

# Kosovo citizens perceptions of violent extremism and reintegration and rehabilitation of the returnees





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The data presented in the report derive from the Western Balkans Security Barometer (WBSB) survey. WBSB is a new regional initiative launched by KCSS in 2020, implemented in cooperation with the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP) in Serbia and Center for the Study of Democracy and Governance (CSDG) in Albania, supported by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). WBSB serves as an instrument to measure public perceptions in Albania, Kosovo and Serbia on different security-related issues. The findings demonstrate how citizens percept or are informed about the issues presented in this report. As such, the views presented in this report do not necessarily represent the views of the KCSS, BCSP, CSDG or NED.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Kosovo citizens continue to perceive violent extremism as a threat for the national security of Kosovo. Majority (76%) of the WBSB respondents believe that violent extremism presents a high threat or a threat for Kosovo. As per the forms of violent extremism, Kosovo citizens see the ethno/national based violence as the most threatening, with 42 percent of respondents sharing the opinion that it presents a high threat for the security of Kosovo. Political based violence is perceived as a high threat for the security of Kosovo by 38 percent of the WBSB respondents, while religious based violence is perceived as threatening by 34 percent of the respondents. Kosovo, as other European countries, have faced challenges with respect to participation of citizens in foreign conflicts. The WBSB data shows that 37 percent of the respondents see citizens that participated in the war zones in Syria and Iraq and returned to Kosovo, as a high threat potential for the country.

Despite the challenges, it is important to note that the WBSB data shows that Kosovars support the work of the government of Kosovo to repatriate citizens from Syria. Accordingly, 65 percent of the respondents support the repatriation of all citizens that still remain in Syria, while 15 percent hold the opinion that only the remaining women and children should be repatriated. Positive attitudes are noted in citizens' perceptions of what approach should be applied to those returning from conflict zones in Syria. 75 percent of the respondents believe that the approach/measures undertaken by Kosovo institutions should be focused on reintegration, as opposed to 11 percent that believe the returnees should be subject of punitive measures and seven percent of the respondents that believe that there is no need for any specific measure. A rather disturbing development is noted with respect to citizen readiness to accept and welcome back to the community the children that have been returned from Syria and Iraq. For instance, the majority of the respondents (57%) would not allow their children to be socialized with the repatriated children as they believe that they may have an adverse effect on other children. On the other hand, 35 percent of the respondents would have no problem in allowing their children to be associated with the returnee children.



# INTRODUCTION

Since 2011-2012 when over 400 citizens of Kosovo joined terrorist groups in the Syrian conflict, over 250 of them have been repatriated to Kosovo. Upon their repatriation, they went through a rehabilitation and reintegration (R&R) process, through programs established by Kosovo institutions which were oriented towards two general approaches: punitive-restorative measures and societal reintegration support.<sup>1</sup> Several research reports show that in addition to the effectiveness of security institutions, successes in rehabilitation and reintegration in Kosovo also come as a result of strong social cohesion stemming from, among other things, strong community ties. Having this in mind, the opinion of Kosovo citizens on various issues related to violent extremism and the R&R of those affected by this phenomenon is very important in shaping their engagement in such areas. This report consists of two sections. The first section provides an overview of the results of the public perceptions in Kosovo regarding the threats deriving from different form of violent extremism. On the other hand, the second section focuses on citizens perceptions in respect to the R&R of Kosovo citizens repatriated from Syria and their readiness to accept them into their respective communities.

With respect to methodology, the data for this report were collected within the framework of Western Balkans Security Barometer (WBSB) survey, through face-to-face interviews with randomly selected respondents throughout Kosovo. The field research was conducted from September 17 until September 25, 2021. The questionnaire for the survey primarily consisted of closed-ended questions in the form of five-point Likert Scale, followed by several open-ended questions without predefined options. The national sample for the survey featured 1,197 households. The first stage of drawing the sample was based in the administrative divisions of the regional directorates of the Kosovo Police, including the eight districts: Ferizaj, Gjakova, Gjilan, Mitrovica South, Mitrovica North, Peja, Prishtina and Prizren. The number of surveys conducted in each district was drawn in proportion to the number of populations for each municipality within the respective districts based on Kosovo's 2011 population census. Within the municipalities, the sample was stratified into urban/rural sample based on the number of households in each area. Random patterns were used to select the households within the sampled locations, while the randomization within the households was based on the next adult birthday method. The data were verified in real time through field coordinators that visited a predefined sample of households after the completion of the survey in the respective households, through telephone contact with all respondents to confirm the adherence to the methodology and some of the key answers and by analyzing the logical consistency of the answers when processing and analyzing the data. The margin of error is 3 percent with a confidence interval of 95 percent.

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1. Ilazi, R. and Perteshi, S., 2020. *Unpacking Kosovo's response to returnees from the war zones in Syria and Iraq*. 01/2020. Prishtina: Kosovar Centre for Security Studies. Available at: [https://qkss.org/images/uploads/files/violent-extremism-eng\\_978757.pdf](https://qkss.org/images/uploads/files/violent-extremism-eng_978757.pdf).



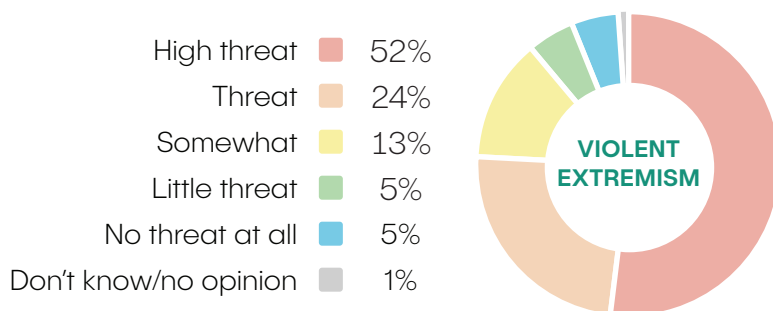


# THE THREATS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM FROM THE CITIZENS' VIEWPOINT

In recent years, the countries of the Western Balkans faced different challenges to their security and stability from various forms of extremism and radicalization. While in the last five years religious based extremism has been seen as major concern in the region due to the participation of individuals from the region to foreign conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Ukraine, other forms of extremism such as ethnic and political based extremism, are becoming a concern. Moreover, considering that Russia is seen as a malign foreign actor in the Western Balkans, the activity of mercenary groups from the region and their participation in the conflict zones in Ukraine in support of Russian policy, exacerbate security concerns and amplify fear of an enabling environment for greater Russian influence in the region.<sup>2</sup>

Although Kosovo institutions have taken concrete steps in preventing and countering violent extremism, and reintegrating and rehabilitating those affected by this phenomenon, the community in Kosovo continues to see the potential risk of various types of extremism. When WBSB respondents were asked to assess how much of a threat does violent extremism present to the national security of Kosovo, 76 percent declared that this phenomenon poses a high threat or a threat.

## CITIZENS' PERCEPTION OF THE LEVEL OF THREAT POSED TO THE NATIONAL SECURITY OF KOSOVO BY VIOLENT EXTREMISM



Furthermore, the discussions facilitated by KCSS with different communities in Kosovo highlight the fact that the citizens see a connection between different forms of extremism and recognize the effect of several internal and external factors in fuelling radicalization and extremism.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the results of the 2020 WBSB survey also highlight the awareness of Kosovo citizens regarding the threats from different forms of violent extremism. In 2020, 38 percent of WBSB respondents in Kosovo perceived politically motivated violence as a high threat. Similarly, 22 percent have seen the ethnic/national violence as a high threat, followed by 17 percent who considered religiously based violence to be a high threat to Kosovo's security.

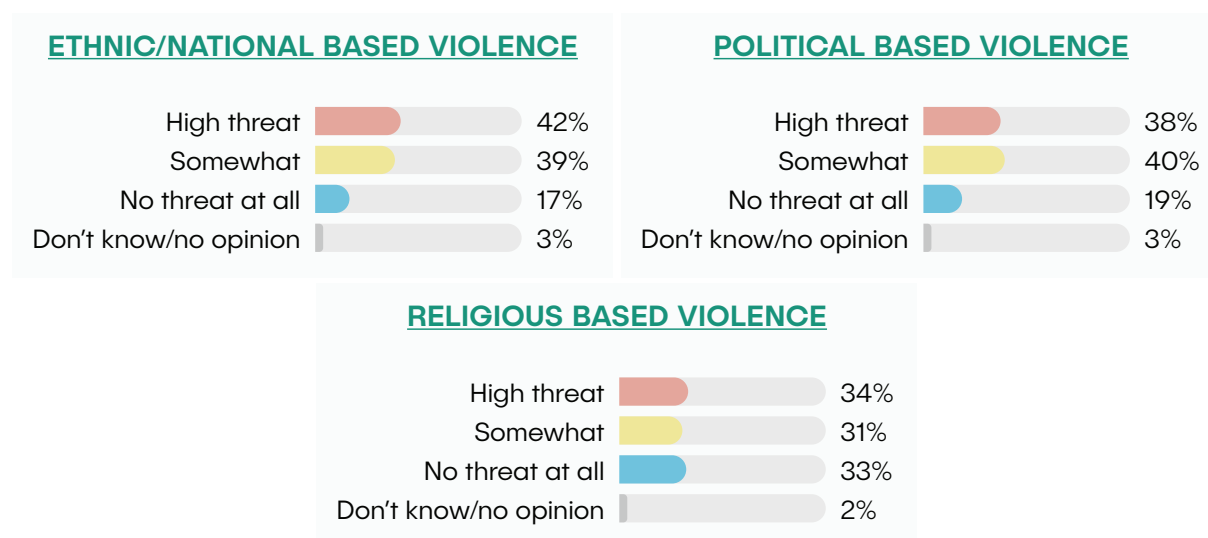
In this year's WBSB survey, there is a noticeable increase in citizens' perceptions of the

2. Velebit, V., 2017. Serb fighters in Ukraine continue to worry the West. *European Western Balkans*, Available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/12/29/serb-fighters-ukraine-continue-worry-west/>

3. For example, please see: <https://www.pave-project.eu/news/kcss-holds-stakeholders-committee-meeting-in-kosovo/>; <https://www.pave-project.eu/news/focus-group-in-north-mitrovica>

dangers posed to the country by ethno-political radicalization and far-right extremism. While in 2020 the politically motivated violence was perceived as the form of extremism with the highest potential to endanger Kosovo's security, the respondents of WBSB 2021 survey see the ethno-political extremism as more threatening to the national security. 42 percent of the respondents hold the opinion that the national/ethnic driven violence is a high threat for Kosovo. Similarly, from the viewpoint of 38 percent of the respondents, political violence – defined as violence among political actors and their staunch supporters and a byproduct of the heightened political tensions and polarization – remains to be a high threat to Kosovo's security. On the other hand, while religious-based violence continues to be the form of extremism that WBSB respondents rank as the least threatening, the percentage of those who perceive it as a high threat has doubled from the previous year. Respectively, 34 percent of the respondents consider religious-based violence as a high threat, while 33 percent believe that Kosovo is not threatened at all from this form of extremism.

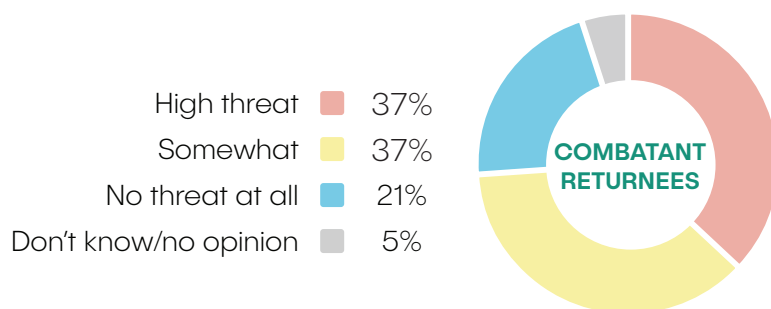
**TABLE 2 CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE LEVEL OF THREAT POSED TO THE NATIONAL SECURITY OF KOSOVO BY VARIOUS FORMS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM**



In addition to measuring citizens' perceptions of the threats posed by various forms of extremism, through the WBSB survey we have also analyzed whether the respondents see Kosovo citizens who participated in the conflict of Syria as combatants (hereinafter: combatant returnees) and have since been repatriated in Kosovo, as a threat to their communities. Therefore, we have integrated the questions for the combatant returnees in the context of security to analyze whether the attitudes related to security can present an obstacle to the readiness of citizens to accept them in the respective communities, hence present difficulties in their R&R. In this respect, 37 percent of the respondents perceive the combatant returnees as a threat to the national security of Kosovo; 37 percent believe that they present a threat to some extent, while 21 percent hold the opinion that they do not present a threat at all.



**TABLE 3** CITIZENS' PERCEPTION OF THE LEVEL OF THREAT POSED TO NATIONAL SECURITY OF KOSOVO, BY KOSOVO CITIZENS WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE CONFLICT OF SYRIA AS COMBATANTS AND HAVE SINCE BEEN REPATRIATED IN KOSOVO



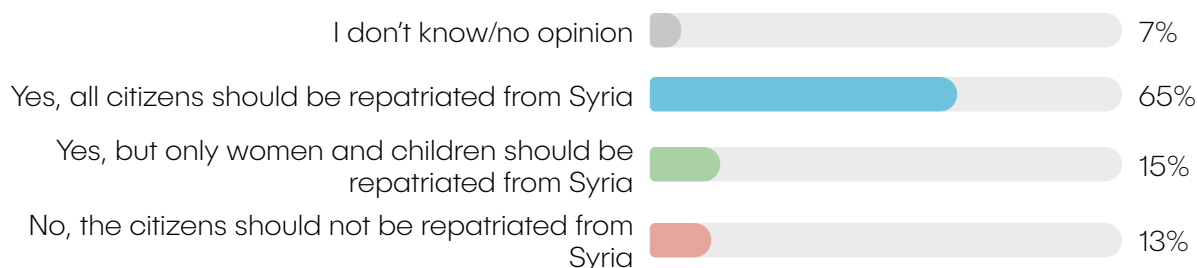
# ACCEPTANCE OR EXCLUSION? REINTEGRATION AND REHABILITATION OF THE RETURNEES AS SEEN BY THE CITIZENS'



Upon the repatriation of Kosovo citizens from the conflict zone in Syria, Kosovo institutions and civil society organizations have established and implemented various activities and programs to ensure the rehabilitation and reintegration of the returnees. KCSS previous researches have highlighted that the strong social cohesion built as a result of strong family and community ties has made the community of Kosovo more resilient against any form of extremism and at the same time have played important role in the R&R of the returnees.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, by highlighting the citizens perceptions on different issues related to the returnees we aim to analyze whether the perceptions of the wider community towards the returnees may affect such social cohesion.

Taking into account that a number of Kosovo citizens still remain in the Syrian territory, the WBSB respondents were asked to give their opinion whether Kosovo institutions should work in their repatriation. The majority of the respondents (65 percent) hold the opinion that all citizens should be repatriated from Syria. On the other hand, 15 percent of the respondents believe that Kosovo institutions should repatriate only women and children, considering them as non-combatants, while 13 percent share the opinion that Kosovo institutions should not repatriate those that remain in the territory of Syria.

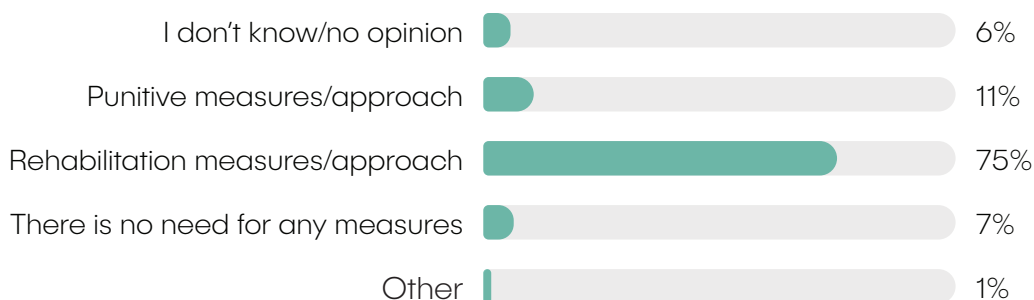
**TABLE 4 DO YOU BELIEVE THAT KOSOVO INSTITUTIONS SHOULD REPATRIATE THE CITIZENS OF KOSOVO THAT ARE STILL WITHIN THE TERRITORY OF SYRIA?**



The results of the previous WBSB survey (2020) have highlighted the lack of information of citizens about the R&R activities and programs targeting the returnees. Last year, 75 percent of respondents stated that they do not have any information regarding such activities and programs. Considering the lack of information about these programs, in 2021 we analyzed whether the citizens believe that such programs should exist. When WBSB respondents were asked what approach is more appropriate for the treatment of the non-combatant returnees, three-quarters of them (75%) declared that the rehabilitation approach is more suitable, as opposed to 11 percent that believe that a punitive approach should be applied towards the returnees. Seven percent of the respondents believe that the returnees should not be subject of any measure.

4. Ilazi, R. and Perteshi, S., 2020. *Unpacking Kosovo's response to returnees from the war zones in Syria and Iraq*. 01/2020. Prishtina: Kosovar Centre for Security Studies. Available at: [https://qkss.org/images/uploads/files/violent-extremism-eng\\_978757.pdf](https://qkss.org/images/uploads/files/violent-extremism-eng_978757.pdf).

**TABLE 5 WHAT APPROACH / MEASURE DO YOU THINK IS MOST APPROPRIATE FOR THE TREATMENT OF NON-COMBATANT RETURNEES?**



Among the citizens repatriated from Syria, there is a considerable number of children who have returned with at least one parent, orphan or more rarely with both parents. Similarly with all the returnees, upon their return, the process of their R&R immediately began with a particular focus in their integration in the regular education system of Kosovo. However, although there has been significant progress in their integration in general and their integration into the education system in particular, KCSS findings from research and observations in our activities with the children returnees, show that these children are prone to stigma as they share a sense of isolation from the wider community. Furthermore, the WBSB results both in 2020 and 2021 show the lack of readiness of the community to accept the children returnees, given that a large proportion of the respondents do not feel safe to allow their children to socialize with the returnee children. In 2020, 55 percent of the respondents declared that they would not allow their children to be socialized with children repatriated from conflict areas, while 32 percent of them have no problem with this. In 2021, we see a similar attitude among the citizens; 57 percent of respondents hold the opinion that they would not allow their children to be socialized with repatriated children, while 35 percent expressed willingness to allow them. The reasons behind these attitudes are mainly related to the fear of the community that repatriated children are potentially more prone to radicalism and as such may adversely affect other children.

**TABLE 6 CITIZENS' WILLINGNESS TO ALLOW THEIR CHILDREN SOCIALIZE WITH THE CHILDREN RETURNEES**





## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Kosovar citizens are still concerned about violent extremism, and see ethno-political radicalization as a major concern. Such a perception is most likely affected by growing far-right movements in the EU as well as in the region (e.g., Dveri and Leviathan in Serbia). Furthermore, continued isolation of Kosovars by the EU, as a result of delays of a positive decision on visa liberalization, amplifies citizen perceptions of being victims of far-right narratives against Kosovo. On the other hand, as argued earlier in this report, research shows that the best results in this area also come due to the engagement of community as primary actors in the efforts of institutions to prevent and counter extremism. Therefore, these results should be seen as an opportunity for designing the community engagement to further build community resilience against all forms of violent extremism. In this regard, the new strategy against violent extremism should be tailored with the role of the community and local actors in Kosovo in mind, and as such be comprehensive. This should be seen as one of the reasons why the integration of the counter-terrorism strategy into the strategy against violent extremism should be avoided, or foresee separate action plans for counter-terrorism, prevention of violent extremism and R&R. The over-securitization of such strategy prevents the involvement of actors without a security background in the activities of the said strategy and potentially isolates the initiatives to prevent and counter violent extremism only within the security spectrum. Moreover, these results can also be seen as a call for decentralization of work with returnees from Syria. In this respect, it is of utmost importance to provide the necessary knowledge and tools to the local level, whose work brings them closer to the communities, consequently have a direct impact on informing the communities and shaping their opinions on various issues including violent extremism, returnees, etc.

Furthermore, the results of the WBSB show that in addition to the effective work of institutions in preventing and combating violent extremism, and in the R&R of those affected by this phenomenon, institutions need to do more effective work in raising citizens' awareness on issues that relate to these topics. In this respect, Kosovo institutions need to design and implement a communication strategy that targets local communities in order to inform them and proactively involve them in the R&R process, consequently work on increasing the community's readiness to accept the returnees, especially children. Moreover, during KCSS activities with children returnees, we have noticed that within their schools and communities they socialize mainly with each other and are more distanced from other children. Therefore, the Ministry of Education in cooperation with local institutions should apply a more proactive approach in their efforts in reintegration by drafting a comprehensive plan for the full integration of repatriated children in public schools and their re-socialization within the education system. Building specific approaches to different elements of R&R is extremely important to ensure that activities in this area do not remain ad-hoc but are rather part of a larger picture, inclusive and consistent.

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