COUNTRY REPORT / NORTH MACEDONIA

DISENGAGEMENT, REHABILITATION AND REINTEGRATION OF FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTERS

MARCH 2022
Abstract

Since 2012, 143 citizens from North Macedonia have left for conflict zones in Syria and Iraq. Of the 69 who have returned, 38 have been killed. Currently, there are five active fighters in the conflict zones, of which four are imprisoned in Syria. North Macedonia was the first Western Balkan country that repatriated seven FTFs returnees (RFTFs) in August 2018 despite the fact that the country was not prepared institutionally to rehabilitate, resocialize and reintegrate (RRR) these people into society. The unpreparedness of the institutions for RRR of the RFTFs was confirmed when one year after serving the prison sentence of several persons from this category of prisoners from September to December 2020 in two joint actions of the North Macedonia’s Ministry of Interior (MoI) and the National Security Agency (NSA), were suppressed and apprehend while trying to operate and prepare a terrorist attack inside of the country. Later in 2020, government institutions began to prepare the National Plan for Repatriation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration of RFTFs and their family members (women and children), which was adopted by the government in June 2020.

The measures and activities undertaken by the state institutions are based on objectives set out in the National Strategies for Countering Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism, which tackle and attempt to neutralize the overall impact of the radicalization on society. The legal framework in place and is aligned with all relevant international instruments.

This report provides a robust synthesis of the major thematic elements that drive the development, scope, and rationale of Disengagement Rehabilitation and Reintegration (DRR) practices in North Macedonia and further presents institutional and community-level DRR-practices. The data was collected through desk research; key informant interviews held in January and February 2022 and focus group discussions facilitated in February 2022. Several aspects were thereby examined in closer detail: the legal framework, the institutional setup on the national and community level, prison based and probation services, the capacity of frontline practitioners, the systematic approach, the protocols and procedures in practice and the treatment of so-called vulnerable categories (namely women and children).
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>CC</td>
<td>Criminal Code</td>
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<td>CSOs</td>
<td>Civil Society Organisations</td>
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<td>CT</td>
<td>Countering Terrorism</td>
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<td>CVE</td>
<td>Countering Violent Extremism</td>
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<td>DRIVE</td>
<td>Disengaging and Rehabilitating Islamist Violent Extremists</td>
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<td>DRR</td>
<td>Disengagement, rehabilitation &amp; reintegration</td>
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<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
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<td>FTF</td>
<td>Foreign Terrorist Fighters</td>
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<td>IPA</td>
<td>Instrument for Pre–Accession</td>
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<td>IRC</td>
<td>Islamic Religious Community</td>
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<td>ISIS</td>
<td>Islamic State of Iraq and Syria</td>
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<td>LES</td>
<td>Law on Execution of Sanctions</td>
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<td>MLSP</td>
<td>Ministry of Labour and Social Policy</td>
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<td>MoI</td>
<td>Ministry of Interior</td>
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<td>NATO</td>
<td>The North Atlantic Treaty Organization</td>
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<td>NEXUS</td>
<td>Association of Citizens NEXUS Civil Concept</td>
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<td>NGOs</td>
<td>Non-governmental Organisations</td>
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<td>NSA</td>
<td>National Security Agency NSA</td>
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<td>P/CVE</td>
<td>Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism</td>
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<td>RFTFs</td>
<td>Returnees Foreign Terrorist Fighters</td>
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<td>RNM</td>
<td>Republic of North Macedonia</td>
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<td>RRR</td>
<td>Rehabilitation, Resocialization and Reintegration</td>
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<td>SOP</td>
<td>Standard Operational Protocol</td>
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<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<td>UNSC</td>
<td>United Nations Security Council</td>
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<td>USA</td>
<td>United States of America</td>
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<td>WB</td>
<td>Western Balkans</td>
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<td>ZELS</td>
<td>The Association of the units of local self-government</td>
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1. Introduction

The phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) poses a major risk to security. Since 2012, 143 citizens have left North Macedonia for conflict zones in Syria and Iraq. Of those who left, 69 have returned, of which 38 have been killed. There are five active fighters in the conflict zones, four of them imprisoned in Syria. Since the introduction of the changes in the Criminal Code (CC) in 2014, 16 FTFs returnees (RFTFs) and facilitators have served prison sentences. In August 2018, the Government successfully repatriated seven North Macedonian citizens from the Syrian Democratic Forces custody. All of them were indicted under the North Macedonia CC. In February 2020, one foreign terrorist fighter was deported from Turkey and charges were pressed against him. In March 2020, a woman and her two children were repatriated from a refugee camp in Turkey. Just recently, the government completed the process of repatriation from Syria and Iraq for four male Macedonian FTFs, five women and 14 children. From September to December 2020, two joint actions of the North Macedonia’s Ministry of Interior (MoI) and the National Security Agency (NSA) dismantled and apprehended two terrorist groups. During the first action in September 2020, a three-member terrorist group operating inside the territory of North Macedonia was neutralized; during the second action in December 2020, eight people were detained under suspicion of “terrorist organization” for planning to carry out attacks against the country’s vital infrastructure. It is important to mention that in both cases the arrested perpetrators were RFTFs who finished serving their prison sentences roughly one year before these incidents (Shikova & Musliu, 2021). Currently, there are 15 convicted FTFs serving their sentence in the North Macedonian prison system, 10 people in the prison of Idrizovo and 5 people in the prison of Stip (Drive interview 4, 2022).

The measures and activities described above are undertaken by state institutions and based on objectives set out in the national strategies that tackle and at the same time attempt to neutralize the overall impact of the radicalization on the society. North Macedonia has set up a National Counterterrorism Strategy (2018-2022), a National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism (2018-2022), related Action Plans, including a National Plan for the Reintegration, Resocialization, and Rehabilitation of returnees from foreign armies and their families (women and children), and respective operational procedures. The legal framework in place is thereby aligned with all relevant international instruments and in accordance with Macedonia’s obligations arising from international law, international human rights law, international humanitarian law standards, and UN Security Council resolutions. Moreover, the country is participating in a Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism for the Western Balkans and undertakes activities accordingly (Drive Interview 5, 2022).

Based on previous research, several common characteristics among RFTFs in North Macedonia have been identified. The radicalization and departures of the FTFs to conflict zones are caused by an interrelated and conditioned set of factors that influence the behaviour and activities of these individuals. The main factors that push individuals towards radicalization and contribute

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1 Authored by: Natalija Shikova, Afrodita Musliu, Zehra Saiti
3 Shadow Report on existing strategies and relevant legal framework for P/CVE and R&R of RFTFs and their families, 2022
to the acceptance of radical ideas and attitudes are thereby of a social character (Shikova & Vanchoski & Musliu, 2020). Another set of factors, also known as push-factors, are structural issues including poverty and low education attainment (obtaining only a primary and secondary level of education). Additionally, trauma during childhood and adolescence can potentially affect the psycho-social development of individuals and make them more prone towards radicalization. Moreover, individual tragedies can be associated with injustice and discrimination (such as violent demonstrations, personal crisis), and as such foster radical thinking. Based on the research conducted in North Macedonia, it was found that FTFs in North Macedonia had limited opportunities for personal and socio-economic development that increased their vulnerability rather than dysfunctional family environments (ibid, 2020). The individuals that join FTF groups are of a younger demographic (among 20-30 years old) and are often living in ethnically mixed areas. With regard to religious beliefs, individuals are found to be mostly of Islamic confession, and were considered less religious in their youth. However, religion did have a great impact during their upbringing. Although they were led by a strong sense of justice and desire to help, the representatives from the Islamic Religious community consider that they did ignore religious principles and rules and followed their desire for self-realization. All of them became radicalized by watching video materials with radical content and violence on various Internet sources and social networks. Additionally, a sense of belonging proves to be a crucial factor in taking action and joining a terrorist group, despite the fact that they had no previous criminal record (Shikova & Vanchoski & Musliu, 2020).4

When it comes to rehabilitation and resocialization processes in the communities that the returning FTFs previously resided in, they are only rarely considered a risk. Some institutional steps were taken to address the resocialization, however the their implementation of these steps needs to be strengthened, while anti-terrorism measures need to be continued.5 Hence, a ‘whole of society’ approach is necessary for providing sustainable solutions regarding physical, social, psychological, and economic challenges that RFTFs and their families face. Additionally, there is a need for more comprehensive efforts in establishing mechanisms for the early identification of radicalization, which will enhance relevant institutional capacities and empower professionals to prevent and counter signs of radicalization that can ultimately lead to violent extremism and terrorism.6

2. Institutional cooperation/Intergovernmental cooperation

Countering hate speech, false news, radicalization, violent extremism and terrorism are top security priorities of the North Macedonian government. Following these priorities, North Macedonia and the EU signed a bilateral implementation arrangement outlining concrete measures to be achieved under the Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism for the Western

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4 Enhancing the Understanding of FTF: Challenges for Rehabilitation, Resocialization and Reintegration of Returnees in the Republic of North Macedonia, Nexus, 2020
5 EU country Progress Report, 2021
6 Shadow Report on existing strategies and relevant legal framework for P/CVE and R&R of RFTFs and their families, 2022
Balkans in October 2019. The Joint Action Plan outlines concrete priorities common to all Western Balkan partners and related EU support in the area of counterterrorism, including preventing and countering violent extremism. This includes strengthening regional cooperation, which must be comprehensive and systematic. North Macedonia, as a member of NATO and the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS, in cooperation with its strategic partner the United States, remains committed to applying the highest standards in countering violent extremism and terrorism. There is an agreement among political forces on the importance of the P/CVR & RRR of RFTFs and their families and clear political will and strategies in place. North Macedonia has a National Counterterrorism Strategy (2018-2022), a National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism (2018-2022), and related action plans. The implementation action plan includes activities to deepen cooperation between institutions to share information to prevent radicalization in prisons in North Macedonia. This activity is realized through the holding of working meetings for the exchange of information between the involved institutions aimed at supporting the resocialization and reintegration of this category of convicts. The strategic documents were adopted, and the processes are devoted to the coordination of the implementation of activities and measures included in the two action plans. The National Plan for Reintegration, Resocialization and Rehabilitation of returnees from foreign armies and their families (women and children) was adopted in June 2020 together with the operational procedures. The National plan defines the general priority areas for the P/CVE & RRR of RFTFs and their families. Additionally, a communication plan by the National Committee for preventing violent extremism and countering terrorism has been drafted, but until now not passed any of the Government sessions i.e., has not been yet approved by the Government (Drive interview 5, 2022).

The National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism (2018-2022) was adopted by the Assembly in March 2018. The Strategy identifies the causes, conditions and factors that foster extremism, but also sets out to explore their interaction. It further defines emerging forms and tendencies in the development of extremist and terrorist activity, especially in light of new forms of terrorism and a change in terrorist tactics. In addition, a series of legal acts and strategies such as the National Strategy for Prevention of Money Laundering and Financing of Terrorism and the National Defence Strategy of the Republic of Macedonia were adopted. Moreover, the new National Strategy for Prison System (2021-2025) envisages effective internal controls and external communication mechanisms aimed at supporting the resocialization of convicts, including terrorist convicts (Drive interview 3, 2022).

Moreover, the Republic of North Macedonia is a signatory and has ratified the most important documents of the Council of Europe related to the prevention and fight against terrorism. These include the European Convention for the Suppression of the Terrorism and the 2003 Protocol to

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7 [FIRST-LINE PRACTITIONERS (firstlinepractitioners.com)]
8 [Security Web Portal | Document details (rcc.int)]
9 [cve_national_strategy_eng_translation_sbu.pdf (vlada.mk)]
10 [cve_national_strategy_eng_translation_sbu.pdf (vlada.mk)]
11 [https://ufr.gov.mk/?p=495]

The legal provisions relating to the crimincation of acts of terrorism and the actions of the FTFs are prescribed in the CC. Additionally, the Law on Prevention of Money Laundering and Financing Terrorism regulates the measures, actions and procedures that task competent authorities and bodies with the detection and prevention of money laundering, terrorist financing and related criminal offenses. Moreover, the Law on Execution of Sanctions regulates the resocialization of convicted individuals in more detail.

The CC provides several articles that regulate illegal conduct that can be used to execute, incite, assist or finance acts of terrorism. Due to the complexity of the terrorism phenomenon, the CC does not provide a precise definition, but lists the criminal-legal acts representing terrorism (see article 394-b).

In the amendments to the CC - made in 2014 upon the recommendations coming from several international documents, most notably by the UN Security Council Resolution 2170/0 - the CC penalizes anyone who “contrary to the law creates, organizes, recruits, transports, organizes transport, equip, trains or otherwise shall prepare a person or group for participation in a foreign army, police, paramilitary or parapolice formations, organized groups or individually, outside the territory of the Republic of North Macedonia, shall be punished by imprisonment of at least five years.” Paragraph 2 of this Article criminalizes activities that - directly or indirectly - offer, provide, secure, seek, collect or conceal finances, funds, tangible assets or equipment which are fully or partially intended for the actions referred to ancillary activities in the previous paragraph.

The Law on Execution of Sanctions (LES) regulates the sanctions imposed for criminal offenses and misdemeanours, which includes imprisonment, and moreover determines the basic principles for the resocialization of prisoners. It further regulates and determines the organizational set-up of the penitentiary and educational correctional institutions in the country. Consequently, the LES is the legal framework within which all other strategic documents related to the national penitentiary system are modelled, and thus represents the basis of bylaws and acts in the field of sanctions, including the process of resocialization in prison facilities.

In 2017, the National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism was established. It has 22 members and 22 deputy members that are permanently employed in 21 ministries and institutions. The coordinative body is chaired by the National Coordinator for Countering Violent Extremism and the Deputy National Coordinator. The Committee has drafted national strategies and action plans to counter violent extremism and terrorism based

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15 https://www.pravda.gov.mk/uis-novostd/2982
17 See more at https://drive.google.com/file/d/1P6Af6GgB1mI9VXNNdZzVmPZMu47d1C_6i/view
18 https://www.pravda.gov.mk/uis-novostd/2982
19 Decision for appointment of members, deputy members and secretary of the national committee for preventing violent extremism and fight against terrorism http://www.slvesnik.com.mk/Issues/4b528c285958436d8c7667da7530e881.pdf?page=6
20 Златко Апостолоски, Национален координатор за спречување на насилен екстремизам и борба против тероризам | Влада на Република Северна Македонија (vlada.mk)
on the four pillars of the UN Global Strategy and the EU Counter-Terrorism Strategy. It is responsible for the coordination of the work and the sharing of information between the institutions participating in the work of the National Committee and in the implementation of the Joint Action Plan for Countering Terrorism in the Western Balkans. Additionally, the government set up an **Inter-Ministerial Working Group on the Reintegration of Foreign Terrorist Fighters** in 2021. The working group was mandated to develop a precise action plan for institutions in order to provide adequate health treatment, education, security as well as psychosocial, socio-economic and legal support to terrorist convicts in order to avoid stigmatization. Following these aims, the roles and responsibilities of the institutions and bodies involved in the Inter-Ministerial Working Group were defined (Drive interview 5).

The government has also established a cooperation with the association of the local self-government units in Macedonia (ZELS), and cooperation agreements have been signed between the National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism and municipalities. The need to work and strengthen local communities’ resilience is recognized especially in areas where the risks are more pronounced. Municipal authorities have recognized that RFTFs can pose a security risk, and activities like trainings for local youth councils and workshops for local multidisciplinary teams have attempted to raise awareness among citizens. Yet, there is no special treatment or targeted measure for possible RFTFs and a local networks to support their families is absent. Rather, the existing assistance programs, such as active employment measures and skills acquisition, are targeted to the general population. Programs and projects for the employment of individuals who have served a prison sentence and RFTFs do not exist. The greatest obstacles are discrimination, public condemnation, and the lack of appropriate work skills among RFTFs.

Most participants in the focus groups do not see a problem with respect to the coordination between the institutions and the multidisciplinary teams. According to them, they have a well-established cooperation and meet once a month to consult about the needs and grievances of the returnees’ families. While they do not have a specific protocol, they communicate regularly when the RFTFs and the family members have specific needs. Despite the good level of communication, the interviewed experts emphasize that many of the institutions do not have enough experience in this area of work and that more specific protocols are needed to be able to legally cooperate regarding this issue. The National Committee further emphasizes that standard operating procedures for dealing with returnees from foreign armies were adopted, however, the document is not publicly available. According to the interviewees, the standard procedures adopted provides guidance concerning the actions institutions have to take in case of a FTF or a family members return from a conflict zones. The guidelines are in the final stage of printing and will be disseminated to all relevant institutions (Drive interview 5, 2022).

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21 Shadow Reports on existing strategies and relevant legal framework for P/CVE and R&R of RFTFs and their families, 2022
22 Enhancing the Understanding of FTF: Challenges for Rehabilitation, Resocialization and Reintegration of Returnees in the Republic of North Macedonia, Nexus, 2020
However, different challenges to sustainable inter-institutional cooperation in implementing RRR programs must be noted. It is evident that despite the fact that North Macedonia has solid legal framework and institutional set-up in place, RFTFs continue to be a potential security risk. Therefore, a comprehensive institutional answer and implementation is necessary to prevent radicalization and violent extremism. According to the latest EU Country Progress Report, the Republic of North Macedonia has a legislative framework to address the fight against organized crime that is largely in line with European standards. Nonetheless, the progress on the anti-terrorism measures needs to be continued and expanded.23 Thus, more systematic, sustainable, inclusive, and relevant RRR programs for RFTFs are needed, and must be based on transparent processes that involve all relevant stakeholders. Additionally, there is a need for more comprehensive efforts in establishing mechanisms for the early identification of radicalization24 in order to counter violent extremism, and terrorism. To this end, relevant institutional capacities must be increased and professionals must be empowered.

The existing challenges are a result of a lack of trained staff in the institutions and prisons, an insufficient budget, overlapping competencies among the institutions, lacking coordination with NGOs and foreign donors, as well the reluctant institutions. Some institutions that are part of the Inter-Ministerial Working Group do not provide the necessary information and are not submitting a yearly report about the implementation of assigned activities. A further challenge that is mentioned is the absence of a web page of the National Committee as a place for information-sharing.25

North Macedonia is actively participating in the implementation of counter-terrorism initiatives and receives financial assistance through the Instrument for Pre–Accession (IPA). Therefore, it can be concluded that several necessary steps towards tangible standards for resocialization of RFTFs in the Republic of North Macedonia were taken. Yet, these efforts need to be strengthened in the face of multiple societal challenges. The main challenge to information sharing is mistrust. The undertaken measures, such as the recently promoted National RRR Plan for RFTFs and their families, needs to be under public scrutiny and the civil society sector should be partnering with the relevant institutions in addressing challenges jointly. At the European level, some programs provide relevant financial and technical assistance in this respect. These programs give directions with precisely defined implementation deadlines.

3. Risk Assessment Tools

The government of North Macedonia considers the detection and early identification of possible terrorist threats a key challenge. Following this notion, the institutional capacities of the national security system have been upgraded, and attempts to develop and apply efficient and functional mechanisms for dealing with the existing threats and risks have been made.26 Preparations for the de-radicalization of FTFs began in 2018, when the adoption of the Strategy for Countering

24 ibid
25 Shadow Report on existing strategies and relevant legal framework for P/CVE and R&R of RFTFs and their families, 2022
26 Република Северна Македонија - Министерство за внатрешни работи (mvr.gov.mk)
Terrorism and Violent Extremism was made. Based on this operational document, a tool for risk assessment of FTFs and a draft methodology for an individual treatment program for radicalized and convicted individuals (hereinafter in the text called Program) was developed, however, the texts are not publicly accessible. The program is being developed with the support of the Office of the Council of Europe in Skopje and with the mediation of international experts. So far, it consists of four modules covering several issues: the first module covers the development of relations and connections; the second one is dedicated to narratives building; the third one is a module on learning and the fourth one is dedicated to the values and believes.27

Additionally, with the support from the Council of Europe, documents regarding the following topics were prepared: Information about signs of radicalization; Tool for fast screening of the radicalized persons; Instrument for screening with the guidelines for their use. The screening tool consists of a table of the system needs, narratives, and networks and mentions 20 indicators. The indicators are categorized into 3 sub-categories (needs, narratives, and motives). The screening tool is not yet applied because the conditions for its full implementation are not given and because additional training for relevant personnel is needed. In this context, a Handbook for Recognizing Signs of Radicalization in Prisons (not publicly accessible) has been developed and is implemented by the prison personal (Drive interview 4, 2020). The purpose of the auxiliary tools is primarily to identify individuals prone to radicalization and ultimately to get them involved in the de-radicalization program. Additionally to these interventions, based on an internal approach, multidisciplinary teams have been established in the penitentiary institutions. Their task is to monitor the behaviour of prisoners convicted for terrorism and terrorist activities in order to detect possible deviations/behavioural changes in their way of communicating with other convicts, e.g. by propagating a certain ideology (Drive interview 3, 2022). The multidisciplinary teams include members of the prison police, the resocialization department, and other sectors relevant to this issue. Their main goal is to identify a possible radicalization in penitentiary institutions and prevent a potential escalation between prisoners. The team meets once a month (more often if necessary) and prepares a monthly report based on their assertions of the situation in the prison. However, despite these activities, there is still no comprehensive, detailed analysis on all institutional levels, which would allow for a better assessment of the convicted returnees their risk of engaging in violent extremism.28

As part of their competencies, the probation officers, in accordance with Article 12 of the Law on the Execution of Sanctions, are supposed to prepare Risk Assessment Reports upon request of the Court for proceedings. These reports must assess the person’s personality through the completion of a special risk assessment. The Directorate for the Execution of Sanctions keeps a single register according to which the probation works are carried out and which records the case for which the person was convicted as well as the type of alternative measure imposed on him. During the course of 2021, the Court requested the preparation of 52 Risk Assessments for the accused persons. So far, no risk assessment has been made for these persons, and specific instruments for conducting a risk assessment of this terrorist convicts do not exist. So far, there

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27 Enhancing the Understanding of FTF: Challenges for Rehabilitation, Resocialization and Reintegration of Returnees in the Republic of North Macedonia, Nexus, 2020

28 ibid
has been only been one completed report for a convicted person that participated in foreign armies, which has been submitted to the Court and the Public Prosecutor’s office (Drive interview 4, 2022). Therefore, the assessment is only done formally and provisionally (Drive interview 2, 2022). On the other hand, frontline practitioners are indicating that the reports are sent to the Directorate for the Execution of the Sanctions but they are not part of their general institutional reports. However, if any risk assessment about the radicalization in prison is performed, it is not standardized with the tools used in police or social works (Drive interview 1, 2022). The participants of the focus groups confirmed that they do not have adequate risk assessment tools. In general, they use their respective internal documents, such as psychological tests for stress, anxiety, and risk assessment questionnaires (not specialized only for FTFs). The exceptions are prisons that assess the degree of radicalization.

4. Prison based DRR

The National Plan for Rehabilitation, Resocialization and Reintegration of returnees from foreign armies and their families (women and children) was adopted in June 2020 together with the operational procedures. The National Plan defines the general priority areas for the P/CVE and includes provisions of RRR of RFTFs and their families. It includes RRR activities which are expected to be carried out within the criminal justice system (such as before and after the release of FTFs serving prison sentences), and in a non-custodial setting (such as measures for women and children who have not been convicted of any crime, providing special sensitivity actions tailored to their needs). The activities are divided into different phases and the plan emphasizes the need for multi-stakeholder cooperation and society-wide access to research and development efforts through the adoption of a model of public health that envisages a role for all levels and relevant sectors of government and civil society. The need for a comprehensive approach by the whole society as a key to countering violent extremism and radicalization is thus stressed.

However, it is important to mention that RFTFs have received no special treatment, in other words, they are treated like all other prisoners. The rehabilitation and resocialization processes applied are similar to all other prisoners, beginning with the admission to the prison or penitentiary correctional facility and lasting for the entire period of the prison sentence. More concrete measures are thereby applied in the period before the release of the prisoner. Usually, all prisoners are involved in various programs like trainings for their future in the labour market after having served their prison sentences. In addition, some of the prisoners are employed to work for the penitentiary for example as custodians or cleaners helping to maintain the overall hygiene in the institutions.

Until now there are 16 RFTFs have served their prison sentence without any involvement in specifically developed DRR programs for RFTFs and facilitators. Currently there are 11 foreign terrorist fighters in Macedonian prisons; 6 RFTFs were released from prison in 2020 and none in 2021.29 According to statements from the convicted individuals and based on the NEXUS

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research, the penitentiaries have poor resocialization capacities. Interviewees state that the programs for the acquisition of professional skills and knowledge are lacking, and most of them never participated in available programs regarding vocational skills and knowledge because of a lack of interest.\textsuperscript{30}

The same is confirmed by the practitioners working in the responsible institutions and by the focus group organized for the Drive project. It is stated that the prisons and penitentiary-correctional facilities do not have specific experience in terms of DRR of RFTFs (Drive interview 1; Drive interview 2). Focus group participants believe that the conditions for further radicalization of prisoners exist because RFTFs serve their sentences with other prisoners.

Based on the Drive research it must be noted that the multidisciplinary teams do not function properly and that they exist only provisionally without sufficient resources and capacities. The prisons and penitentiary-correctional facilities do not have specific experience in assessing the prisoners’ risk of violent extremism. However, prison officials working on resocialization and other public officials are indicating that there is a high risk of a spread of radical ideas and attitudes among other prisoners and within the family of the convicted person (especially among younger siblings). RFTFs are thus considered a high-risk category of prisoners in comparison to other prisoners, while they are serving their sentence in several penitentiaries of closed or semi-open type and are therefore in regular contact with other prisoners. According to prison officials the risk of recidivism after release from prison is high. Moreover, they point out that there are no effective mechanisms to monitor the radicalization of the broad prison population within correctional facilities emanating from this category of sentenced individuals.

5. Preparedness of Frontline Practitioners

The research team has gathered relevant information regarding the capacities and preparedness of prison staff in approaching RFTFs in prison. Firstly, it must be mentioned that the institutions lack capacities and are understaffed. Although the prison officials consider continuous education important, there is generally a huge demotivation among prison staff (Drive interview 1, 2022). Although some actions have been taken, the prison staff/officials are not prepared to react to possible new challenges or take action to prevent the spread of radicalization. The first step in improving the capacities in approaching RFTFs in prison is the education and training of prison staff/officilas, as there is currently neither a systematic approach nor enough material (e.g. manuals, guides) explaining RFTFs procedures in prison facilities. There are also no staff training modules that help practitioners to work directly with these individuals, although steps have been taken by the Directorate for Execution of Sanctions. Still, there is a need for adequate training for the frontline practitioners such as prison officials in respect of dealing with RFTFs.

On the other hand, there are also no special protocols for social workers working with RFTFs. There is an action plan that was drafted as part of the national plan of the National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Terrorism, which involves the Ministry of Labour and Social

\textsuperscript{30} Enhancing the Understanding of FTF: Challenges for Rehabilitation, Resocialization and Reintegration of Returnees in the Republic of North Macedonia, Nexus, 2020
Policy (MLSP), the Social Work Centers, local self-government, and the civil sector. According to the action plan, the development of training modules for social workers and professionals from other complementary institutions (e.g. those providing shelters for RFTFs) were planned.\textsuperscript{31} However, the emergence of RFTFs and facilitators is a new issue that requires professionally trained staff. Therefore, efforts must be made in order to train existing staff as they can build on their already existing knowledge, and it is necessary to strengthen the capacity of the social work centers and to train the staff to deal with the indicated risk.

As for the implementation of the plans and the strategies, based on the Annual Reports for the work National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism – available as free access to information -, we observe that in 2018 there have been trainings for police officers in identifying and preventing radicalization; trainings for social workers; trainings for police officers in countering terrorism and violent extremism (22 trainings in total); as well as vocational education programs for convicts that take place continuously. In 2020, preventive activities – such as a training with the police - was organized, as well as trainings for the members of penitentiary institutions. Additionally, the members of the National Committee took part in a series of training and workshops with domestic and foreign experts in order to understand the essential problems.\textsuperscript{32} Additionally, a protocol has been developed by the Council of Europe together with the Directorate for the Execution of the Sanctions. A series of workshops were held for prison services and for directorate staff. However, based on the held Drive interviews, there are many obstacles in the implementation of guidelines. It is considered that the procedures regarding RFTFs exceed the rules and procedures of the prison officials – and thus outside of their domain and legal competencies. Consequently, a more systematic approach is necessary to increase the preparedness of frontline practitioners (Drive interview 2, 2022). Additionally, the participants in the focus groups, besides expressing their opinion that the conditions for preventing the process of radicalization in prisons are not met, they also state that probation offices are also not properly addressing this issue. According to the interviewed people from the responsible institutions, additional trainings for the prison personnel have been planned in the recent period (February – March 2022), and the trainings will be organized with the support of the Council of Europe (Drive interview 4, 2022).

According to the interviewees, the employed probation officers generally have the capacity and knowledge to facilitate the RRR of the perpetrators. Within the twinning project "Strengthening the penitentiary system and development of the probation service", both institutions have held professional trainings. The probation officers now have more than three years of practical experience, given that the probation service was established at the end of 2018. With regard to the prevention and management of violent extremism, the project “Strengthening the Capacity of the Penitentiary System and the External Police Control Mechanism in RNM” was implemented by the Council of Europe. Thereby, 19 probation officers have undergone basic training for preventing radicalization. Specialized training for the prevention and dealing with violent

\textsuperscript{31} Enhancing the Understanding of FTF: Challenges for Rehabilitation, Resocialization and Reintegration of Returnees in the Republic of North Macedonia, Nexus, 2020
\textsuperscript{32} Shadow Reports on existing strategies and relevant legal framework for P/CVE and R&R of RFTFs and their families, 2022
extremism is required in order to further expand knowledge and techniques in the work and treatment of RFTFs, with the ultimate goal of RRR (Drive interview 4, 2022).

Based on the activities envisaged in the The National Plan for Rehabilitation, Resocialization and Reintegration of returnees from foreign armies and their families, the Directorate for the Execution of Sanctions closely cooperates with the Council of Europe. During March 2021, the “Standard Operational Protocol (SOP) for Preparation for Release and Post-Penal Assistance to Radicalized Convicts” was finalized, and in June 2021, a training for the implementation of the SOP was held in Skopje (Drive Interview 3, 2022). The training was attended by representatives of the Directorate for the Execution of Sanctions, prison personnel, representatives from Ministry of Labour and Social Policy; Ministry of Interior; Agency for National Security as well as the National Coordinator for Countering Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism. In February 2022, a series of trainings for prison staff, organized by the Directorate for the Execution of Sanctions, started at the Training Centre for Education in Idrizovo. Additionally, the Council of Europe organized 3 forums within the framework of the regional project (that aims to provide direct support and strengthen the skills and abilities of workers in ensuring the safe and effective release of radicalized convicts) in 2021. The aim of the forums was to help the responsible personnel in getting acquainted with the SOP. Upon completion of all trainings and forums, the same modules will be applied in the work of the Directorate (Drive interview 3, 2022).

6. Reintegration measures

Reintegration measures are connected with successfully overcoming the challenges in realizing the programs discussed above (such as adequate planning and ensuring sufficient financing), but also include more structured social activities like raising the general populations’ awareness and increasing community responsibility and the acceptance of RFTFs. Involving families, community members and civil society organizations is in line with the “whole-of-society approach” which envisions a role for multiple sectors and civil society actors in DRR programs. In general, it can be said that the community accepts RFTFs and their families without big problems or prejudices. In essence, communities do not pay particular attention to RFTFs and does not see them as a great security threat (Drive interview 2, 2022). The Islamic Religious Community (IRC) and local representatives of the religious community have the will to help realize RRR aims for terrorist convicts. Officially, the IRC has a body that works on preventing radicalization and terrorism amongst believers, but the capacities of the body are not known. Moreover, the IRC is willing to offer trainings on an interpretation of the religion in a nonviolent way to the RFTFs while they are in prison, however, such activities have not been requested or realized so far.33

According to the general approach of the social workers (that is not tailor-made and customized for RFTFs), resocialization means adapting a former prisoner to the new situation, i.e. after the experienced trauma. It includes on the one hand support in finding a job that will provide the person with the basics for subsistence, and on the other hand education measures for the

33 Enhancing the Understanding of FTF: Challenges for Rehabilitation, Resocialization and Reintegration of Returnees in the Republic of North Macedonia, Nexus, 2020
community that has to accept the RFTFs. The competent institutions thereby primarily point to the existing system of social protection. Hence, after serving their prison sentence, the system obliges former prisoners (regardless of the crime committed) to report to the social work centers where they will be provided with material and professional assistance if necessary. The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy is creating policies in this area, and the social work centers are developing individual reintegration plans. This represents the basis of the multisectoral strategy for individuals at risk who need psycho-social support. According to the novelties in the Law on Social Protection, dealing with any risk includes the targeted work of a professional (social worker, psychologist and pedagogue) appointed as a case leader who is tasked with providing support. Additionally, in case of an assessed risk or in face of a lack of trust of the individuals towards the institutions, the social work centers include additional resources such as health organizations and educational institutions. Only socially disadvantaged individuals are offered financial assistance and assistance in applying to the National Employment Agency. The possibility of providing initial material assistance (if the person requests it) exists according to the Law on Social Protection, and refers to returnees from prison, regardless of the grounds on which they were imprisoned. According to employees of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, RFTFs are not legally categorized as a vulnerable group of citizens, but further considerations are made especially if it is determined that the motives for their departure to the conflict zones were financial.34

Participants in the Drive Project focus groups believe that RFTFs and their families (women and children) are well accepted by society. Regarding their employment opportunities in the private sector, participants held two different opinions. One group considered that business owners will be afraid to hire RFTFs, whereas some of the participants who have met businessmen were confident that companies are ready to offer a job to the RFTFs. According to them, the returnees are not seen as fighters, but rather as victims. According to their information, some of the returnees are currently working as taxi drivers, on construction sites, in bakeries, etc. Until now, returnees have not asked for a job, but rather for some material support in terms of computers for children, shelves, etc. Regarding the health checks on their mental and physical health, there is no information except that a check was done when they returned to the country for the first time. This process is done on a voluntary basis in centers for social work which employ psychologists, psychiatrists as well as doctors who can offer help.

According to the Drive interviews, 3 FTFs were released 3-6 months earlier with on probation, despite the fact that they had not been part of the RRR programs. After they served their sentence, these RFTFs were again arrested for the same crime that they were previously convicted for (Drive interview 1, 2022). The interviewed officials are concerned that the reason for that is a lacking performance of probation teams that are generally (, not only in respect of RFTFs,) not carrying out their tasks well (Drive interview 2, 2022).

Additionally, the institutional representatives point out that the RRR of convicts is a top priority of the probation service that has been carried out in cooperation with several institutions such as the Centre for Social Work; the National Agency for the Employment; Public Health

34 ibid
Institutions; the Ministry of Internal Affairs; Public enterprises formed by the municipalities; as well as the non-governmental sector. In accordance with the goals determined in the individual program for each convicted person, convicts are is placed under the supervision of the probation service. The goals envisaged in the individual program is that convicts live in accordance with legal and moral norms. To this end, the cooperation with the non-governmental sector is considered an important factor, as it offers specialized programs for perpetrators according to the committed (Drive interview 4, 2022). With the SOP procedures, the centers for social work need to be involved in the RRR processes up to six months before the convict’s release from prison. Additionally, the community should be involved in the program design through the representatives from the municipalities and local municipal teams (Drive interview 6, 2022).

7. Vulnerable categories

International documents point out the importance of helping women and children associated with FTFs who may have been victims of terrorism and stress the need to take these categories into account when preparing strategies for rehabilitation and reintegration. Women returnees of FTFs from North Macedonia mostly left to accompany their husbands and did not participate as fighters in the conflict zones. The government does not see them as criminals, as follows they are not being prosecuted and convicted, but rather treated as persons at risk. Currently, the centers for social work are working with six women and 16 children, the work is carried out in accordance with the SOP. With regard to support structures, the social centers have ensured the realization of rights related to social and child protection; health protection; basic living conditions; psychological and sociological support; vocational training; carrier planning etc. (Drive interview 6, 2022). One of the interviewees (Drive Interview 2, 2022), as well as several focus groups participants consider it is too early to discuss the processes of resocialization of women returnees. While some state that is too early for the women to start working, others point out that there is a lack of interest in finding a job, especially since some of the women have previously been housewives. However, some of the focus group participants and interviewees believe that these women would be stigmatized and discriminated (Drive Interview 2, 2022). According to the focus group participants, a possible solution is for young women returnees to enter the labour market or start their own small businesses (according to their capacities). The representatives from the Center for Social Work said that if women agree to take part in the resocialization program, they jointly create an individual plan in line with their needs. Partially this process is supported by state institutions and funds intended for vulnerable categories (Drive interview 6, 2022).

The integration of children into the school system can be described as successful. In general, the kids are accepted by their peers and the school, where they are not separated from other students during classes (Drive interview 6, 2022). One focus group participant has pointed out that children attend the school in integrated classes together with their peer classmates. They are well accepted, regularly attend classes, and do not have difficulties in studying and learning.

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The returned children speak many languages, such as Macedonian, Arabic, Turkish and Bosnian, and there is no indication that some of the children have been discriminated. However, one main problem is that many children whose fathers have died in the conflict zones where born in Syria and therefore do not have birth certificates, which hinders the registration in the North Macedonia’s birth register. Thus, they attend school without documents and are unable to receive school certificates at the end of the school year.

The focus group participants from the Centre for Social Work stated that the relevant institutions are aware of this situation. Teachers are also informed about these specific circumstances, and part of the teaching staff - including pedagogues and psychologists from schools - took part in trainings to detect early signs of radicalization (Drive interview 6, 2022). These trainings, however, are not specifically tailored to RFTFs and their family members, and therefore did not address the special circumstances of children/students that are entering the education process (Drive Interview 2, 2022). Additionally, the focus group participants confirmed that the Centre for Social Work organizes meetings and counselling with the RFTFs’ children every second week. These meetings are led by psychologists and pedagogues, with the final aim to facilitate their quick resocialization and reintegration into the community.

8. Discussion and Conclusion

This study provides for a robust synthesis of the major thematic elements that drive the development, scope, and rationale of DRR practices in North Macedonia. It presents the institutional as well as the community level of DRR practices. The data was gathered by desk review; six key informant interviews held in January and February 2022; and two focus group discussions held in February 2022. Several observations will be summarized in the paragraphs below.

In principle, important strategies addressing CVE, CT and DRR challenges are in place in North Macedonia. The legal framework is aligned with the EU and international standards relating to these issues. Accordingly, there is a good institutional set-up that operationalizes the existing strategies. The National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism was established in 2017 and consists of 22 members and 22 deputy members that are permanently employed within 21 ministries and institutions. This proves that violent extremism is recognized and addressed as an issue by the North Macedonian Government. The National Committee has organized several trainings and workshops that were facilitated by domestic and foreign experts, with the main aim of helping committee members to familiarize themselves with the phenomenon and to understand their respective responsibilities. Additionally, with the support from the Council of Europe, several risk assessments tools, methods and programs were developed, although the documents are not publicly available. The trainings of frontline practitioners are ongoing; however, the implementation of the tools and strategies remains questionable. There is an evident lack of a systematic approach towards sustainable implementation, and prison manuals, guides, and procedures for prison officials with regard to RFTFs inmates do not exist either within the penal institutions nor in probation services. Several steps have been taken by the Directorate for Execution of the Sanctions, yet the implementation
of the introduced methods (like multidisciplinary teams for the detection of early signs of radicalization) lack implementation. According to statements by convicted individuals reported in previous NEXUS research\textsuperscript{36}, as well as statements from prison officials within this research, we can conclude that penitentiaries still have poor resocialization capacities. RFTF convicts have pointed out that programs for the acquisition of professional skills and knowledge are lacking. In addition, most of them never participated the rarely available programs that the prison organizes due to a lack of interest. Even more concerning is that some of the convicted RFTFs were released from prison with a probation period despite the fact that they have not been part of any RRR programs in the prison.

Unfortunately, there are no specific RFTF protocols in place that apply to social workers. RFTFs should be engaged in the processes of RRR at least six months before their release and for a further period of six months after their release. This research shows that this is not applied in practice. After their release from prison, in the absence of tailor-made protocols and procedures for RFTFs and their family members (women and children), social workers are forced to apply a general approach (existing protocols) for the reintegration of RFTFs as well as women and children into community. The probation service was established in 2018 with support of the Council of Europe. The SOP was drafted in 2021 for the use of the probation services. However, this SOP still is not put in practice, and currently there is ongoing training for the probation officers in order to get acquainted with the SOP. Although some training was provided for the probation officers, the probation teams are still not carrying out all necessary activities. On the other hand, our research also shows that the institutional representatives regard the RRR of RFTFs and their family members (women and children) as a main priority for the probation services. The research has shown that lacking institutional cooperation and a lack of information sharing both internally and externally have hindered the proper implementation of RRR practices for RFTFs.

When it comes to vulnerable categories, such as women and children, all interviewed participants agree that all FTF’s women from North Macedonia left for Syria and Iraq to accompany their husbands rather than to take part in fighting in conflict zones. Accordingly, and in lack of evidence of their involvement in terrorist activities abroad, the institutions do not perceive them as criminals but rather as persons at risk. What this research has revealed is that it is too early to discuss the process of women’s resocialization, as their role is difficult to assess and in light of them being perceived as housewives that lack the professional skills to enter the labour market. Regarding the reintegration process of children, the opinion prevails that children are slowly but surely integrating back into the educational system without major difficulties. The research revealed difficulties with the children’s documents, as many of them were born in conflict zones. However, the social worker respondents assure that those children are not left behind and that the Centers for Social Work as well as the pedagogical staff are aware of the issue. The children continue to go to school while efforts are being made to resolve this issue.

\textsuperscript{36} Enhancing the Understanding of FTF: Challenges for Rehabilitation, Resocialization and Reintegration of Returnees in the Republic of North Macedonia, Nexus, 2020
To conclude, the declaration that DRR practices remain an important, yet understudied aspect of (de)radicalization trajectories in countries that have repatriated individuals engaged in the promotion of violent extremism and participated in foreign conflicts, holds also for North Macedonia. Although there is a growing consensus that DRR practices require community-level and tailor-made approaches in order to ensure an optimal impact, we can observe many defects that can be overcome by means of more integrated approach. The modern RRR programs need to be transparent, inclusive and multidimensional in their practical implementation. Furthermore, there is the need to engage with CSOs and NGOs which enjoy a bigger credibility within communities. A successful RRR process must focus not only on the period of the prison sentence itself, but also on the reintegration of RFTFs into the community. North Macedonia follows the obligations arising from international law, international human rights law, international humanitarian law standards, and UN Security Council resolutions. Moreover, the country is partaking in the Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism for the Western Balkans. North Macedonia has drafted a National Counterterrorism Strategy (2018-2022); a National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism (2018-2022); as well as the National Plan for Rehabilitation, Resocialization, and Reintegration of RFTFs and their families (women and children), together with the SOP. However, the “whole of society approach” is lacking proper implementation as the approach remains institutionally fragmented. Rather, a multi-agency approach must prescribe precise action plans for the institutions that are aimed at providing adequate health, education, psycho-social, socio-economic, security, and legal treatment to RFTFs, taking care not to further stigmatization. Particular attention must be paid to the cultural context, as there cannot be a “one size fits all” approach that works in all cultural settings. The program for reintegration needs to be implemented in a way that carefully considers the direct influence on the basic human rights to a fair trial, work opportunities, housing, and freedom of belief. North Macedonia needs to take additional steps in order to support and enhance the institutional cooperation, involve the wider community in the process, and hence make the process of DRR meaningful and fully operational.
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List of the interviewed individuals:

1. Prison official, penitentiary institution (Drive interview 1).
2. Inter-Ministerial Working Group for RRR, representative (Drive interview 2).
3. Directorate for Execution of the Sanctions, representative (Drive interview 3).
4. Ministry of Justice, representative (Drive interview 4).
5. National Coordinator for CVE and CT (Drive interview 5).
6. Representative from the Center for social work (Drive interview 6).