social Affairs and Integration in collaboration with the Danish Prison and Probation Services. The programme combines rehabilitation and reintegration elements, developing inmates' dialogue and conflict management skills, and helping them to deal with specific challenges and to network outside prison. The Aarhus exit intervention for dealing with returnees is based on the four-step procedure of the **Aarhus exit programme**, which was adjusted to be implemented with returnees. The first phase of

---

<sup>15</sup> All information which has not been referenced is sourced from expert interviews in Belgium, France, Germany, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia.

<sup>16</sup> Information sourced from Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2017, *RAN Manual. Responses to returnees: Foreign terrorist fighters and their families*.

the programme involves risk assessment, which is then followed by physical and mental health assessments. This is because mental health treatment needs to be prioritised before any exit intervention can be attempted. During the resocialisation period, practical issues are dealt with, e.g. housing, daily occupation and alternative networks.

In **Germany**, the approach is in line with that applicable to other types of radicalised individuals, due to the individualised nature of these approaches; there are deradicalisation programmes in the judicial system where participation may be compulsory if it forms part of the sentence. For cases that are not prosecuted and thus do not go through the judicial system, individuals may be approached directly through a counselling organisation, a (state) deradicalisation programme or their social environment. Individuals can also approach such organisations themselves, regardless of whether they have been prosecuted. The choice of organisation depends on whether the counselling organisation has already been in contact with the person or members of the family. Counselling organisations and deradicalisation programmes work directly with individuals and support them in practical matters (such as finding accommodation, employment or social stabilisation) as well as counselling with regard to lived experiences and ideology, with a focus on distancing and deradicalisation.

### 3. Specific approaches to child returnees

Several EU and Western Balkan countries have developed particular programmes and procedures for dealing with child returnees. They generally draw on existing institutions and approaches in the area of child protection. Trauma management is a key component of these approaches: on the one hand, it is important to provide psychological care that considers gender-specific issues; on the other, the formation of new trauma through the experience of the return itself should be avoided.

In the **Netherlands**, the ‘return plan’ is created before the return per se, and includes detailed actions, contacts and information on who might take on the child’s care and what type of support they would need.

In **Belgium**, a 2018 National Security Council decision foresaw that children under the age of 10 can be repatriated, while children older than 10 are considered on a case-by-case basis. For children who are not orphans, this means separating them from their mothers in camps. The return to Belgium after deportation from Turkey, however, has involved the subsequent return of the mothers. About 30 children have returned from Syria to Belgium. On arrival, they received a psycho-medical evaluation, and the priority is to help them reintegrate into society, school and routine life as soon as possible. Children are not separated from families on the grounds of the latter’s radicality alone, unless there is a reason for child protection services to intervene, like a conviction or problems at school. Support is provided on a case-by-case basis, in or outside the family, but the priority is to keep children with the family. If necessary, the judge responsible for minors can decide to place the minor in foster care (as a protection measure); however, this is a rare occurrence. After the age of 12, the children are listed on FTF lists and can be discussed in multi-agency platforms; the goal of the approach is to provide follow-up (mostly social-preventive) and to take measures to ensure their reintegration. In terms of reintegration, work on the ground draws on experience of work and institutions with endangered minors; the extended family is appreciably involved in the process, whether on a voluntary basis or as a result of measures linked to a judicial mandate.

In **France**, the approach includes an assessment system for children, involving a 3-month physical and mental health evaluation. A detailed set of instructions concerning the distribution of tasks and responsible authorities is in place for authorities and practitioners. Pre-existing services for endangered minors were adapted for children returning from Syria. The children are assigned a judge specialised in juvenile cases (children under 18) who is responsible for their protection and who issues an order for them to be taken under the protection of the judicial system. The judge appoints the respective services for child protection (Aide social à l’enfance), which are local institutions run by each administrative unit. These social services authorise social workers to physically greet the children and arrange for their care, and to transfer them either to an emergency shelter or to a foster family. Upon their arrival, the children undergo a psychological evaluation in hospital from a psychologist or psychiatrist. If the children are considered to need support in this area, the necessary therapy is initiated as soon as possible. Later on, when they move and change address, the children will see another local therapist; during this period, the social services psychologists

serve as a link with the therapists. The children are enrolled in a school in the area where they live; there, the school psychologist can follow up with the therapist as and when needed.

Generally, the French clinical and psychological approach aims to normalise life for the children as far as possible. For small children under the age of 6, it is not usually considered necessary to provide additional therapy, unless there is good reason for it, e.g. trauma. For these younger children, trauma is identified by observing the child, to identify related physiological symptoms such as eating or sleeping disorders. Otherwise, the assumption is that children up to the age of 6 do not have an understanding of concepts such as death, and are thus more resilient and able to readjust quickly after having experienced a war situation: it is considered preferable to allow the children to adapt to their new circumstances. In all cases, a psychological evaluation is necessary to establish a baseline for reference, should problems arise later. For example, it is recognised that teenagers might refer back to their experiences as children in search of answers and explanations, or might develop psychotic symptoms because certain experiences have not been properly processed. Importantly, this does not mean that children might later become a danger to themselves or others, but rather refers to psychological developments and stages relating to the self. Another component of this approach is the involvement of the family and the extended family in a highly controlled and monitored environment<sup>17</sup>, as it is possible that the family might be harmful to the child's well-being; this situation is subject to change, if for instance, contact with the mother is subsequently considered not detrimental to the child. However, the emphasis is on the normalisation of the children's everyday life. Furthermore, it is known that a large majority of individuals who have experienced trauma will avoid associated experiences, e.g. violence. Historical examples indicate that even sustained and intensive indoctrination can be neutralised by reintegration into regular society and its everyday processes. In other words, the success of reintegration is believed to depend more on the adequacy and normality of the receiving system than on the quality and processing of the former jihadi one.

A very similar approach is adopted in the **Western Balkan countries** dealing with child returnees. Normalisation of the children's everyday life is based on regular schooling and the adaptation to the domestic school system. Regular schooling is thus considered one of the most vital components in the process of a child's reintegration and resocialisation. Since child returnees are typically very young, their adaptation into kindergarten or first grades in primary school is achieved without reported obstacles in most Western Balkan countries (in some cases, additional support for these children is organised in the form of extra classes or night school, to allow them to operate at the same functional level as their peers in the same grade). However, the lack of official citizenship for such children remains an issue that complicates their legal status and hampers their progress (for example, in some Western Balkan countries, children not holding a nationality will not be able to graduate, despite attending school alongside other students) – countries are still seeking legal solutions to this problem.

## Key learnings

Based on this initial overview of practices and experiences, existing literature and interviews with stakeholders, the following key learnings for practitioners can be derived.

## CHALLENGES

- The **heterogeneity of the returnees** can pose a challenge, because different kinds of measures are necessary to address the varied types of circumstances and needs.
- It is difficult to continue **disengagement work after prison** if programmes and practitioners lose access to the individuals.
- **Coordination** of the various actors involved is demanding, particularly the timely **exchange of information** and the choice of information to be communicated.

---

<sup>17</sup> This is different in other countries such as Germany, where preference is given to the (extended) family, unless this is not considered beneficial for the child's welfare.

- The **lack of motivation** of some returnees and/or their social environments to cooperate with counselling organisations, exit programmes or psychological counselling/therapeutical services can be a hurdle. Sometimes, returnees' initial reaction is to seek a sense of security and not to focus on traumatic experiences. In these cases, a long phase of trust-building is necessary before the subjects of ideology and departure can be addressed.
- **Media** reporting can be detrimental to reintegration, especially in cases involving children, as it can promote fear in the community and school and contribute to **stigmatisation**.
- Practitioners reliant on structures or systems originally designed to address different kinds of social problems might lack sufficient knowledge and **expertise** to properly address repatriation cases and backgrounds.
- The reluctance, fear and/or lack of knowledge of **foster families** might present a stumbling block in the process.
- Practitioners in social services working with returnees might have a difficult time **balancing their duty of care with the obligation to report suspicious behaviour**. This conflict of interest can negatively impact trust-building and relationships between social workers and their clients.
- **Separating children from families** and/or **concealing secrets around their past** might result in future problems, e.g. the subjective feeling of having been discriminated against or unjustly treated.
- **Defining and measuring success in reintegration** is difficult.
- The **rehabilitation and reintegration** of deeply indoctrinated returnees remains a key challenge.
- Disappointment with the realities of Daesh does not equate to disappointment with the **Islamist extremist ideology** or the broader idea of an Islamic state.
- An understanding of the threat posed by **women** is likely influenced by entrenched social biases that underestimate the agency of women.

## LESSONS LEARNED

### Institutional cooperation

- In terms of the multi-agency approach and returnee coordination, close and continuous coordination and exchange among the institutions involved is crucial when implementing common measures.
- Within multi-agency structures, timely and rigorous communication is key, to allow each partner to find a point of contact in these communication structures for each aspect of the case.
- A functional multi-agency approach must be based on mutual trust and respect among the actors involved, a clear understanding of one another's roles, professionalism in dealing with other organisational structures, and also sensitivity and a readiness to compromise, particularly given the different perspectives of security agencies and civil society organisations.
- Early involvement of relevant actors at the initial stages of reintegration work has proven beneficial.
- The tasks of initiating the deradicalisation programme and contacting family members should be carried out as soon as possible.
- Individuals appear to be more willing to engage with counselling bodies that make concrete and persistent communication efforts.
- At conferences or round tables, it is worth appointing a lead institution in line with the nature of the case (e.g. child support services for children).

### The local level

- Cooperation across different administrative levels is of utmost importance.
- Local authorities must nurture social cohesion to mitigate the risk of returnee recidivism and promote tolerance within the community; this will help create an environment that fosters successful reintegration.

- Greater involvement of civil society and NGOs will improve the rehabilitation strategy and bridge gaps in trust between communities and national-level institutions.
- Involving the (extended) family in the reintegration of both children and adults is recommended and preferred, unless the family constitutes a radicalisation factor (family members who hold extremist beliefs may negatively influence imprisoned or recently released returnees).
- A holistic approach should be adopted to manage the risk associated with both individuals and their immediate and wider social environment.
- Establish a local team of experts from different fields (youth care, education, social and mental health care, etc.) or a mobile national team to support local communities in dealing with rehabilitation and resocialisation of returnees.
- Governments must address and manage the underlying tensions that may emerge between returnees and broader society: the assistance and support provided to returnees can be a cause of friction, especially in societal groups that are already underserved and in need of support.
- Promote better cooperation with the religious community, which typically plays a crucial role in the reintegration and resocialisation of returnees, and secure support from families and communities.

### Individual reintegration

- Each case is unique, which means that dealing with returnees is a continuous process of learning by doing.
- The successful reintegration of returnees appears to be directly related to the degree of attachment to relevant authorities, i.e. integration into the system.
- In order to facilitate the reintegration process, it is necessary for individuals to confront their personal experiences in Daesh territories and their effects. This aspect of the process can best be supported by an interdisciplinary team of professionals.
- It is important to address family-related difficulties; this will help to establish social stability and therefore create a 'social net'.
- For children and young people, (re)integration, prevention and (if necessary) deradicalisation measures are particularly significant, as is cooperation between local authorities in these cases. The long-term outcome of the reintegration of children will largely depend on how the process is further managed and sustained. Tailored efforts are required to address trauma, compensate for the lack of formal education, navigate complex family arrangements, determine nationality and custody and address potential stigma and social alienation. Appropriate care and long-term intervention require sufficient resources and specialised expert advice.
- Prioritise the implementation of programmes for rehabilitation in prisons. Facilitate and encourage multi-agency partnerships to counter radicalisation in prisons and provide adequate post-penal support to released violent extremist offenders.
- Effective programmes to rehabilitate and reintegrate returning FTFs are crucial, not only to prevent acts of violence but also to mitigate further radicalisation among young people and to build overall community-level resilience to violent extremism.

## Further reading

Radicalisation Awareness Network. (2020). *Rehabilitation Manual. Rehabilitation of radicalised and terrorist offenders for first-line practitioners*. [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/default/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network/ran-papers/docs/ran\\_rehab\\_manual\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/default/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/ran_rehab_manual_en.pdf)

Radicalisation Awareness Network. (2020). *Challenges and solutions when working with families of foreign terrorist fighters*. [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files/2020-09/ran\\_fc-s\\_conclusions\\_challenges\\_solutions\\_when\\_working\\_with\\_families\\_ffts\\_29-30\\_062020\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files/2020-09/ran_fc-s_conclusions_challenges_solutions_when_working_with_families_ffts_29-30_062020_en.pdf)

Radicalisation Awareness Network. (2019). *Study visit: Returned women and children – studying an ongoing experience on the ground*. [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/pages/page/study-visit-returned-women-and-children-studying-ongoing-experience-ground-10-11\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/pages/page/study-visit-returned-women-and-children-studying-ongoing-experience-ground-10-11_en)

Radicalisation Awareness Network. (2018). *High-level conference on child returnees and released prisoners*. Ex post paper. RAN Centre of Excellence. [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files/2019-01/high-level\\_conference\\_on\\_child\\_returnees\\_and\\_released\\_prisoners\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files/2019-01/high-level_conference_on_child_returnees_and_released_prisoners_en.pdf)

Radicalisation Awareness Network. (2017). *Setting up an exit intervention*. Ex post paper. RAN Exit. [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files/2017-04/ran\\_exit\\_setting\\_up\\_exit\\_intervention\\_berlin\\_13-14\\_022017\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files/2017-04/ran_exit_setting_up_exit_intervention_berlin_13-14_022017_en.pdf)

Radicalisation Awareness Network. (2021). *RAN Manual. Responses to returnees: Foreign terrorist fighters and their families*. Updated version, forthcoming.

## Bibliography

- Avdimetaj, T., & Coleman, J. (2020). *What EU Member States can learn from Kosovo's experience in repatriating former foreign fighters and their families*. Policy brief. Kosovar Centre for Security Studies. Clingendael Institute. Retrieved from [https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2020/06/Policy\\_Brief\\_Kosovo\\_experience\\_repatriating\\_former\\_foreign\\_fighters\\_May\\_2020.pdf](https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2020/06/Policy_Brief_Kosovo_experience_repatriating_former_foreign_fighters_May_2020.pdf)
- Bundesministerium des Innern, für Bau und Heimat. (2018). Umgang mit Rückkehrern aus jihadistischen Kampfgebieten. Retrieved from [https://www.innenministerkonferenz.de/IMK/DE/termine/to-beschluesse/20181128\\_30/anlage-zu-top-23.pdf;jsessionid=484B835EC62630FE2E161EF168CED5B1.1\\_cid391?\\_blob=publicationFile&v=2](https://www.innenministerkonferenz.de/IMK/DE/termine/to-beschluesse/20181128_30/anlage-zu-top-23.pdf;jsessionid=484B835EC62630FE2E161EF168CED5B1.1_cid391?_blob=publicationFile&v=2)
- Erebara, G. (2020, October 26). Albanian children to be returned from Syrian refugee camps. Retrieved June 1, 2021, from BalkanInsight website: <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/10/26/albanian-children-to-be-returned-from-syrian-refugee-camps/>
- Jeannerod, B. (2020, June 24). La France a rapatrié d'autres enfants du nord-est de la Syrie. Retrieved June 1, 2021, from Human Rights Watch website: <https://www.hrw.org/fr/news/2020/06/24/la-france-rapatrie-dautres-enfants-du-nord-est-de-la-syrie>
- Renard, T., & Coolsaet, R. (2018). *Children in the Levant: Insights from Belgium on the dilemmas of repatriation and the challenges of reintegration*. Security Policy Brief No. 98. Egmont Institute. Retrieved from [https://www.egmontinstitute.be/content/uploads/2018/07/SPB98-Renard-Coolsaet\\_v2.pdf?type=pdf](https://www.egmontinstitute.be/content/uploads/2018/07/SPB98-Renard-Coolsaet_v2.pdf?type=pdf)
- Rosand, E., Ellis, H., & Weine, S. (2020, September 14). Repatriating ISIS family members: A North Macedonian model? Retrieved June 1, 2021, from Just Security website: <https://www.justsecurity.org/72420/repatriating-isis-family-members-a-north-macedonian-model/>

Radicalisation Awareness Network. (2019). *Study visit: Returned women and children – studying an ongoing experience on the ground*. Ex post paper. Retrieved from [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/default/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network/ran-papers/docs/ran\\_study\\_visit\\_kosovo\\_11\\_10122019\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/default/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/ran_study_visit_kosovo_11_10122019_en.pdf)

Speckhard, A., & Shajkovci, A. (2019, September 3). Waiting for return of the caliphate among ISIS enforcers in Syria's al Hol, Ain Issa and Roj camps. Retrieved June 1, 2021, from Homeland Security Today website: <https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/counterterrorism/waiting-for-the-return-of-the-caliphate-among-isis-enforcers-in-syrias-al-hol-ain-issa-and-roj-camps/>

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2019). *Handbook on gender dimensions of criminal justice responses to terrorism*. Retrieved from [https://www.unodc.org/documents/terrorism/Publications/17-08887\\_HB\\_Gender\\_Criminal\\_Justice\\_E\\_ebook.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/terrorism/Publications/17-08887_HB_Gender_Criminal_Justice_E_ebook.pdf)

#### About the authors:

**Anita Perešin** is a Senior Advisor in Croatia's Office of the National Security Council and Lecturer at the University of Zagreb.

**Daniela PISOIU** is Senior Researcher at the Austrian Institute for International Affairs and Lecturer at the University of Vienna.

## FINDING INFORMATION ABOUT THE EU

### Online

Information about the European Union in all the official languages of the EU is available on the Europa website at: [https://europa.eu/european-union/index\\_en](https://europa.eu/european-union/index_en)

### EU publications

You can download or order free and priced EU publications from: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publications>. Multiple copies of free publications may be obtained by contacting Europe Direct or your local information centre (see [https://europa.eu/european-union/contact\\_en](https://europa.eu/european-union/contact_en)).

### EU law and related documents

For access to legal information from the EU, including all EU law since 1952 in all the official language versions, go to EUR-Lex at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu>

### Open data from the EU

The EU Open Data Portal (<http://data.europa.eu/euodp/en>) provides access to datasets from the EU. Data can be downloaded and reused for free, for both commercial and non-commercial purposes.

Radicalisation Awareness Network

# RANI

Practitioners



Publications Office  
of the European Union