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INTERGOVERNMENTAL COORDINATION AND REINTEGRATION STRATEGIES IN NORTH MACEDONIA'S FIGHT AGAINST VIOLENT EXTREMISM

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Current security challenges within the broader geopolitical context are significantly impacting North Macedonia. The objective of this study is to examine North Macedonia's strategies in countering violent extremism (CVE), addressing the reintegration of returnees, and improving intergovernmental coordination.

Methods: The research employs a qualitative approach, drawing on official reports, government documents, policy frameworks, and secondary academic sources related to North Macedonia's counter-terrorism and CVE efforts.

Results: Findings indicate that North Macedonia has established a reintegration strategy for approximately 40 of its citizens affiliated with the Islamic State. Around 50 individuals have been convicted of terrorism-related crimes. However, challenges persist, including lenient sentencing, limited reintegration outcomes, and weak interinstitutional coordination.

Discussion: While North Macedonia has introduced legal and financial measures to monitor returnees and initiated collaborative reintegration programs, these efforts remain fragmented. Overlapping competences among institutions continue to obstruct efficiency. A proactive, well-coordinated approach is essential for strengthening resilience against extremism.

Keywords: North Macedonia, violent extremism, counter-terrorism, reintegration, Western Balkans

1. Introduction

Since 2012, North Macedonia has faced persistent challenges related to violent extremism and foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs). A total of 143 Macedonian nationals (133 men and 10 women), excluding children, were documented to have travelled or attempted to travel to conflict zones in Syria and Iraq. Of these, 69 individuals have returned, 38 were killed, and four remain in displaced persons camps in northeastern Syria. By the end of 2023, the

country had repatriated 30 nationals. While state authorities currently assess the terrorist threat level as “medium,” influenced by global geopolitical tensions such as the war in Ukraine and recent Middle East conflicts, no new departures have been recorded since 2021. Arguably, this trend of decrease is a result of advanced legislation, enhanced security enforcement, and international cooperation. Nevertheless, despite notable progress, North Macedonia continues to face significant challenges in effectively coordinating and implementing policies on the rehabilitation, resocialization, and reintegration (RRR) of returned foreign terrorist fighters (RFTFs) and their families. This is predominantly due to the fragmentation of competencies among various institutions, limited specialized capacities, and insufficient support mechanisms for individuals at risk of radicalization. The abovementioned issues remain critical weaknesses that threaten long-term human security and social cohesion.

The issue of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) directly intersects with both human security and sustainable development, especially within the framework of the UN 2030 Agenda (A/RES/70/1). Terrorism and violent extremism undermine social stability, community trust, and economic development—conditions essential to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). North Macedonia’s policies related to the FTFs contribute to several SDGs. Namely the undertaken steps related to FTFs and related RRR processes are in line with SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions) since are aimed towards prevention of radicalization and protection of communities; SDG 4 and SDG 8 are addressed by initiatives that supports education and awareness rising, as well as the providing employability of returned FTFs as part of their RRR processes; SDG 10 relates with efforts to tackle the inequality since they prove to be a catalysts for seeding extremist narratives in the society; and SDG 5 by addressing gender-specific vulnerabilities of women and children associated with FTFs. In general, it is accepted that addressing FTFs’ issues requires a holistic approach that should strengthen community resilience, reduce security threats, and promote long-term social inclusion. However, the full success of these efforts depends on certain preconditions, such clear division of the institutional competences and mandates, strengthened operational coordination - at the national and local level, and sustained support for rehabilitation programs not only within prisons, but as well within communities where those convicts return. Therefore, a comprehensive “whole-of-society approach” remains essential to prevent recidivism and future radicalization in society. By assessing current frameworks and identifying critical shortcomings, this research supports policy improvements that will enhance human security, foster sustainable development, and reduce the long-term risks posed by terrorism and violent extremism in North Macedonia.

The objective of this study is to provide an analysis on the existing legal and institutional frameworks, as well as intergovernmental coordination mechanisms, that govern North Macedonia’s efforts to address RFTFs — both imprisoned ones, as well as the ones that have completed their sentences. It is relevant since it addresses the topic that is not much researched in the Macedonian context, but it is crucial in reaching human security. The study assembles the knowledge gained through various research projects and initiatives that assess the national measures of the fight against terrorism. Additionally, it relates these efforts to good governance principles, international human rights standards, and sustainable development priorities. Moreover, it points towards gaps in undertaken measures and applied strategies, and provides actionable recommendations for more effective practice.

2. Literature review

The "Foreign Terrorist Fighters" or "violent extremism and radicalization that lead to terrorism" are concepts that remain challenging to define, due to varying scientific approaches and the political connotations embedded in their origins. The closest that definition can be *"Foreign terrorist fighters are individuals who travel to a State other than their States of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict"* (UNSC Res. 2178/2014). Whereas the *"Violent extremism and radicalization that lead to terrorism is a dynamic process whereby an individual comes to accept terrorist violence as a possible, perhaps even legitimate, course of action. This may eventually, but not necessarily, lead this person to advocate, act in support of, or engage in terrorism"* (OSCE, 2019).

Due to the complexity of the phenomenon of "terrorism", the criminal codes of many countries, as well as the international conventions for the prevention and suppression of terrorism, do not establish a precise definition for the act. However, all actions labelled under the term "terrorism" include an element of violence directed at people and property, but also an intention to endanger life and body and to create a sense of insecurity and fear among citizens. Therefore, the two elements that constitute the legal nature of act of terrorism are formulated objectively –as the commission of a serious act against life or a body, destruction of property, endangerment of the environment or other serious acts of violence or generally dangerous actions; and subjectively - the intention to endanger and create a feeling of insecurity or fear among an unspecified circle of peoples (Kambovski 2015).

2.1. International and regional instruments for FTFs

The gravity of the FTF phenomenon was reaffirmed by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), with adoption of the Resolution 1373 (2001), and Resolutions 2178 (2014) and 2396 (2017). Resolution 1373 was adopted in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks in the United States, introducing legally binding measures that required member states to take comprehensive actions to counter, prevent, and combat terrorism. A key aspect of this resolution was the obligation to criminalize not only terrorist acts themselves but also preparatory activities such as financing, planning, and providing support for terrorism. UNSC Resolution 2178 (2014) mandated that states take action to prevent, disrupt, prosecute, rehabilitate, and reintegrate FTFs. Additionally, it encouraged member states to collaborate with local communities and non-governmental actors in developing strategies to counter violent extremist narratives that may incite acts of terrorism. Resolution 2170 (2014) and Resolution 2178 (2014) were both adopted under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which recognized the movement of FTFs as an international threat to peace and security. The resolutions mandate the development and implementation of administrative measures to prevent and combat the travel of FTFs. These measures include collecting biometric data, conducting data analysis, and sharing travel booking information with relevant state authorities (UNODC 2017). Furthermore, UNSC Resolution 2396 (2017) reinforced the commitments outlined in the 2014 resolutions, urging member states to cooperate and support each other's efforts in addressing FTFs. It also called on all states to establish serious criminal offenses related to the travel, recruitment, and financing of FTFs, as well as to take appropriate measures concerning suspected terrorists and their accompanying family members. These measures include prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration, all in accordance with domestic and international law.

Considering the regional practices, the Council of Europe has established a key legal framework to prevent and counter terrorism. The most significant one is the Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism 196 that entered into force in 2007. Rather than introducing new definitions of terrorism, the Convention builds on existing anti-terrorism conventions by defining additional offenses that could lead to acts of terrorism. These newly defined offenses include “public provocation to commit a terrorist crime,” “recruitment for terrorism,” and “training for terrorism”, as well as related offenses that criminalize complicity in such acts. Additionally, attempts to commit these crimes are also criminalized (Articles 5-9). Notably, the Convention states that an indictment under its provisions does not require the actual commission of a terrorist act. This principle is explicitly stated in the Convention and is based on a similar provision in the International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism, where the location in which offense occurs is not a determining factor in prosecuting any of the crimes outlined in the Convention, The Additional Protocol to the Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism (2015), CETS No. 217 was introduced to address the criminal-legal aspects of the FTF and returnee phenomenon. The Protocol entered into force in 2017 and requires signatory states to criminalize specific acts, including participation in a terrorist organization, terrorist training, traveling abroad for terrorist purposes, and financing or organizing such travel (Articles 2-6).

The Republic of North Macedonia is a signatory and has ratified all of the above-mentioned instruments.

2.2. National legal frame

North Macedonia’s legislative framework is broadly aligned with the *EU acquis* and international counterterrorism instruments (European Commission, 2024). National legal framework for the incrimination of terrorist acts and the activities of FTFs is outlined in the Criminal Code, the Law on Prevention of Money Laundering and Financing of Terrorism, and the Law on Execution of Sanctions.

The Criminal Code (CC) (1996) contains multiple provisions that regulate illegal conduct associated with executing, inciting, assisting, or financing acts of terrorism. Like the other examples, the Macedonian Criminal Code also does not provide a precise definition of terrorism, and only lists criminal acts that are considered terrorism (Article 394-b). Additionally, the Criminal Code criminalizes the “terrorist organization” (Article 394-a), as an act that involves the formation of a group, gang, or other criminal entity for the purpose of committing acts classified as terrorism, i.e. that acts that typically involve violence with an aim of spreading fear, or insecurity among citizens. The Code criminalizes as well the “financing terrorism” (Article 394-c), and provides additional qualifications for the terrorist threats against constitutional order and security (Article 313), as well as the acts that are considered international terrorism (Article 419).

In the attempts to align with international standards and strengthen national security, with the amendments in 2014, the Criminal Code introduced the criminal act of “Participation in Foreign Army, Police, Paramilitary, or Parapolice Formations” (322-a). According to this, any individual who unlawfully organizes, recruits, transports, equips, trains, or otherwise prepares a person or group to participate in such formations outside the territory of North Macedonia is subject to a prison sentence of a minimum of five years. Additionally, Paragraph 2 of this article criminalizes activities that directly or indirectly involve securing, providing, or concealing financial resources, funds, assets, or equipment intended to support such actions, classifying them as ancillary offenses. The participation or training of Macedonian citizens in such formations that are outside the territory of the state is envisaged

as a special form of this crime and is punishable by at least 4 years in prison. However, in the case where Macedonian citizens have the citizenship of the state in whose military and police formations they participate or if they are members of its military, paramilitary, or police forces but under the control of internationally recognized governments and organizations, then there is no illegality. The actions related to the incitement to such actions is sanctioned as well (Article 322-a) with a prison punishment of at least four years. A qualified form of this crime if these activities are committed against a child, for which a prison sentence of at least 5 years is predicted. Additionally, anyone who hides the perpetrator of the crime, or helps prevent the discovery of the crime or the perpetrator by hiding the means with which the crime was committed, the evidence, or in any other way, shall be sanctioned, with a prison sentence of one to five years (Article 322-a, paragraph 6). Within there is also a possibility of effective repentance, and for anyone who contributes in the finding of the perpetrators may be released from punishment.

The Law on Prevention of Money Laundering and Financing Terrorism regulates the measures, actions, and procedures that entitle competent authorities and bodies to undertake them in order to detect and prevent money laundering, terrorist financing, and related criminal offenses. A new Law entered into force in July 2022 and aligned it with the EU Directive 2018/843. Although the Law entered into force, there are related challenges considering the implementation of the legislation and further challenges, such as alignment of the Macedonian legislation with EU Directive 2018/1673 on combating money laundering (European Commission 2024).

The Law on Execution of Sanctions (LES) governs the enforcement of penalties for criminal offenses and misdemeanors, including imprisonment. It establishes fundamental principles for prisoner resocialization and defines the organizational structure of penitentiary and educational correctional institutions within the country. LES is a legal basis for developing strategic documents, bylaws, and other regulations related to the execution of sanctions, particularly those concerning the rehabilitation of inmates. Additionally, this law guarantees convicted individuals the right to participate in resocialization programs, which include work, education, leisure activities, sports, recreation, and medical or psychological treatment (Article 169). Convicted persons, among other rights, have a guaranteed right to education and work. This attention for convicted persons needs to be not only during the execution of the prison sentence, but also after its serving, with providing assistance upon their release from prison. The assistance should provide food and accommodation, advice on choosing a place of residence, harmonizing family relationships, finding employment, completing vocational training, providing financial assistance to cover the most necessary needs, as well as other forms of support.

2.3. RRR of the FTFs within a Good Governance Framework

These RRR programs typically target individuals radicalized to violence, across different stages of disengagement. Such initiatives often combine prison-based interventions with community-level aftercare efforts, following the prison release. The possible programs may provide vocational training, psychological counseling, ideological dialogue, employment support, and other tailored services aimed at preventing relapse into radical networks (OSCE 2018). Within the quality of prison environments is a critical factor since poorly managed facilities can intensify extremist dynamics (Liebling & Hamm 2015). However, prison-based interventions alone are insufficient. Effective reintegration builds on broader, long-term strategies to prevent violent extremism by addressing the structural drivers that enabled radicalization in the first place—such as socioeconomic exclusion, institutional mistrust, and

community stigmatization (Holmer & Shtuni 2017). Therefore, the sustainable rehabilitation outcomes depend on multi-layered support systems that extend beyond criminal justice and prioritize social cohesion, human dignity, and equal opportunity. In parallel, governments must engage a diverse network of organizations capable of contributing specialized expertise to both the planning and implementation of these efforts. This preventive and community-based dimension of counterterrorism should draw upon a wide range of social actors—such as teachers, social workers, and community leaders of various ages and genders—who collaborate closely with traditional security stakeholders, including policymakers, senior government officials, police, and intelligence services (Zeiger 2016). Such cooperation requires a coordinated, multi-sectoral approach in which reintegration is understood as a comprehensive process through which former fighters regain civilian status and secure access to legitimate employment and stable income. At its core, this represents a social and economic transition that contributes to the broader development of the country, and reflects a shared societal responsibility (Gleichmann et al. 2004). In other words, well-designed rehabilitation and reintegration programs for returned foreign fighters are essential not only to prevent future acts of violence but also to curb further radicalization, particularly among younger generations, i.e., to strengthen community resilience against violent extremism (Holmer & Shtuni 2017).

The reintegration and rehabilitation programs for individuals associated with terrorism are necessary for society protection, and to be effective, require tailored intervention strategies that should be founded on the principles of good governance. As highlighted by the Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN 2017), any approach to rehabilitation must be rooted in democratic values that guarantee meaningful participation in social processes, particularly for vulnerable groups such as returned foreign terrorist fighters (RFTFs). Their inclusion in political, public, and community life is fundamental for rebuilding trust and fostering active citizenship. Establishing an environment where civil and political rights—including freedoms of association and expression—are fully protected constitutes the bedrock for successful reintegration (RAN 2017). These processes must be situated within a society that is committed to the rule of law and respects human and minority rights. Equal access to justice, impartial law enforcement, and an independent judiciary contribute to a sense of security and fairness that are essential for transformative social reintegration (Gleichmann et al. 2004). Only when these principles are upheld can it be expected that those individuals will genuinely regain a sense of belonging and social recognition, i.e., they provide opportunities for positive behavioral change. Moreover, programs must demonstrate transparency in their intentions as well as credibility among actors involved, since legitimacy is critical for trust-building and long-term success (Holmer & Shtuni 2017). Equally important is to recognize that there is no universal model that fits all contexts.

Despite less precise legal definitions within a broad national, regional, and international frame, there are perceived security worries related to the FTFs, especially to the returned ones. Those can be addressed only through an appropriate RRR model. Since this topic requires an interdisciplinary approach, much efforts are needed within the national research discourse. To address this gap, it is important not only to understand this complex phenomenon, but as well to provide solutions that can help in institutional efforts to effectively deal with it.

3. Methods

This research employs a qualitative methodology based on the analysis of existing normative frameworks, institutional practices, and secondary data related to individuals convicted of terrorism in North Macedonia and its RRR efforts involving government agencies, prisons, local authorities but as well as the community. The study includes a detailed legal and policy review of national strategies, laws, and operational procedures relevant to the management, rehabilitation, and reintegration of returned foreign terrorist fighters (RFTFs), both currently serving prison sentences and those released into the community. Data were drawn from national and international reports—including annual publications of the Directorate for Execution of Sanctions, findings of the Ombudsman, assessments by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT), and other independent monitoring bodies—to provide a comprehensive understanding of the functioning of the penitentiary system and identify systemic gaps. Additionally, the research incorporates insights from prior academic studies and evaluations to assess the implementation of RRR measures. Gender considerations, community impact, institutional roles, staff capacities, and operational conditions were also examined to ensure a rounded understanding of counterterrorism efforts. The methodological approach thus integrates legal, institutional, and operational dimensions to produce evidence-based findings and actionable recommendations for strengthening the Macedonian counterterrorism framework.

4. Institutional efforts towards RRR of RFTFs

4.1. Peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16)

The current security challenges, within the broader geopolitical context of ongoing conflicts in Ukraine, the Middle East, and regional tensions in Kosovo, are significantly impacting North Macedonia as a multicultural and multiethnic society, with potential spillover effects from global conflicts. The presence of ISIS-affiliated individuals and sympathizers further heightens security risks. Authorities acknowledge the risk of citizens being recruited into foreign wars (which is punishable under domestic law), and these concerns extend across the Western Balkans, particularly given the role of technology and social media in spreading extremist ideologies (Nexus 2022; Nexus 2023). To address these issues, and despite being one of the smallest members of the Global Anti-Terrorist Coalition, North Macedonia has developed a comprehensive reintegration strategy for RFTFs, aiming to integrate them into society and prevent further radicalization. At the policy level, the National Counterterrorism Strategy (2023–2027) and the National Strategy for Combating Violent Extremism (2023–2027) are in place. Those two strategic documents have been coordinated by the National Committee, which is a governmental body supported by the Inter-Ministerial Working Group. The system is comprehensive but in the same time a complex one, which makes it difficult to navigate. For instance, RFTFs serve their sentences in penal institutions, which are part of the national prison system, organized through a network of Penal and Correctional-Educational Institutions, supervised by the Directorate for Execution of Sanctions. For the success of this legal entity within the Ministry of Justice, it needs to collaborate closely with the National Coordinator, particularly through officials involved in the Inter-Ministerial Working Group for RRR. However, this collaboration also extends to other committee members, depending on the nature of the tasks and the involvement of specific institutions required to achieve strategic objectives (Nexus 2023).

4.2. Initiatives supporting education and employment for returnees (SDG4 & SDG8)

Reintegration measures are connected with successfully overcoming the challenges and realization of the programs (such as adequate planning and ensuring sufficient financing), and more structured social activities, raise the general awareness and increase the community responsibility and ability for acceptance. 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 prevention, intervention, disengagement, and rehabilitation programs. Considering the Macedonian context, notable on a general level, the community accepts FTF returners without big problems or prejudice, and in essence they are not seen as a great security threat (Nexus 2022).

The central government cooperates with the local self-government units, and this cooperation has been institutionalized with agreements signed between the National Committee and the municipalities, as well as with the Association of the local self-government units (ZELS). The main idea behind it is to strengthen the local communities' resilience so they can actively take part in RRR processes (Nexus 2022). Within this frame some activities have been taken towards raising awareness among the citizens, such as trainings for local youth councils or workshops for local multidisciplinary teams. However, the targeted measures are lacking. The assistance programs, such as active employment measures, skills acquisition, and assistance in establishing cooperation with the business sector, are general and apply to all categories of individuals who are at social risk. Despite not being seen as a threat, this vulnerable category of individuals who have served a prison sentence for terrorism face difficulties in finding employment within companies. The greatest obstacles are fear, discrimination, public condemnation, but as well as the lack of appropriate work skills (Vanchovski, Shikova, Musliu 2020).

The RRR of convicts is a main priority of the probation service. That is organized in cooperation with several institutions such as the Centre for Social Work, National Agency for the Employment, Public Health Institutions, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Public enterprises formed by the municipalities, non-governmental sector, etc. It is done in accordance with the goals set in the individual program of the former convict and aims to achieve the main priorities under supervision of probation service (Nexus 2022). This process means adapting a former prisoner to a new situation, but in fact applies to all former convicts, and it is not customized for RFTFs. Additionally, as a part of this multisectoral approach, the financial assistance is provided to these socially disadvantaged persons; nevertheless, the Law on Social Protection does not legally categorize the RFTFs as a vulnerable group of citizens, meaning after a life in prison, they are left without any financial support. That can be problematic considering that often the financial motive is a predominant factor in caring the decision to join foreign armies at the first place (Vanchovski, Shikova, Musliu 2020).

4.3. Gender Dimensions (SDG5)

Gender plays a critical role in understanding the dynamics of FTFs and the strategies required for effective reintegration. EUROPOL estimates that approximately 11% of European FTF returnees are women (Europol 2020), and global assessments numbered the female population between 13–20% of all FTFs (International Centre for the Study of Radicalization 2018). Although media narratives often stereotype female recruits as “jihadi brides,” research demonstrates significant diversity in their backgrounds, motivations, and roles (Shapiro & Maras 2018). The general practice points out that while many women have been associated with non-combat functions, the ideological embrace of violence and the

possibility of active militant engagement must not be overlooked. However, North Macedonia has adopted a human-security-based approach, and by 2023, 15 women and 28 children, citizens associated with ISIS, were the state successfully repatriated. Unlike the international trends, in the Macedonian context, women are largely treated as persons at risk rather than criminals, as authorities consider them to have travelled primarily to accompany husbands. Consequently, unlike male returnees, no women have been prosecuted under foreign fighting legislation. As for the others, the reintegration efforts are guided by a National Plan and standard operating procedures emphasizing education access, psychosocial support, and work within communities through multidisciplinary teams. However, significant gaps persist, including a lack of gender-responsive indicators, uneven local institutional capacity, limited financial assistance, and legal challenges related to civil documentation for children born in conflict zones.

4.4. Community integration (SDG10)

In the global effort to prevent violent extremism and counter international terrorism, counterterrorism measures have become central to security discourse over the past two decades. Governments increasingly acknowledge the importance of addressing the underlying “root causes” or drivers of radicalization to develop effective policies and programs that can mitigate or eliminate these initial triggers. Such drivers vary widely, ranging from ideological motivations and personal or family influences to charismatic leadership, socioeconomic marginalization, political grievances, material incentives, and desires for retribution—each contributing to an individual’s path toward radicalization in different ways (Zeiger 2016). Effective prevention of radicalization depends strongly on localized, community-driven initiatives, particularly within schools and municipal-level structures. Strengthening the capacities of local prevention/countering violent extremism actors and raising public awareness support social resilience and reduce stigmatization toward returnees. Civil society organizations play a crucial role by offering psychosocial support, trauma-informed services, vocational training, and pathways to employment—critical factors in preventing frustration and renewed distrust toward state institutions. Training programs for social workers, psychologists, teachers, and frontline practitioners contribute to reducing stigma and facilitating smoother reintegration for returnees and their families. On the other hand, in North Macedonia, the religious communities remain underutilized despite their influence within local contexts. While strategic national frameworks emphasize broad social engagement—including religious leaders—faith-based actors are only informally involved (Horizon Civitas 2024).

5. Discussion: Main challenges and some positive steps

Recently, the EU raised concerns that the country is only moderately prepared to combat terrorism, reintegrate FTFs and address radicalization in prisons. The EU is critical towards the absence of an adequate program for reintegrating FTFs into their communities, but as well points out that there are still staff shortages, underfunding, and overlapping institutional responsibilities. Within these remarks, it is pointed out that the cooperation between central and local institutions needs to be strengthened, as well as information sharing in the municipalities where returnees settle after serving their sentences. Additionally, the steps need to be taken within prison institutions aimed at preventing radicalization, since as they are set, they may facilitate it (European Commission 2024) (n.b. the FTFs are not separated from other prisoners).

As the other faced challenges, it may be listed as the need for more comprehensive implementation of the set strategies. While Government has introduced legal and financial measures to monitor returnees and launched collaborative reintegration programs involving state institutions, NGOs, and international organizations, significant obstacles remain, among them overlapping responsibilities between governmental institutions, local authorities, and penitentiaries (Nexus 2022). Alongside, it is important to note that institutions in North Macedonia operate with discretionary powers embedded in numerous laws. These powers are often granted through vague and poorly defined provisions, which allow institutions excessive flexibility in decision-making. While such flexibility is intended to enhance efficiency, it frequently results in abuse of power, undermining the public good and exceeding legal and ethical boundaries (Gjorgjievski & Vrglevski 2023). Considering the inmates convicted of terrorism-related offences, the broader institutional culture has additional challenges, including corruption and mistreatment by prison staff. However, these problems are symptomatic of the general conditions and daily experiences faced by all prisoners, not just those convicted of terrorism-related crimes (Dimoski 2024).

Additionally, a stronger gender-sensitive framework is necessary to ensure that returnee women and children do not remain marginalized, which could increase vulnerability to radicalization (Brown & Mohammed 2021). Integrating gender dynamics more fully into prevention, rehabilitation, and reintegration policies remains essential for shaping resilient communities and advancing broader sustainable security goals in North Macedonia. Within this frame, establishing of structured, multi-agency approach to community reintegration remains essential. This includes expanding cooperation between local authorities, CSOs, and religious bodies. Developing a clear policy roadmap for faith-based engagement—especially with individuals convicted of extremist offences—would strengthen North Macedonia’s comprehensive response and contribute directly to community safety, inclusion, and long-term prevention of radicalization.

For EU and international counterparts, the prison radicalization is arguably the most concerning aspect. The issues are raised on the staff shortages in prison police, but also in the lack of specialized training to address such threats (Vanchoski, Shikova, and Musliu 2020; RAN 2017). The shortage is not only in qualified resocialization experts, as well as post-release care practitioners (Nexus 2022; Council of Europe 2023). Additionally, considering the terrorism issues, not only weak reintegration efforts for returnees—especially the lack of effective intergovernmental coordination (both horizontal and vertical) is one of the major challenges, but also the lenient sentencing for terrorism related offences in comparison with EU and international practices standards, and this remains to be further addressed.

Despite these inconsistencies, there are also some positive developments. For example, more recently, all case files, release assessments, psychological evaluations, and individual RRR plans have been integrated into a specially created database managed by the Ministry of Social Policy, which has taken over coordination in this area. All institutions (including prisons, probation services, etc.) that possess documents related to RFTFs are required to submit them to the Ministry so they can be included in the database. When necessary, these institutions can access the information in an integrated manner. A significant portion of these documents is also submitted to the courts for various legal purposes. Access to the database is fully available to the National Security Agency, multidisciplinary teams, and all relevant organizations and institutions through formal requests for information, as provided by law. However, access is strictly regulated, and the Ministry makes the final decision based on whether the requesting party has a legitimate interest. In addition to institutional files, the database also includes informal sources such as NGO evaluations, donor reports, and similar documents intended to support a more comprehensive approach to

the issue. Nonetheless, a significant barrier remains: a lack of trust between institutions and civil society organizations, as well as ongoing deficiencies in communication and coordination.

This research has some limitations, and they need to be taken into account. The study mainly relies on secondary sources, official reports, and existing literature, whereas the interviews, fieldwork, or direct engagement with returnees, prison staff, or policymakers were part of the previous undertaken research that relied primarily on empirical data. This research is based on an institutional practice that sometimes depends on publicly available documents, although some information is gained through direct contact with the relevant stakeholders. As a result, this study partially reveals informal and non-documented coordination problems within institutions. Therefore, the potential bias in available sources needs to be taken into account. Additionally, while gender is discussed within this study, the empirical data on women and children returnees in North Macedonia remain scarce, constraining deeper gender-responsive analysis. Nevertheless, this study (same as the previously undertaken) has a restricted scope of evaluation since there was a possibility to assess legal frameworks and policy implementation, but not to measure the actual effectiveness of reintegration outcomes or long-term recidivism. That should be part of other, much more structured evaluation efforts, and it is a possible topic for future research.

6. Conclusion

Human Security and Sustainable Development are deeply interconnected approaches that place people's well-being at the center of global governance. Human Security is a condition for development since conflict, violence, and insecurity undermine development efforts. North Macedonia continues to demonstrate a strong commitment to counterterrorism engagements, particularly in fulfilling the objectives established in the Joint Action Plan on Counterterrorism for the Western Balkans. The country maintains cooperation with EU partners, while national legislation is broadly aligned with EU and international counterterrorism standards (European Commission 2024). However, further alignment is necessary. Although the terrorism-related challenges are something new that faces North Macedonia, there is a solid legal foundation to address such issues. However, ongoing efforts are required to refine sentencing practice, implement effective post-release monitoring, and ensure close coordination among stakeholders. The country remains committed to international collaboration and adherence to human rights principles, and it is an active participant in the global fight against violent extremism and terrorism—dedicated to ensuring the security and stability of the region. Nevertheless, the evolving geopolitical context and emerging security threats necessitate continuous vigilance and adaptability in national strategies. While the existing strategies and initiatives appear wide-ranging, their success depends on sustained coordination, monitoring, evaluation, and adaptation to new challenges. Additionally, for the success of these efforts and for overcoming the current challenges, it is essential to clarify the roles and responsibilities of local and central institutions involved in counterterrorism and the prevention of violent extremism. To support early detection and effective intervention, coordination between national and local teams must be strengthened; institutional capacity should be enhanced; mandates and available resources clearly defined; and information sharing improved. That is necessary since human security, as a part of sustainable development, enhances people's lives, dignity, and opportunities. Only with joint efforts and with a comprehensive agenda, these outcomes can be inclusive and lasting, making the society resilient and capable to address current and future challenges that faces.

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