



COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONSON VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND REPATRIATION OF KOSOVO CITIZENS FROM ISIS BATTLEFIELDS



Author: Skender Perteshi & Shpat Balaj

External Review: Garentina Kraja

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The insights presented in this report are a summary of information gathered from field activities of KCSS and “Kosovo Security Barometer”¹ survey respondents. 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 Kosovar Centre for Security Studies or the Embassy of the Kingdom of Netherlands in Kosovo.

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Kingdom of the Netherlands

¹ Kosovo Security Barometer is a program within KCSS that measures citizens’ opinion on different security-related issues. The program is supported by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). The results deriving from the program, presented on this report, are merely interpretations of the results of public opinion and in no way represent the views of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides an overview of Kosovo citizens' perceptions on violent extremism. The report specifically focuses on their views on the repatriation of Kosovo citizens from the battlegrounds of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, as well as the citizens' perception on the efforts of institutions and CSOs in regard to the reintegration and rehabilitation of the returnees and their families. The report, presenting both qualitative and quantitative analyses, provides first-hand insights gathered on the ground through extensive research of KCSS. The key data that shape the qualitative aspect of the report derive from the discussions with local communities in eight municipalities of Kosovo, organized by KCSS within the project Building Resilience: Communities against Violent Extremism. On the other hand, the quantitative results derive from the Kosovo Security Barometer (KSB), a KCSS program that measures public opinion on various security issues.

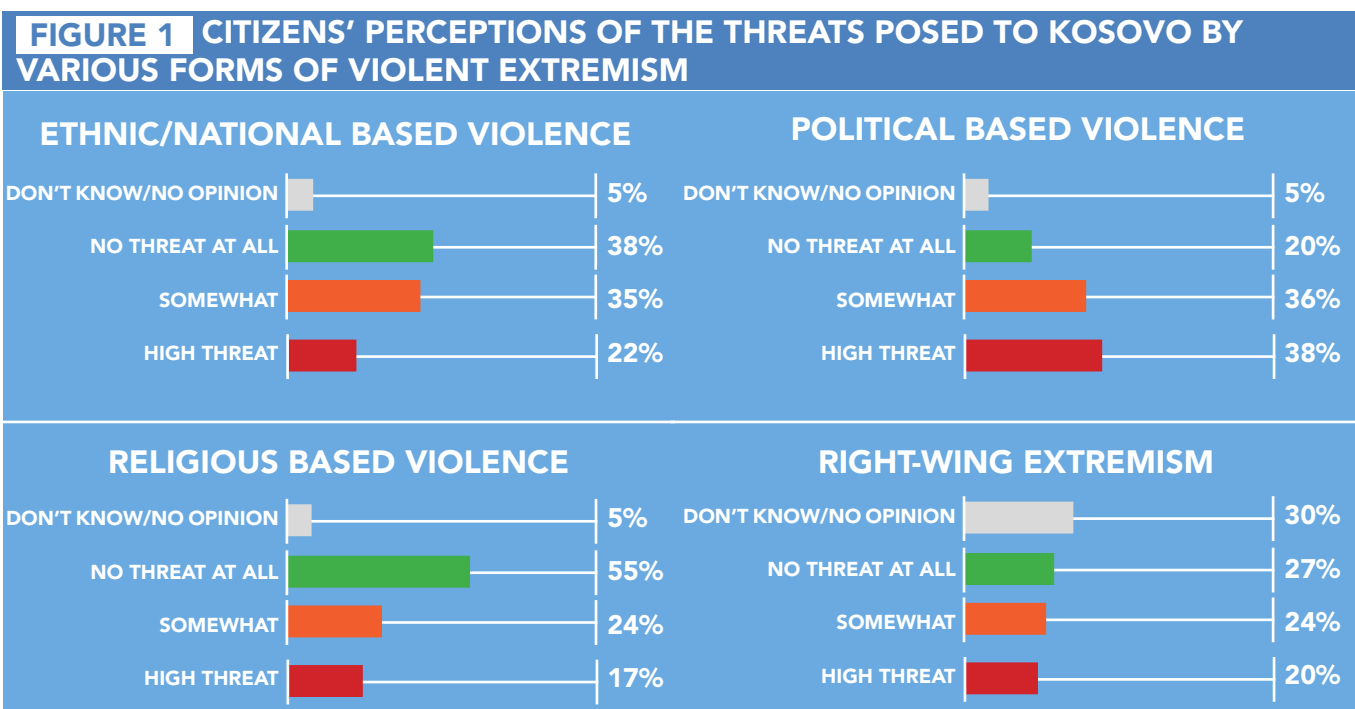
Some 403 Kosovo citizens have joined the Islamic State and other terrorist organizations allegedly to establish the "Islamic Caliphate" in Syria and Iraq. Since 2012, some 250 are returned or repatriated from conflict zones and are currently undergoing rehabilitation and resocialization programs, implemented by Kosovo institutions and local civil society organizations. This brief report was inspired by the recent scholarly research and policies into the reintegration and rehabilitation of foreign fighters and their family members associated with the Islamic State and similar terrorist organizations, which argues that families of the returnees and community in general are essential in the successful rehabilitation of returnees from conflict zones.¹ KCSS set to test this hypothesis by seeking to understand the community's response to foreign fighters and their families who spent several years in IS-controlled areas or prison camps among IS recruits and their supporters. Our data gathered across Kosovo, both in affected and unaffected areas show that the public is reluctant and resistant to the return of the former terrorist fighters (FFs) in its midst, but they are significantly more open to receiving repatriated women and children back into their respective communities. Despite the establishment of rehabilitation and reintegration programs in Kosovo, Kosovo citizens remain skeptical about the country's capacity to carry out such programs successfully, potentially undermining any institutional efforts aimed at addressing this vulnerability. As this brief demonstrates, Kosovo's public remains largely uninformed and insecure about the ongoing efforts to address violent extremism and its consequences in Kosovo. Further, the brief's initial glaring finding is that transparency and communication about reintegration programs remains crucial should an attitudinal change in the society at large be required. On a general note, this report shows that Kosovo citizens remain alert and perceive different types of violent extremism as a continuous threat to country's national security.

¹ Security Council, UN. (2020). Repatriating Detained Foreign Fighters, Their Families Key to Combating Threat Posed by Islamic State, Counter-Terrorism Officials Warn Security Council. Available at: <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14282.doc.htm>

CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS OF VIOLENT EXTREMIST THREATS TO KOSOVO

The security of the Western Balkans is challenged by different forms of extremism. Fueled by the malign influence of non-democratic powers and enabled by local political parties, politicians and different religious and political entities, several forms of extremism have emerged in the region. In recent years, the region has become a hotbed of ethnic, religious and political extremism, which have exploited, enforced and magnified existing cleavages, further dividing a region already torn by the wars of the 1990s. In addition, the region's right-wing extremism and ethno-religious nationalism, primarily found among Serbian radical groups with ties to the war criminals of the 1990s wars, has begun to take shape and serve as an inspiration to conspiracy-prone anti-immigrant extremist movements globally such as a case of terrorist attack in at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. ² By implementing and participating in activities and discussion in local level and measuring public opinion through KSB survey, KCSS sought to gauge whether Kosovo citizens' perceive these forms of extremism as a threat to national security.

Kosovo respondents appeared mostly concerned over various manifestation of political violence. According to 38 percent of the respondents across Kosovo political violence – defined as violence among political actors and their staunch supporters and a byproduct of the heightened political tensions and polarization - remains the country's biggest security threat, followed by ethnically driven extremism. Twenty percent of the respondents ranked right wing extremism as the third threat. The growing concern over right-wing extremism – which is not yet pronounced in Kosovo - could be a reflection of the significant rise of this form of extremism in Europe and in the neighboring countries in recent years. However, 30 percent of the respondents have no opinion regarding threats emerging from right-wing extremism, indicating that a large portion of the public have no knowledge of this form of extremism. The religious-inspired violence is perceived as less threatening, with 55 percent of respondents stating that this type of extremism is not a threat to national security, while the rest split in perceiving it as a high threat or somewhat of a threat.



² BBC (2019). Christchurch shootings: 49 dead in New Zealand mosque attacks. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-47578798>

Similar attitudes were also demonstrated from the participants of KCSS discussions in the community/local level. The participants of the discussions emphasized that Ethnic-based extremism is maintained to some extent in Kosovo, mostly due to the conflicts between Serbs and Albanians in the past. As argued by the participants, in order to prevent and counter the ethnic-based extremism, there is a need to handle the unsolved challenges from the past conflicts and have a wider promotion of interethnic relations, based on a reflection of the past.³

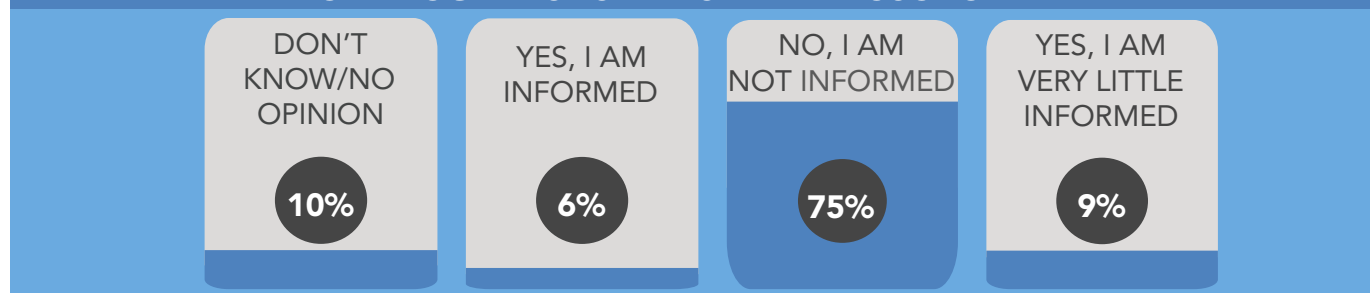
³ Public discussion with local communities, local institutions and local CSOs. Mitrovica, May 14, 2020.

CITIZENS' PERCEPTION ON THE REPATRIATION, REHABILITATION AND REINTEGRATION OF KOSOVO CITIZENS FROM IS-CONTROLLED BATTLEFIELDS

PERCEPTIONS ON REINTEGRATION AND REHABILITATION PROGRAMS

More than 250 citizens of Kosovo have been repatriated from Syria and Iraq and went or are currently undergoing rehabilitation and reintegration programs and initiatives undertaken by Kosovo institution and civil society organizations. However, citizens do not have enough information on what is specifically being done in rehabilitation and reintegration efforts. In addition to the lack of information of local communities, local institutions and local CSOs are very little or not involved at all in these processes, due to the limited operational and financial capacities to implement projects and activities of this nature.⁴ Although the local level considers to have the necessary knowledge to contribute to these processes, so far, the central level has not anticipated and has not used their potential in this regard.⁵ This is perceived with concern by local communities as they will be the final address of returnees and the reintegration process could only be successful if the communities themselves are strengthened and engaged.⁶ Given these insights, through KSB survey, KCSS sought to gauge whether information on these programs has trickled down to citizens and communities that are central to their success. The collected data show that the overwhelming majority - 75 percent of the respondents - do not have any information regarding rehabilitation and reintegration programs, 9 percent have limited information and only 6 percent said that they are informed of the ongoing efforts.

FIGURE 2 HOW MUCH ARE THE CITIZENS INFORMED ABOUT THE REINTEGRATION AND REHABILITATION PROGRAMS ESTABLISHED IN KOSOVO



Moreover, another important aspect highlighted by community representatives is the miscommunication of the local and central institutions with local communities and local CSOs with regard to rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives.⁷ Avoiding the cooperation between local and central institutions with local communities and CSOs could limit the impact of the rehabilitation and reintegration processes and potentially create dissatisfactions within the community if their concerns and perspectives on these processes are neglected.⁸

⁴ Public discussion with local communities, local institutions and local CSOs. Gjilan, April 10, 2020.

⁵ Ibid.

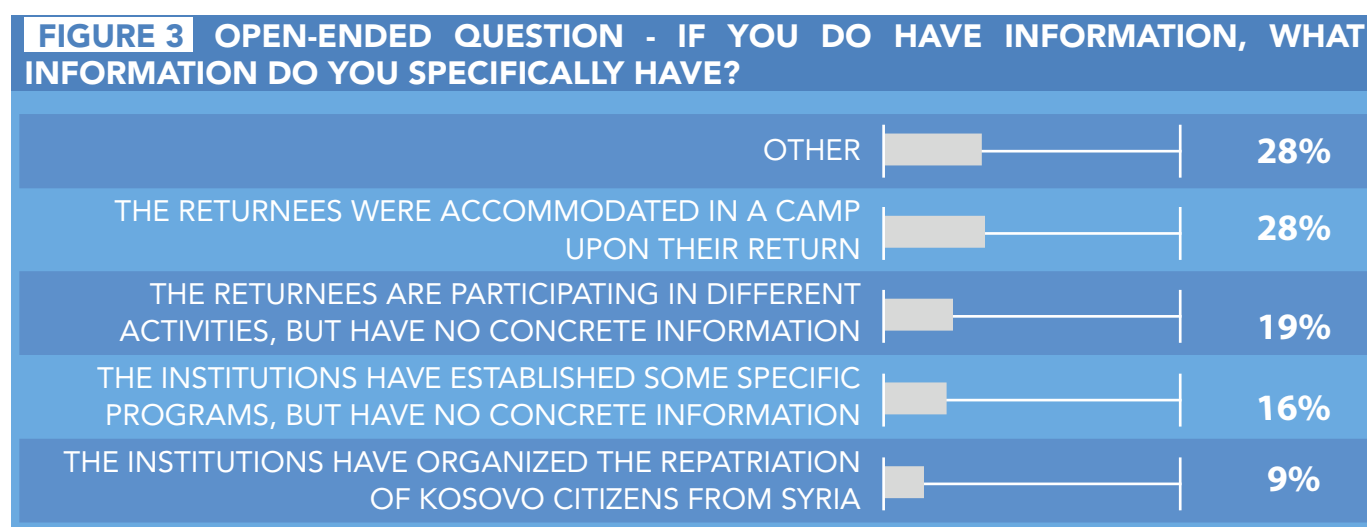
⁶ Public discussion with local communities, local institutions and local CSOs. Mitrovica, May 14, 2020.

⁷ Public discussion with local communities, local institutions and local CSOs. Prishtina, August 08, 2020.

⁸ Ibid.

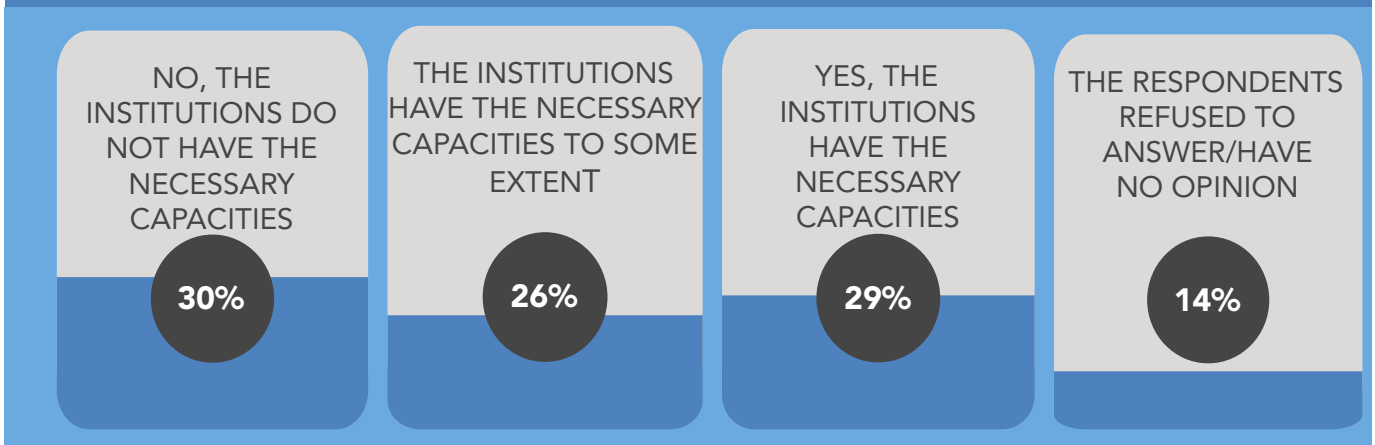
The question on 'Figure 2' was followed by an open-ended question, which allowed respondents to indicate what information they specifically have about the programs. The responses were recorded, coded into categories and further analyzed. Based on these responses, there is a knowledge gap even among those that indicated they are aware of the rehabilitation programs. Almost none of the respondents were able to identify a specific program or activity implemented by institutions or local and international organizations. The respondents mainly referenced the temporary accommodation of the returnees from the former IS battlefields in the first 72 hours of their return to Kosovo, which is most likely due to the greater media coverage on the repatriation from Syria and Iraq. Nineteen percent of the respondents that declared that they have information about the reintegration and rehabilitation programs said that they know about returnee's participation in different activities, while 16 percent said they know that country's institutions established some programs. In both cases, the respondents were not able to specifically identify any activities or programs undertaken for repatriated individuals.

The 'Other' category includes answers that were not related to this specific question, however, due to the lack of information the respondents tried to provide concrete answers although not relevant to the topic under discussion. On the other hand, 9 percent of the respondents were only informed about the organized repatriation of Kosovo citizens from Syria through April and May of 2019.



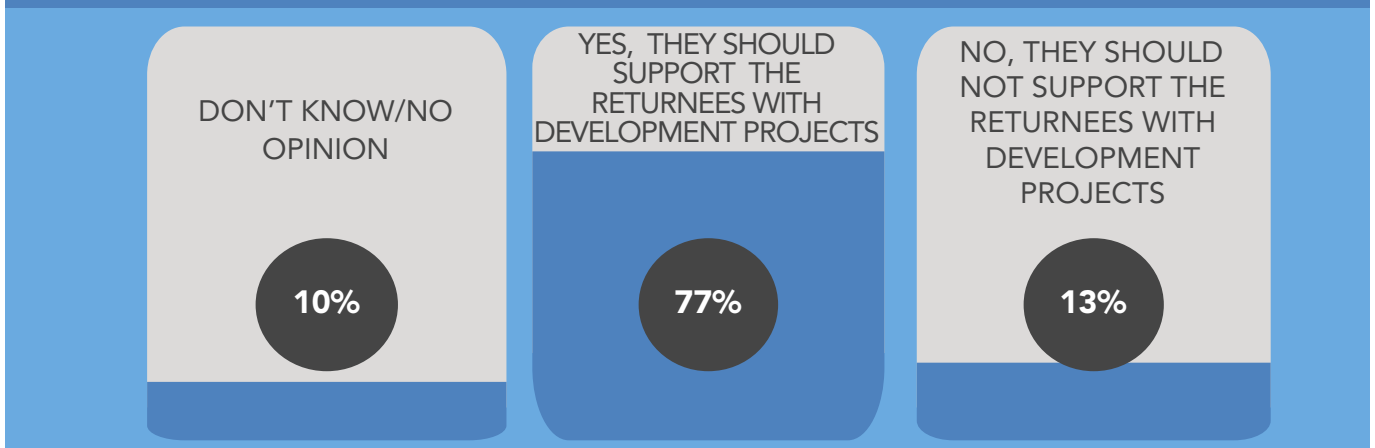
The respondents expressed doubt on Kosovo's institutional capacity to effectively reintegrate the returnees. About 30 percent of the respondents were skeptical that Kosovo institutions have the capacities to effectively reintegrate and rehabilitate the returnees, while 26 percent of them believe that reintegration capacities were effective only to some extent. Only 29 percent of the respondents believe that Kosovo institutions have the ability to properly reintegrate the returnees.

FIGURE 4 CITIZENS PERCEPTION ON THE CAPACITIES OF KOSOVO INSTITUTIONS TO REINTEGRATE THE RETURNEES



Given the importance of coordination between different stakeholders and the work of institutions in terms of rehabilitation and reintegration, KCSS also assessed whether citizens believe that institutions and international organizations should support returnees with development projects. In this regard, citizens appeared supportive, with 77 percent of respondents stating that institution and international organizations should implement development projects to support the returnees. Furthermore, local communities believe that it is important to support local CSOs as well, so they can develop and implement activities that would complement central-level rehabilitation and reintegration efforts.⁹ According to local actors, local initiatives such as “Fol Tash”¹⁰ in the city of Podujeva have contributed to deradicalization by raising awareness against violent extremism, while the reflection of such initiatives in the reintegration process would contribute to greater effectiveness of the process.

FIGURE 5 CITIZENS PERCEPTION ON WHETHER LOCAL INSTITUTIONS AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS SHOULD SUPPORT THE RETURNEES WITH DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS



⁹ Public discussion with local communities, local institutions and local CSOs. Podujeva, May 8, 2020.

¹⁰ For more information on the platform, please see: <https://www.foltash.com/>

PERCEPTIONS ON THE RETURNEES

Kosovo's public perceives the returnees as a security threat. Fifty-one percent of Kosovo Security Barometer respondents said that they believed the returnees are a threat or a high threat for Kosovo, while 41 percent of them believe that they pose very little or no threat at all. Such a perception was also observed in KCSS's local discussion where many participants expressed concerns for certain individuals who have returned from the war zones in Syria and Iraq. Their skepticism and fear of these individuals is increasing the potential for stigmatization of certain individuals, emphasizing the need to raise awareness in the community about their approach to the returnees.¹¹



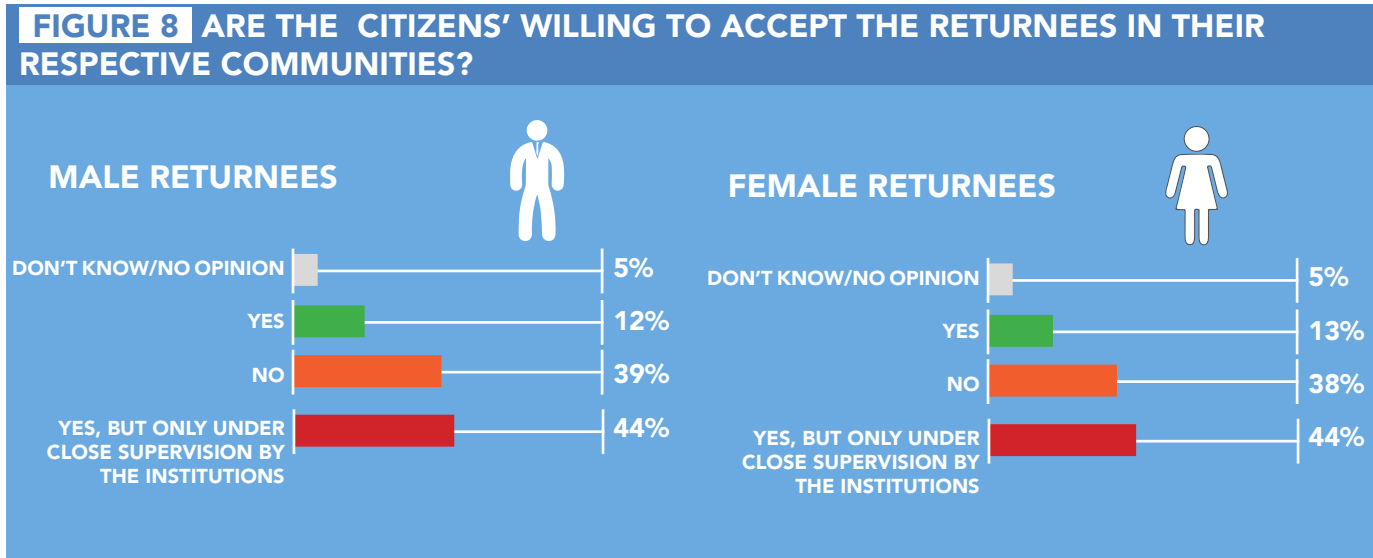
This question was followed by an open-ended question to contextualize the opinion of the majority of the respondents. Forty percent of the respondents believe that the returnees still share an extremist ideology, which presents a danger for Kosovo's security, while 30 percent of them hold the opinion that the returnees are used to a violent environment and as such can further cause violence in Kosovo. Sixteen percent of the respondents that believe that the returnees are a threat to Kosovo think that the returnees can negatively influence others. On the other hand, the 'Other' category summarizes the less-frequent answers that are related to the potential spread of different diseases by the returnees, lack of the state capacity to rehabilitate or control them, general feels of insecurity toward them or the respondents' belief that they should not have been repatriated at all.



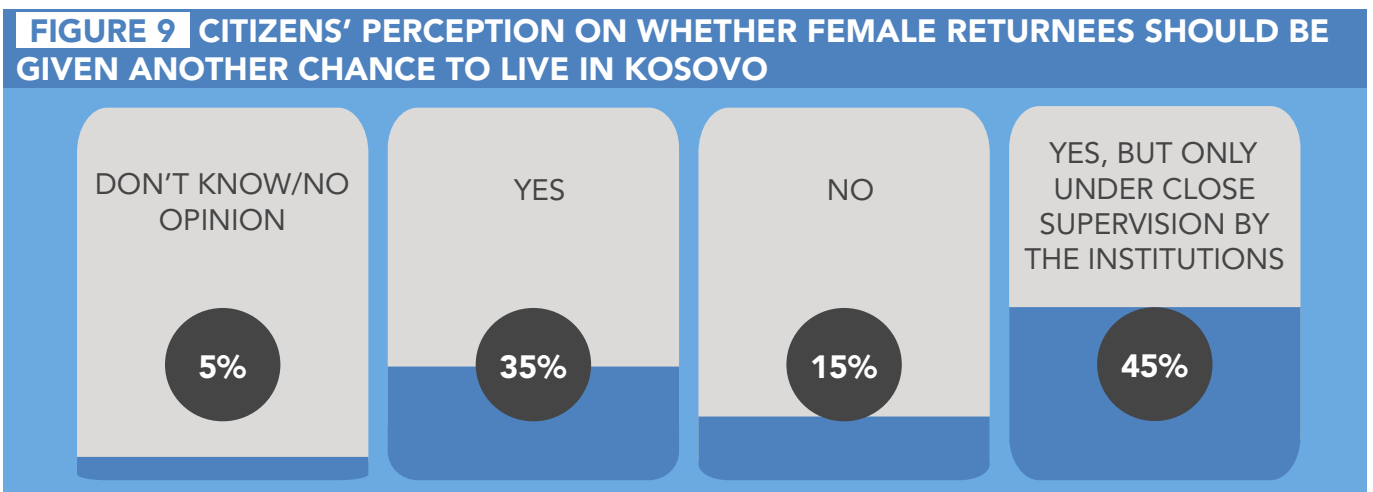
Furthermore, KCSS has analyzed the willingness of citizens to accept the returnees in their respective communities. Respondents are generally reluctant to accept them: 39 percent of the respondents said that they would not accept the men returnees in their community, while 38 percent hold this perception for women returnees. Moreover, 44 percent of respondents said they would accept both male and female returnees, but on the condition that they should be

¹¹ Public discussion with local communities, local institutions and local CSOs. Gjilan, April 10, 2020.

under close supervision by the institutions. The increase of the sense of security of citizens when they rely on institutions, reaffirms the importance of involving local level institutions in the process of reintegration and rehabilitation, as the first institutional contact of citizens. Furthermore, local institutions need to be more engaged and vocal in the social and economic aspects of their citizens and raise their efforts in building social cohesion among the communities in Kosovo. Thus, the institutions would ensure community resilience, consequently making the communities more stable, secure and resilient, while also making them more open to the repatriated persons.¹²



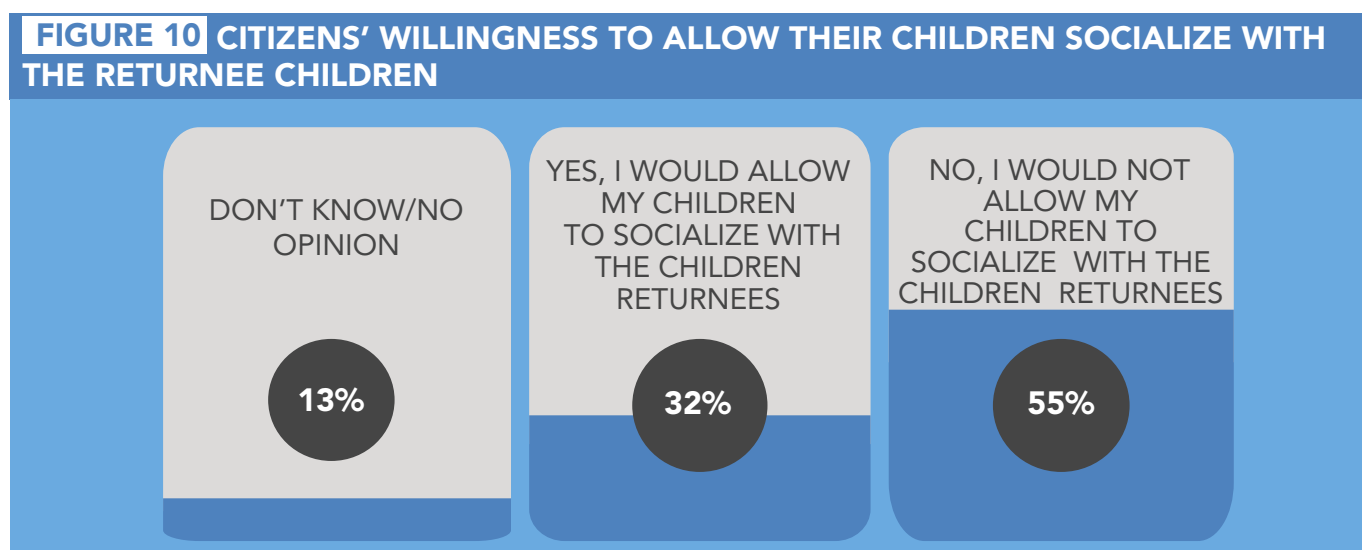
When asked if Kosovo should give the women returnees a chance to be integrated in Kosovo, the respondents responded more positively. Only 15 percent of respondents believe that they should not be given a chance at all, while 35 percent hold the opinion that they should be given a chance. Meanwhile, 45 percent of respondents believe that they should be given a chance, but with close supervision by the institutions.



¹² Public discussion with local communities, local institutions and local CSOs. Fushe Kosova, July 7, 2020.

PERCEPTIONS ON CHILDREN RETURNEES

One of the key challenges of the institutions remains the reintegration and rehabilitation of children returnees. The children who traveled with their families to war zones and those born there during the conflict are potentially affected by trauma and are subject to societal isolation and stigmatization. While one of the key elements in successful reintegration efforts is socializing with other children and the community at large, the repatriated children in Kosovo spend most of their time with other repatriated children and their close family members.¹³ Therefore, one of the key issues assessed by KCSS was the willingness of respondents to allow their children to socialize with the repatriated children. The results are concerning and show a potential for the stigmatization of children returnees and further isolation. Fifty-five percent of the respondents said they would not allow their children to socialize with the children repatriated from conflict zones, while 32 percent of them do not have any problem to do so.

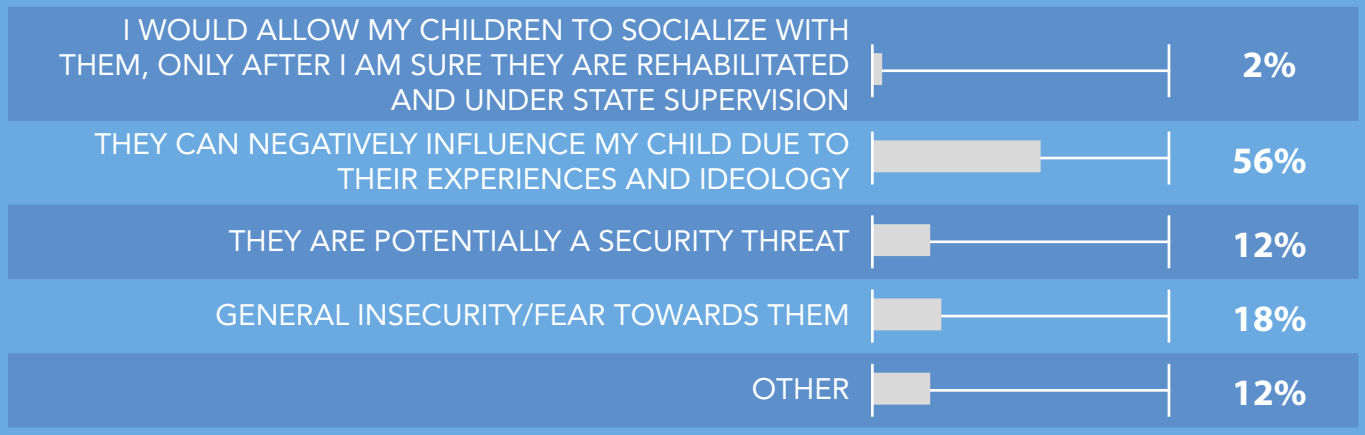


This question was followed up by an open-ended question in which the respondents were given a chance to elaborate why they such views. Fifty-six percent of the respondents believe that due to the experiences of the children returnees in the war zones as well as their exposure towards ideology, they could have a negative impact on their children should they be allowed to socialize with them. Eighteen percent of the respondents have a general fear and a sense of insecurity from the children returnees, but do not have any other specific reason on why they prevent their children's socialization with them. Twelve percent of the respondents are of the opinion that children returnees are a potential security threat and therefore would not feel comfortable to allow their children to socialize with them. Only 2 percent of the respondents declared that in principle they would allow their children to socialize with the returnees, however only after making sure that they are rehabilitated and under state supervision. The 'Other' category presents different answers that were not that frequent and mostly consists of the answers that simply confirmed that they would not allow their children to socialize with the returnees, without providing concrete reasons. Similar approach was observed in the discussions with local communities organized by KCSS in six municipalities of Kosovo for the needs of data collection for this report. The participants emphasized their concerns towards repatriated children and noted that they would hesitate to let their children socialize with 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 may spread extremist ideologies.¹⁴

¹³ Participatory observation of KCSS team in activities and programs for the reintegration and rehabilitation of children returnees.

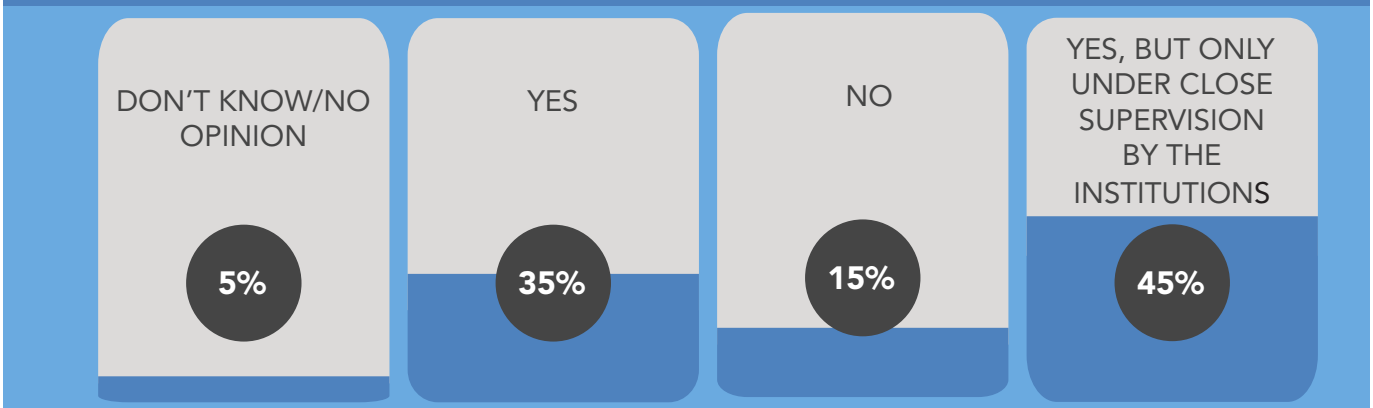
¹⁴ Public discussion with local communities, local institutions and local CSOs. Gjilan, April 10, 2020.

FIGURE 11 OPEN-ENDED QUESTION - IF YOU ARE NOT WILLING TO ALLOW YOUR CHILDREN TO SOCIALIZE WITH THE CHILDREN RETURNEES, WHY?



Respondents expressed more positive attitudes when they were asked to provide their opinion on whether they believe that the children returnees should be integrated in the regular education system with their peers. Thirty-five percent of the respondents declared that the children returnees should be integrated in the education system with their peers, while forty-five percent of them hold the same opinion but under the condition that the children returnees should be placed under close supervision by the institutions while they attend school with others. Fifteen percent of the respondents believe that they should not be integrated in the regular education system.

FIGURE 12 CITIZENS' OPINION ON WHETHER CHILDREN RETURNEES SHOULD BE INTEGRATED IN THE REGULAR EDUCATION SYSTEM WITH OTHER PEERS



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The rehabilitation and reintegration programs for repatriated persons from conflict zones should be designed based on the individual needs of those to whom the respective programs will be addressed to. The institutions and CSOs should apply a proactive approach in involving the community in the implementation of the rehabilitation and reintegration programs, having in mind the fact that the community is reserved in accepting the returnees back in their communities.

The institutions of Kosovo have centralized the communication between different institutions, CSOs and community with the returnees through the Division for Prevention and Reintegration of Radicalized Persons within the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Consequently, in case certain actors have interest and capacities to implement projects or activities in the service of reintegration and rehabilitation, their contribution is always channeled through this mechanism. Due to bureaucratic procedures and the burden of a single mechanism serving as link between different stakeholders and returnees, and the constant contact of the returnees to a single institution, potentially slows down their socialization, which is a key element for the full reintegration into society.

More focus should be given to the children returnees who based to our research and activities are more prone to stigmatization as they share a feeling of isolation and discrimination from the community. While their integration in the school system has progressed significantly, most of them continue to attend their classes in special classes, separately from the other children. Thus, they have limited space to socialize with other children, outside the circle of the returnees, consequently hindering their social integration to some extent. This also affects the perspective of the community's willingness to accept the children returnees, given that a large proportion of citizens do not feel safe to allow their children socialize with the children returned from conflict zones.

On the other hand, the women and man returnees among other challenges are facing major barriers for employment in public and private sector in Kosovo. While their employment in the public sector is hampered to some extent by the criminal responsibility they bear for their time spent in conflict zones, the private sector is refusing to employ them as they continue to perceive them as a threat for the companies and the community at large.

In order for the reintegration and rehabilitation process to be as effective as possible and to address the shortcomings identified in this report, KCSS provides the following recommendations:

1. The process of communicating and working with repatriated individuals should be further facilitated and not necessarily be concentrated in a single mechanism as is the case with the Division for Prevention and Reintegration of Radicalized Persons. Moreover, the Division should more open and encouraging for professionals and various organizations and ensure wider involvement of them in the rehabilitation and reintegration process;
2. The Ministry of Education in cooperation with local institutions should take a more proactive approach in the reintegration and rehabilitation efforts and design a comprehensive plan to fully integrate the repatriated children in public schools and avoid the establishment of special classes for this category only;
3. The Government of Kosovo should design and implement a communication strategy targeting local communities, in order to actively inform the community about the reintegration and rehabilitation process and through communication and awareness raising increase the community's willingness to accept the returnees;

4. As the reintegration and rehabilitation programs and policies are relatively new to Kosovo, the Government of Kosovo in cooperation with academia and CSOs should implement activities for capacity and knowledge building. The focus should be in giving the municipalities the necessary capacities to establish reintegration and rehabilitation programs and share their knowledge and capacities with other local actors such as: Local Safety Councils, social workers, teacher, local CSOs, community leaders etc.

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