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EX POST PAPER

RAN Study Visit – ‘Returned Women and Children’
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Study Visit: Returned Women and Children – Studying an Ongoing Experience on the Ground

Returning foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and their family members continue to be one of the most passionately debated topics in European P/CVE and beyond. In April 2019, as one of the first in Europe doing so in large capacity, Kosovo made a political decision and repatriated 110 Kosovan citizens from detention camps in North Syria, most of them women and children. The government also vowed to bring back those citizens still remaining in Syria and Iraq.

During the study visit, RAN explored the measures that were taken to re-integrate the women and children into Kosovan society. By engaging with stakeholders from government authorities, first-line practitioners and civil society organisations in Kosovo, the visit allowed substantial insights into the ongoing Kosovan experience, characterised by pragmatism and a can-do-attitude, and to draw first conclusions relevant for P/CVE practitioners from EU Member States.

* 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.

Introduction and Background

A diverse group of RAN expert practitioners visited Kosovo's capital Pristina to learn more about the Kosovan approach towards the repatriation and reintegration of women and children returned from Syria and Iraq. Over the course of one and a half days, RAN met with Kosovan authorities, civil society organisations (CSOs) and international partners involved in this endeavour. This paper provides insights into the take-aways and relevant lessons for EU Member States (MS) and P/CVE practitioners confronted with the topic of returning affiliates of the so-called Islamic State (IS) and their children, within their own respective contexts.

KOSOVANS IN SYRIA AND IRAQ

The problem with Islamist extremism in Kosovo has long been said to be driven by external influences, mainly in the form of foreign non-governmental organisations (NGOs). These began establishing themselves in what is now Kosovo, after the war ended in June 1999. This perspective on external influences is currently reinforced by government authorities in light of the current foreign terrorist fighter (FTF) problem. According to the authorities, this particular type of NGOs began with Islamist extremist recruitment and indoctrination under the guise of supposed humanitarian assistance during dire post-war economic and social circumstances. Eventually, these efforts, carried out within illegal mosques and outside of the structures of formal religious networks in Kosovo,² apparently resulted in the recruitment and departure of FTFs from Kosovo to jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq. At the same time, authorities believed the United Nations (UN), tasked with the transitional administration of Kosovo from 10 June 1999 onwards, neglected the issue in favour of focusing on ethnic tensions, which were perceived to be the more urgent problem at the time. While Kosovan authorities felt that they were left without much support from international partners such as the EU and the UN even after the FTF problem became apparent in 2012, independent reports also criticised the government itself for allegedly underestimating the dangers posed by Islamist extremism and jihadism in the context of the Syrian civil war. From 2011 to 2013 the relevant stakeholders appear to have maintained a generally favourable view of all anti-Assad opposition, leaving many actors unprepared for what would follow.³

These developments would eventually lead to one of the highest numbers of FTF departures to the conflict area in Syria and Iraq, per capita. Beginning with the first departure in 2012, the Kosovo Counterterrorism (CT) Police Department counted a total of 257 men and 52 women who travelled to join the IS. These adults brought with them 50 children and gave birth to another 81 while inside the conflict area, adding up to 309 Kosovan adults with links to IS and 131 children. By December 2019, 162 adults and at least 74 children had returned independently or were brought back by the government.⁴ Of all of those, 110 were brought back by government initiative during a single operation, arriving at Pristina airport in the early morning of 20 April 2019. The following four sections will give a closer look at the (1) decision-making process behind the process and the preparation for the operation, the actual (2) repatriation phase and its immediate aftermath, (3) the ongoing medium to long-term reintegration measures, and eventually the (4) potential for transferral to EU MSs.

² Jakupi, Rudine & Garentina Kraja 2018. "Accounting for the Difference: Vulnerability and Resilience to Violent Extremism in Kosovo", pp. 10-13, 26. Available via: https://www.berghof-foundation.org/fileadmin/redaktion/Publications/Other_Resources/WB_PVE/CTR_CaseStudy3Kosovo_e.pdf, accessed 17/12/2019.

³ Kursani, Shpend & Arbër Fetiu 2017. "The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in Kosovo: Covering a Blind Spot", p. 84, in Vlado Azinović (Ed.): *Between Salvation and Terror: Radicalization and the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in the Western Balkans*, pp. 83-102. Available via: http://atlanticinitiative.org/wpcontent/uploads/2017/05/images_BetweenSalvationAndTerror_BetweenSalvationAndTerror.pdf, accessed 02/12/2019.

⁴ These numbers were disclosed during the meeting and may differ slightly from the varying but similar numbers stated in other reports or articles on the subject matter.

Repatriating 110 Citizens from Syria

– A Chronology

"We will not stop before bringing every citizen... back to their country and anyone that has committed any crime or was part of these terrorist organisations will face justice." – Abelard Tahiri, Kosovo Minister of Justice, April 2019.⁵

STEP 1: DECISION-MAKING & PREPARATION

Before April 2019, some 134 IS-affiliated persons had already returned to the Kosovo independently, most of them around 2013-2014, after having spent only short periods of time within the conflict areas (ranging from only a few weeks to a few months). After IS rapidly began losing ground in Syria and Iraq in 2017, the Kosovo authorities were confronted with the issue of some of their citizens reaching out to the authorities, also via their families back home, in an attempt to return. This call for help was later amplified by calls for repatriation of detainees and prisoners of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the United States (US) and the UN. Eventually, in efforts to find solutions for expatriate citizens of Kosovo still present in the war zone or at the detention camps the government came up with three potential scenarios for FTFs and other IS-affiliates:

- They could leave the war zone and return to Kosovo illegally;
- They could return via Kosovan embassies in third countries or be deported by these countries; or
- The Kosovan government could take control and organise their return in an orderly way.

After assessing the arguments in favour and against each scenario, all mapped out by the Police CT Department with a main focus on security aspects, the third scenario was picked, as an option that was reinforced by the constitutional obligation to support Kosovan citizens abroad and an additional moral duty perceived by authorities to repatriate citizens. This led to the creation of an Action Plan and the subsequent creation of a Division for Prevention and Reintegration and an inter-institutional working group. At that point in time, the decision to carry out large return operations involving dozens of people at once had not yet been taken. Instead, around 2018 the authorities first began preparations with individual returnees in mind. A 72-hour emergency plan was drafted for the immediate period upon the arrival of returnees to Kosovo. This period was to include mainly medical, psychiatric, and psychological assessments and referral to hospitals if necessary (for more information on the 72-hour period, see Step 2: Implementation). All the different institutions that would be involved in the rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees and/or their children (e.g. hospitals, schools, welfare institutions) were tasked to prepare for their return. But these institutions were not informed that the plan was to return 110 persons in a single operation in April 2019, except for persons who were deemed crucial to the actual repatriation and were not free to divulge the information beforehand. This included the Police CT Department, which until the creation of the specialised division had been the only authority in charge of actions relating to FTFs and their families.

Security Concerns?

Leading up to the repatriation, the Police CT Department's main task was to conduct investigations of all adults who had gone to Syria and Iraq and compile evidence against them, since all of them were initially considered suspects for terrorism-related offenses. Notably, the Kosovan security services were in favour of repatriation, which was considered to be a more sustainable approach than leaving their citizens in Syria, where circumstances shifted rapidly from day to day. In addition, the authorities approached the operation as a powerful sign of good faith towards the returnees and their families, as well as towards those still in Syria. The aim was to facilitate trust-building, and ideally ensure their cooperation regarding the long-term reintegration process.

A major advantage during this process was the fact that Kosovan authorities seem to have maintained close contact with the families of the expatriates throughout their stay in the Middle East conflict areas. The information gathered through these contacts was then used not only to prepare for the adults' trials, but also for the rehabilitation and reintegration of themselves and their children.

⁵ BBC News, 20th April 2019. "Syria War: Kosovo brings back 110 citizens including jihadists", <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-47998456>, accessed 03/12/2019.

Preparing the Educational and Social Welfare Systems

After the decision to eventually repatriate all citizens was taken, besides the security apparatus taking action the 'softer' actors also began introducing new procedures. During the preparatory phase, the **Ministry of Education** engaged schools and principals in outreach activities, raising awareness of the issue and sensitising those responsible for the challenges lying ahead. Furthermore, as there are social workers and psychologists employed by schools needed preparation to handle a novel situation, trainings were provided for mobile staff who could eventually assist with tasks at several schools. Throughout, the ministry tried to refrain from using terms like 'radicalisation' in order to avoid stigmatisation and advised schools to do the same.

The **Ministry of Social Welfare**, on the other hand, which is responsible for welfare support and housing, focused in the preparatory stages on finding suitable housing for the returning women and children. In most cases this meant identifying those remaining family members in Kosovo with whom the returnees could be housed and assessing their willingness to take them back in. (Initially, all families agreed to take their relatives back.) These plans also included housing the 9 orphans among the 74 children, for whom close blood relatives were found.

Both ministries continue to play an important role during the long-term reintegration phase, which will be covered further down.

Step 1: Inspiring Key Elements

- ➔ Perceiving proactive repatriation as more sustainable, even from a security perspective;
- ➔ Having a constitutional and perceived moral obligation to repatriate citizens;
- ➔ Maintaining good and close relationships with remaining family members, beneficial for preparation;
- ➔ Developing intensive inter-institutional and multi-agency cooperation of all sectors is necessary for adequate preparation (welfare system, educational system, security services).

Step 1: Challenges

- ➔ Setting up effective multi-agency cooperation remains a lengthy and bureaucratic process and needs to be prepared well in advance;
- ➔ Having fewer financial and human resources for sustainable implementation "on the ground", e.g. lack of school social workers;
- ➔ Repatriation and reintegration are currently not among the higher government priorities, leading to insecure long-term prospects.

STEP 2: REPATRIATION

Eventually, the decision to repatriate 110 citizens at once was followed through. In addition to the idea that repatriation and reintegration efforts would contribute to long-term security, one of the main rationales behind this operation seems to have been the fact that of those 110 persons, 32 were female and 74 were children. Hence, from the perspective of the Kosovan authorities, a vast majority were regarded as being victims. Even though all adults were primarily considered suspects, Kosovan authorities at that time differentiated quite clearly between men, who were considered to be FTFs, and their family members, including the women, who were considered to be victims.

The repatriation itself was carried out with substantial help from the United States, as Kosovo itself does not have official relations with the FSA-led military alliance in charge of the detention camps in North Syria. The relevant practitioners were informed of the operation on the very day it took place. When the 110 persons arrived at Priština airport in secret, four men were immediately taken into custody, while the women and children were brought to an asylum centre at a military base designated as an 'arrival centre'. There, the adapted 72-hour emergency plan took effect.

The 72-hour-emergency-plan

The planning and implementation of this period was coordinated by a specialised inter-institutional and multi-agency division, appointed by the Ministry of Interior. It included, among others, the following institutions:

- University Clinical Centre of Kosovo
- Police
- Departments of Citizenship and of Integration
- Public Prosecutor's Office

- Ministry of Health
- Ministry of Social Welfare
- Sanitary Inspectorate

While all institutions had been made aware of a potential of taking back returnees and tasked to prepare for this possibility, only a small number of officials were made aware of the operation taking place on 19-20th April 2019. The practitioners involved (doctors, nurses, psychologists, psychiatrists, and ambulance paramedics) were only notified a few hours before the repatriation was carried out. The government was under intense scrutiny by the media nonetheless, since the detainees had been informed about the repatriation by the FSA two days prior to the operation and subsequently informed their relatives in Kosovo, which led to rumours within the small community of Kosovo.

The legal basis for detaining the returned persons for 72 hours came from the Sanitary Inspectorate, which was tasked with assuring that the returnees, who had lived under desperate medical and sanitary conditions for months and sometimes years, brought no infectious diseases such as cholera to Kosovo, endangering the larger population. In general, the main focus during these 72 hours was on medical assessments, which led to the immediate hospitalisation of some of the women and children. After a few hours of rest for the exhausted women and children, intense medical and psychosocial assessments followed over the course of the next hours and days. Due to a lack of sufficiently trained staff, all relevant professionals (especially the coordinators, but also emergency doctors and psychiatrists) stayed with them at the 'arrival centre' throughout the 72 hours, a fact considered valuable by the authorities, since they said this might support trust-building between the practitioners and the returning women and children.

Even though securing enough qualified staff was challenging, the authorities managed to train and prepare female police officers and female doctors and nurses to engage with the women. The assumption behind this was that many of the women might be reluctant to effectively cooperate with men, based on the fact that they had been living under extremist interpretations of Islamic law for the past years. Even though they were now back in Kosovo and not all of them were convinced ideologues, the fact that the women and children were kept together throughout the first days may have maintained pre-existing social pressure among them to uphold certain norms and boundaries set by their lives under IS.

After the Department of Public Health gave its permission, psychiatric and psychological assessments were carried out over the course of the next days. Psychiatrists tried to gain insights into the children's mental states and the circumstances under which they had survived the past months and years, by the method for example of playing with them. They then engaged in 'psychoeducational' activities with the mothers (30 out of the 32 women were mothers) to provide first guidance on how to communicate with and treat their children in the new Kosovan environment: for example on how to teach the children to sleep in beds, something most of them had rarely or never done before, or how to dress them.

As a result of the investigations of the women that had begun when they first left for Syria and Iraq, every adult woman had to appear before a court and all of them were ordered on house arrest pending further investigations.

First Steps (Back) into Society

When the first 72 hours had passed and after they were assessed as fit to be placed in local communities, the women and children were released to their families. All families had agreed to take them back into their homes. The only exception were those few who needed intensive medical care and who therefore stayed at the hospital for additional weeks. Although the families had initially thought they would be able to care for their repatriated (and sometimes new) relatives, tensions were reported as being high, especially within the first weeks. Issues like overcrowding and past family conflicts arising again led to a number of families asking the authorities for alternative housing. While these were sometimes available, the psychiatric unit in charge of the supervision and treatment of the women and children also tried to offer support and counsel to the families, to reduce tensions and provide them with the necessary help to deal with this new and often very emotional and stressful situation. During the first days and weeks, the team of 16 psychiatrists and 4 psychologists based at the University Clinical Centre often worked 15-hour shifts, to reach as many families and returnees as possible. They were available for families and returnees to call 24/7, which was an immense strain on their own coping abilities and which had the potential to negatively impact their professional capabilities and judgement.

Oftentimes mothers used the option of 24/7 phone consultations during stressful situations to request advice on dealing with their children's behaviour. Most often these would be minor events such as airplanes flying over or fireworks going off in the vicinity that would scare the children who related this to traumatic memories. This would agitate the traumatised children and sometimes leave their mothers at a loss in how to help them.

Step 2: Inspiring Key Elements

- Practitioners and relevant authorities have been dedicating immense amounts of time and personal effort to support children, far beyond their normal job descriptions.
- Around-the-clock availability of psychiatrists via phone for remote consultations was provided to returnees, especially to mothers for the benefit of their children.
- Mobile teams providing psychosocial support were available to meet the returnees and their families at home when necessary.
- Children were considered to be victims, which created a perceived obligation to help them become reintegrated.
- Families of the repatriated were involved and supported throughout the planning and implementation phases.

Step 2: Challenges

- Immense workload for practitioner staff, especially psychiatrists in charge of treatment and therapy of women and children. In the long term, this could lead to overstretched personnel and burn-out, which in turn could endanger the rehabilitation process. Community-based, sustainable long-term structures will have to be built and strengthened for the support of the rehabilitated children and their mothers.
- The receiving families may be overwhelmed. This may serve as an additional stress factor not only for themselves, but also for the women, children, and communities.
- The clear differentiation between men, considered to be FTFs, and women, initially primarily considered victims, underestimates women's motives for supporting IS and their potential for radicalisation and future violence.

STEP 3: REINTEGRATION

Once the 72-hour period ended and after the first couple of weeks during which first-line practitioners were working intensively with the returnees, the longer-term process of rehabilitation and reintegration began and continues to this date.

The relevant authorities in Kosovo are very realistic in assessing that this process could go on for years and possibly decades. Most of the returnees exhibit signs of severe PTSD, such as stress, anxiety and depression. Additional symptoms of complex trauma may only become visible at a later stage. Similarly, children might question the circumstances under which they were raised, at a later stage in their life. This may be aggravated by the complex traumas of bereavement many of these children have experienced, e.g. through the death of their parents. These assessments and concerns are shared by Kosovan and EU practitioners, who agreed that long-term involvement of the affected individuals, families, and communities is essential. Maintaining such a long-term approach requires stable funding and sufficient staffing.

In September 2019, all children above the age of 6 were able to start school. From the start, achieving this and strengthening the children has been the authorities' and psychiatrists' main focus after their release into the communities. The objective remains to allow children to live a life as normally as possible. The mothers, on the other hand, were reportedly often afraid their children might be stigmatised, and many had severe problems with the thought of letting them leave during the day to go to school. Therefore, the mental health unit (comprising 16 psychiatrists and 4 psychologists) began holding individual sessions with the children, their mothers, and later on joint sessions with family members. Their treatment focused on the mental consequences and trauma of the extreme conditions under which they had lived and on the possible negative impacts on the physical and emotional development of the children. Methods used included largely elements of arts therapy, game therapy, and conversation therapy. Whenever necessary, additional psychological tests were and are performed and joint evaluation sessions are held regularly for children and mothers.

These sessions are complemented with supporting activities aimed at familiarising the children with their new environment and strengthening their resilience. Such activities include simple things like visits to larger playgrounds, but also to the zoo or to a ski resort. Group sessions are currently in the planning stage for some of the women who are found to be amenable to such a format. Notably, the children and women have also been provided with access to plastic surgery to remove the visible signs of war trauma, namely the scars from wounds most of these individuals have endured.

Strengthening the Educational and Welfare Systems

As mentioned before, both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Social Welfare are important partners in the reintegration process. At the Ministry of Education, a specialised working group responsible for the implementation of P/CVE measures has been established, which consists of staff members skilled at all levels of education in Kosovo. In addition to sensitising and preparing schools and staff for the eventual return of traumatised children, members of this group have also been working on embedding P/CVE in the regular structures within their sphere of influence. This includes the training both of existing staff and agencies on radicalisation and prevention and of aspiring teachers as well.

All children above the age of six are currently attending school. So far, no severe problems have been reported by the authorities with regards to their integration into the school system. However, external observers note that many returnee children seem to remain relatively isolated. Additionally, occasional administrative problems seem to persist, as when children lack clear documentation. These children have been allowed to attend school but are not able to sit exams and graduate. How – and how fast – this important issue will be solved remains to be seen.

The Ministry of Social Welfare, which is also the key responsible authority for the nine orphans, has enrolled all women and children in the social welfare system. The orphaned children have been placed with their closest blood relatives. According to the ministry's report, these orphans have been developing well during the past months and no real differences can be perceived in comparison to other returnee children. As all of them have been enrolled in the social security system, mothers and children receive limited financial and social support from the government, similar to regular Kosovan citizens. The main challenge here lies with the job market integration of the adult women. Within Kosovo there is a difficult economic situation and an unemployment rate of approximately 30 percent, thus finding proper employment for this specific group has proven to be difficult. An additional complication lies in the fact that supporting measures that go beyond what regular citizens receive or are able to access could easily raise the objections of the larger population. The majority may see this as unjust, and as favouring and prioritising this particular group of returnees over the rest of the population.

(Future) Civil Society Involvement

Until now, civil society organisations (CSOs) had generally not been part of the Kosovan approach to rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees. This may be due to the contentious history of self-styled civil society organisations and of Islamist extremism in Kosovo, which was mentioned earlier. Nevertheless, CSOs have an important role to play, and many have already taken important steps to support reintegration, or report on and investigate potential challenges or errors with regards to P/CVE and rehabilitation in Kosovo. Starting in December 2019, CSOs have begun to assume a more prominent role in the implementation of rehabilitation measures, supporting the government structures with complementary capacities and approaches. Authorities were criticised for involving CSOs late but they justified it by pointing to the security-sensitive nature of the processes during the early stages. The authorities now seem to accept the necessity of CSO involvement for long-term measures and have allowed some organisations to start working on the topic. These organisations will be involved in a number of ways, mainly relating to long-term psychosocial support of the returnees, but also of the affected communities.

Involvement of CSOs in Kosovo

- Currently the [Kosova Rehabilitation Centre for Torture Victims \(KRCT\)](#), which has long-standing experience in dealing with victims of torture and trauma, is setting up a plan to empower communities and ensure stable long-term work for affected children and families. Institutional services and network building will strengthen the ability of institutions at central and at local level to understand and deal with trauma. This includes trainings for existing social workers and mental health professionals, regular doctors, and teachers, among others. Furthermore, KRCT plans to organise round-table discussions with relevant organisations and institutions to engage communities more. Lastly, additional research (e.g. on trans-generational trauma) is being carried out to improve the knowledge base and to adapt the practical work accordingly.
- While the KCRT will be focused on strengthening regular mental health support throughout the communities, the [Kosovar Center for Security Studies \(KCSS\)](#) will focus on extracurricular activities for affected children and families, and for children vulnerable to radicalisation in general. KCSS has been engaged in observation and analysis of the ongoing reintegration process for some time now. As it has observed that many of the returnee children continue to be relatively isolated and marginalised, KCSS aims to increase the children's interpersonal communication skills by engaging them in activities such as weekend camps, supporting their stable integration into society.
- An important factor to keep authorities and CSOs in check is skilled and alert media outlets. The [Balkan Investigative Reporting Network \(BIRN\)](#) has been working to observe, analyse, and report on violent extremism in Kosovo since 2007, when the first cases occurred. Since then, the network has been engaged in reporting on institutional failures, but also on instances of the spreading of fake news by other media outlets, and in the training of reporters to deal with the issue of returnees sensibly. A major focus is BIRN's effort to discourage the publication of photos of returnee children and prevent their further stigmatisation.
- An additional way to support sustainable P/CVE at the local level lies with the empowerment of women at all levels of society. [Women without Borders \(WwB\)](#) has created a system of mother schools, which has been running in Kosovo since 2018. This programme identifies and trains relevant candidates to then train a group of mothers, empowering them to take on responsibility and become grassroots leaders against radicalisation within their communities.

The Role of the Religious Community

Kosovo remains mostly secular. The authorities have very clearly stated that they do not encourage conservative Islamic dress and that they view religion primarily as a private matter. In 2018 the government struck an alliance with the largest, most widely accepted Islamic community to support P/CVE. Imams and female preachers and scholars, called *moalime*, offer lectures in the communities and are trained to recognise signs of radicalisation within their spheres of influence. Some are also engaged in prison contexts, offering religious support to prisoners, also aimed at P/CVE. They have also agreed to be available to counsel returnee women on matters of faith, and to support them in distancing themselves from IS's ideological interpretations of Islam. However, demand for this special support seems to remain marginal. This relative lack of interest is sometimes ascribed to the highly publicised alliance between the authorities of the Islamic community and the government. This leads to a lack of credibility of the official Islamic community in the eyes of individuals vulnerable to radicalisation. The community however continues its efforts to prevent radicalisation and to offer religious support to those who ask for it.

International Support

In Kosovo, long-term support structures for reintegration would not be feasible without the support of international partners and institutions. The support of the US and its embassy in Kosovo is especially noteworthy, as they have been a substantial partner in this from the beginning. Their financial support is focused mainly on support for children (e.g. through the KCSS project). Aside from its work on children, the US embassy is also engaged in advocacy work, aiming at setting up long-term rehabilitation programmes for released prisoners, which currently do not exist in Kosovo. This also relates to the issue of the possibility of current expatriate fathers returning and joining their families in the near future, after having served their mostly short-term sentences of 2-4 years. How will they influence the development of these children and women? This question thus far does not seem to have been addressed, but could prove a determining factor in family rehabilitation in the long run.

Aside from the US, the United Kingdom and especially the United Nations' [International Organisation for Migration \(IOM\)](#) have been supporting Kosovo for a long time. The IOM has been present in Kosovo since 1999, developing its activities from short-term reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts to strengthening the longer-term development

of Kosovo itself. In line with this, the IOM has been a crucial partner of the Kosovan authorities throughout the repatriation and rehabilitation process, able to also support measures for adult women, based on less restrictive funding from the UK.

Medium and long-term security and judicial aspects

As mentioned before, all women were obliged to appear in front of a judge upon their arrival in Kosovo. There, they received house-arrest restrictions for one month, pending further investigation. According to some reports, the house-arrest period has been extended for all women. Following investigations during the past eight months, a total of nine women were indicted and two already convicted. The convicts were sentenced to two-year suspended sentences, allowing them to return to their families, conditional upon participation in therapy sessions. By suspending the sentences, the court supports the reintegration of these women. This is viewed favourably by the Kosovan security services. However, these numbers also show that a clear delineation of men as FTFs and perpetrators versus women as victims cannot be maintained. Acknowledging the women’s roles and potential radicalisation would lead to finding the right rehabilitation measures, which would also be crucial for the positive development of their children. Additionally, these developments make it clear to security services that cannot underestimate these women and that they need to remain vigilant regarding the women’s development over the next couple of years.

Hence, it may be worthwhile considering disengagement and deradicalisation measures for these women beyond psychosocial support and therapy for trauma victims, in order to work on potential underlying ideological motivations.

Step 3: Key Inspiring Elements

- ➔ Having a hands-on, pragmatic approach to reintegration while being aware of its limitations. This allows managing developing circumstances in a flexible way.
- ➔ Immense dedication of first-line practitioners involved in the process.
- ➔ Engagement of all relevant public sectors in implementing long-term processes to deal with radicalisation and reintegration in the future.
- ➔ Access to plastic surgery to remove scars from war wounds.
- ➔ Including CSOs in the future to make long-term efforts sustainable.

Step 3: Challenges

- ➔ A risk of overstretching existing staff.
- ➔ Lack of CSO involvement during the early stages, although their support is pivotal for future sharing of the workloads and to relieve currently active staff. Lengthy preparation is necessary before they can start their support.
- ➔ Long-term, stable, and local mental health care is necessary to deal with the complex trauma of children.
- ➔ Danger of underestimating the women’s (past and future) involvement in violent extremism by primarily perceiving them as victims.
- ➔ A lack of religiously unaffiliated disengagement/deradicalisation/exit work in the approach.
- ➔ A lack of long-term rehabilitation measures for released prisoners including lack of preparation for the return of fathers (from prison, conflict area) to their families.
- ➔ Having to deal with frequent and expected symptoms of PTSD shown by women and children such as stress, anxiety, and depression. Accompanying symptoms, such as chest pain, lack of concentration, survivors’ guilt.

TRANSFERRING LESSONS TO THE EU CONTEXT

How reintegration and rehabilitation measures can be designed and implemented is always dependent on the specific context within Kosovo. In this sense, Kosovo has the advantage of being relatively small, with a relatively small population, resulting in faster direct communication. The effective establishment and implementation of inter-institutional and multi-agency collaboration is certainly easier in smaller contexts. Even so, bureaucratic obstacles also exist in smaller settings and, as Kosovo has shown, can be overcome. Hence, the creation of specialised and permanent departments responsible for the coordination of such complex mechanisms involving all relevant actors can serve as an inspiring example to larger MSs. Still, it needs to be taken into account that such endeavours are lengthy processes by nature, and therefore need to be designed and prepared as early as possible.

Additionally, Kosovo has made big efforts to embed P/CVE measures within the long-term structures of all relevant systems, to be prepared for future challenges. Incorporating awareness on matters of prevention at all levels of governance is elementary to sustainably engage in P/CVE.

Throughout this process, the Kosovan authorities have acknowledged the fact that there is no perfect plan for the reintegration of returnees. As a result, authorities and practitioners have shown their willingness to create solutions and approaches based on an ongoing learning experience and remained flexible in how they approach their work. In doing so, they have created a powerful example of how even a complex matter can be addressed with limited resources.

Key Inspiring elements:

- Creation of a new, permanent Department for Prevention and Reintegration, tasked with inter-institutional coordination of all measures related to reintegration, including prevention to begin with.
- Far-reaching, intensive multi-agency cooperation initiated by senior political decision-makers.
- Availability of 24/7 support structures for returnees and their families.
- Willingness to deploy existing even if limited resources effectively.
- Consideration of seemingly small yet important details: e.g. providing access to plastic surgery to remove scars from war wounds.
- Advantage of being Muslim-majority, no problems with anti-Muslim bigotry.
- Advantage of being small with direct communication channels.

Main Challenges in Kosovo

- Reintegration not high on the government's priority list, leading to limited funding and uncertain financial prospects.
- Overburdening of existing staff: relief and additional support necessary.
- Until now, lack of CSO involvement. CSOs are necessary to relieve current staff and make efforts sustainable.

Conclusions for the EU Context

- Larger EU Member States might need to establish ways for close, nation-wide inter-institutional and multi-agency cooperation to enable long-term collaboration of all relevant actors.
- Good inter-institutional preparation and grounding of P/CVE across all levels of relevant sectors necessary.
- A perfect plan does not exist. Willingness to remain pragmatic and flexible is important.
- Prepare for long-term, localised and stable mental health support of child and adult returnees, who will likely be affected by PTSD and accompanying symptoms as well as by complex trauma.
- Proactive repatriation of and support to children of IS affiliates could act as powerful motivator for the participation of their parents in rehabilitation and disengagement measures.
- The presence of refugees from Syria and Iraq in EU MSs, many of whom fled due to atrocities committed by IS supporters, constitutes a challenge for rehabilitation of former IS affiliates. One possible way of addressing this issue is to design restorative justice processes tailored to such a situation.

Conclusion

The decision of Kosovo to repatriate its citizens remains unique in the European and EU context, although Bosnia also recently announced repatriation of its citizens.⁶ By developing a policy to eventually repatriate every citizen from Syria and Iraq, and especially by proactively organising the return of 110 citizens at once, Kosovo's authorities and political stakeholders have made an impressive decision. While the immediate repatriation phase and the first 72 hours appear to have been meticulously planned, non-governmental stakeholders commented that the follow-up and ongoing medium- to long-term reintegration phase has been characterised by a less structured approach. Nonetheless, the multi-agency cooperation that has been set up in Kosovo is an impressive example of how – if

⁶ See Asharq Al-Awsat, 19 December 2019. "Ex-ISIS Militants, Women and Children Return to Bosnia", <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/2043581/ex-isis-militants-women-and-children-return-bosnia>.

supported by sufficient political will – bureaucratic obstacles can be overcome. If done properly, this allows the establishment of functioning and pragmatic procedures to facilitate the reintegration and rehabilitation of returnee women, and especially children. The situation in Kosovo is compounded by the weak economic situation, which makes international support crucial. Nevertheless, even though the authorities spoke of a lack of international support during the initial years of the FTF problem, they managed to work within the existing (financial) structures, proving that such endeavours may be possible even with limited resources. Two of the most inspiring aspects observed in Kosovo are first of all the political will to make this decision, and being very pragmatic in its implementation. A further inspiring aspect is the dedication of the professionals involved in this process. The positive prospects of the ongoing efforts in Kosovo would not have been possible without this factor. Therefore, it becomes apparent that authorities should empower civil society support as much as possible, in order to lift some of the burden from their staff and to avoid a potential setback at a later stage.

In conclusion, when taking challenges and points of improvement into account, Kosovo provides some inspiring approaches. Elements of this approach, highlighted above, could be relevant to MSs who are engaged in reintegration of returning or returnee women and children.

Further Reading on FTFs, Repatriation and Rehabilitation (in Kosovo)

The RAN Returnee Manual 2017. Chapter two is specifically about child and female returnees. Available via: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/ran_br_a4_m10_en.pdf.

Bytyqi, Kujtim and Sam Mullins 2019. “**Returnee Foreign Fighters from Syria and Iraq: The Kosovan Experience**”, in CTC Sentinel 12(7), pp. 25-30. Available via: <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2019/08/CTC-SENTINEL-072019.pdf>.

Jakupi, Rudine & Garentina Kraja 2018. “**Accounting for the Difference: Vulnerability and Resilience to Violent Extremism in Kosovo**”, pp. 10-13, 26. Available via: https://www.berghof-foundation.org/fileadmin/redaktion/Publications/Other_Resources/WB_PVE/CTR_CaseStudy3Kosovo_e.pdf.

Kraja, Garentina 2017. “**The Islamic State Narrative in Kosovo – Deconstructed One Story at A Time**”. Available via: http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/ISNinKosovo-eng_794656.pdf.

DW.com, 2 October 2019. “**‘Islamic State’ returnees in Kosovo guided back into society**”. Available via: <https://p.dw.com/p/3QbBX>.