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'We assist them address their distorted thoughts': reintegration actors and the politics of post-expulsion in Kosovo

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ABSTRACT

The mainstreaming of the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) policy at the global and regional level has led to increased academic attention to the actors implementing it. However, critical research has focused on 'assisted voluntary return' practices in host countries during pre-expulsion, giving insufficient attention to post-expulsion dynamics in the countries of citizenship. Addressing this gap, the article examines the work of reintegration actors in Kosovo, where various state and non-state actors provide reintegration services. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of interviews with reintegration actors and drawing on the 'analytics of government' framework, the article conceptualises reintegration as a technology of governance that aims to influence the conduct of expelled irregular migrants in the post-expulsion phase. The article finds that reintegration actors understand irregular migration as a product of structural and individual factors, but at the level of interventions, they problematise the perceived individual psychological predispositions towards irregular migration. The analysis further shows how these actors employ psychosocial techniques to promote neoliberal subjectivities that are assumed to deter irregular re-migration while producing 'proper' mobile subjects. By centring the practices of reintegration actors, the article extends the spatial and temporal scope of critical scholarship towards the politics underpinning post-expulsion interventions.

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Introduction

The mainstreaming of Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) policy at the global and regional levels¹ along with the growing number of actors involved in the provision of AVRR assistance, has drawn increasing academic attention to the politics underpinning it. Initially, the focus of scholars has been mainly on the rhetoric of 'voluntariness' that pervades AVRR, questioning whether it provides a real choice for

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irregular migrants who lack a genuine option to remain in host countries (Leerkes, Van Os, and Boersema 2017; Lietaert 2016; Sahin-Mencutek and Triandafyllidou 2025; Webber 2011). More recently, critical scholars have shifted the attention from the rhetoric to the work of AVRR agents in their interactions with irregular migrants. More concretely, scholars have provided critical insights into the 'soft techniques' (i.e. financial incentives, counselling techniques, bonding strategies) that AVRR state and non-state counsellors employ to elicit compliance from irregular migrants who await expulsion (Cleton and Chauvin 2020; Cleton and Schweizer 2021; Kalir and Wissink 2016). Scholars have looked at how state and non-state actors frame irregular migrants as rational actors who are expected to respond positively to the incentives of the AVRR programmes, thus avoiding their forced deportation (Cleton and Schweizer 2021; Pécout 2023). The main argument of this work is that AVRR counsellors engage in 'bureaucratic persuasion' and act as intermediaries between host states and irregular migrants, with the aim of influencing migrants' return ambitions (Cleton and Chauvin 2020, 299; Schweitzer, Humphris, and Monforte 2022; Kalir and Wissink 2016). Therefore, these contributions show that, despite being promoted as an alternative to forced expulsion, AVRR agents are embedded in and serve the host states' migration-restrictive agendas.

However, although the expansion of the analysis towards AVRR actors has provided important insights into the *pre-expulsion* practices of 'voluntary return' actors in the host countries, there is a dearth of critical research on the *post-expulsion* practices of reintegration actors in their countries of citizenship. In this regard, there is ample policy-relevant research conducted on reintegration, but it mainly deals with assessing the success/failure of reintegration assistance and examining the factors that lead to different reintegration outcomes (Kuschminder 2017; Majidi and Oeppen 2023; Tizazu et al. 2021). More recently, some scholars have examined reintegration experiences and shown how expelled migrants are enrolled by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and local NGOs in media campaigns, sharing their personal stories of migration hardships to discourage others from undertaking irregular journeys to the countries of the Global North (Fine and Walters 2021; Maâ, Van Dessel, and Van Neste-Gottignies 2023; Marino 2023). What is not explored yet, however, is a critical analysis of how reintegration actors engage with the expelled irregular migrants and what kind of ambitions they want to achieve through providing reintegration services. In other words, since the existing scholarship has focused on AVRR actors in the host countries of the Global North, it is equally important to recentre the analysis from AVRR actors active in the *expulsion procedure* towards the work of reintegration actors in the Global South who are active in managing the *post-expulsion condition* of expelled irregular migrants.

Departing from this need to address this underexplored aspect of AVRR programmes, the aim of this article is to provide critical insights into the knowledge that informs the daily work of reintegration actors with expelled migrants in a specific empirical context. To that end, the article draws on 16 interviews conducted with state and non-state reintegration actors in Kosovo, which, due to its visa liberalisation process with the EU and its aspirations to join the Union, has had a high compliance rate in readmitting its own expelled irregular migrants from the EU, and in implementing robust reintegration programmes (Sacchetti 2016; Vollmer and Sahin-Mencutek 2023). The article relies on Critical Discourse Analysis to examine the discourse through which they define expelled migrants, rationalise reintegration techniques, and articulate the ambitions they aim to

achieve. Theoretically, the article conceptualises reintegration assistance as a ‘technology of governance’ that aims to shape the ‘conduct of conduct’ of expelled irregular migrants in their countries of citizenship. To operationalise the analysis, the article applies Dean’s (2009) ‘analytics of government’ framework to the empirical material. Based on it, the article shows that reintegration actors in Kosovo define expelled irregular migrants as ‘psychologically vulnerable subjects’ that need to be ‘empowered’ to overcome their predispositions towards irregular migration. In this regard, the article finds that the role of reintegration actors is to mould responsible neoliberal subjects that can resist irregular (re)migration drives by intervening in their attitudes towards the labour market in Kosovo. Furthermore, the analysis engages with the ambitions of these actors and shows that the broader goal is not only to stop irregular re-migration but also to craft ‘proper’ mobility subjects that can migrate in the future through legal channels.

By bringing into the focus of analysis the work of reintegration actors, this article contributes to the current debate on AVRR by extending the spatial and temporal analytical reach of the existing critical scholarship towards the dynamics of post-expulsion. As reintegration constitutes a central element of AVRR, the article gives closer attention to post-expulsion as an active site of governance, and explores how after expulsion, irregular migrants are made subject of neoliberal interventions that aim to transform their relationship towards themselves, the markets, and mobility.

The context: reintegration actors and Kosovo as a platform for reintegration techniques

To explore the knowledge and practices that underpin the engagement of reintegration actors with expelled migrants, this article focuses on the case of Kosovo. Kosovo is the youngest country in the Western Balkans, and its state-building process has been heavily influenced by the international community. It declared independence in 2008, following a secessionist guerrilla war with Serbia in the late 1990s that ended with the deployment of a United Nations mission, placing Kosovo under international administration. The peacebuilding and state-building processes have been heavily influenced by Western powers (mainly the US, the UK, and the EU) that have even designed the constitutional order and the institutional make-up of the country (Visoka 2017). This has created a conducive context for the diffusion of international (neo)liberal norms and has made the country an interesting case study for social science research interested in the dynamics related to the translation of global norms to local contexts (Björkdahl and Gusic 2015; Visoka 2017). It is important to note that this context of state-building was brought up by many respondents in the fieldwork, who framed Kosovo’s compliance with readmission requests mainly as a state duty and international obligation to its citizens abroad. They highlighted that, as a young state with contested statehood, Kosovo seeks to act as a responsible international actor, suggesting that the pursuit of statehood and international legitimacy contributes to Kosovo’s alignment with the EU migration agenda.

At the level of migration policies, the diffusion process has taken place within the integration process of the country, along with its visa liberalisation process with the European Union. The legal framework, and policies that pertain to migration governance and reintegration processes have been influenced by the Stabilisation and Association

Agreement between Kosovo and the EU (2016), which contains clear obligations for the latter to ‘cooperate in the areas of visa, border/boundary control, asylum, and migration and [Kosovo] shall set up a framework for cooperation to prevent and control illegal immigration, including trafficking and smuggling in human beings’ (European Commission 2016, 96, 99). Additionally, Kosovo has taken up the formal obligation to ‘readmit its own citizens residing illegally in the EU’ and ‘non-EU nationals who have entered the EU through Kosovo territory’ (ibid., 100). To meet these standards, each year the Kosovar government adopts a National Programme for the Implementation of SAA (NPISAA) and divides responsibilities for each measure among different institutions (NPISAA 2023). In the area of migration management, state institutions receive continuous assistance from western donors in the form of expertise in the process of drafting laws that are aligned with the EU, and the training of officials in border management and migration governance. On reintegration policy, the country has relied heavily on the support of the IOM and ICMPD to increase institutional capacities to implement reintegration measures for its readmitted citizens. The policy framework in place refers, and is discursively aligned, with the major global instruments on migration management and reintegration such as the Global Compact for Migration and the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants. For its compliance in mainstreaming reintegration policy into its legislative and policy framework, Kosovo has been regarded ‘as a role model for the entire region’ (Vollmer and Sahin-Mencutek 2023, 20) and was rewarded with the waiving of the visa regime in January 2024.

An impetus to the consolidation of reintegration assistance and the proliferation of actors in the implementation of the policy came in 2014, when a sudden outflow of asylum seekers from Kosovo to EU countries intensified the government’s reintegration efforts. However, taking place in the context of visa liberalisation, Kosovar authorities reacted promptly to halt the outflow and showed a commitment to readmitting and reintegrating the expelled migrants from different EU countries (mostly Germany, Switzerland, France, Sweden). In the months that followed, Kosovar authorities responded expediently in processing readmission procedures and readmitted around 20,000 citizens in a very short period.² At the same time, the process of reintegrating the irregular migrants gained even more prominence. The Ministry of Labour and Welfare signed an agreement with UNDP Kosovo to co-finance interventions to ensure the ‘sustainable reintegration of Kosovo returnees’ in the social and economic life of the country. The NGO sector also got increasingly engaged in the provision of reintegration assistance as many EU countries channelled their development funds into financing reintegration services. IOM, the German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ), Caritas Switzerland, and other local NGOs received international and government funds for implementing reintegration programmes. Though the number of asylum seekers and, consequently, the number of expelled Kosovars has significantly decreased (MIA 2021b), reintegration still represents a priority policy for both public institutions and non-state actors that usually compete for donor funds to stay active in an increasingly competitive NGO sector (CiviKos 2022).

Against this background of 20 years of reintegration policy consolidation in the country and the growing involvement of different actors in implementing the policy, Kosovo represents a relevant context to research reintegration dynamics. As Vollmer and Sahin-Mencutek (2023, 3–7) argue, ‘Kosovo has become an experimental ground’

for reintegration policy ‘where a multiplication of transnational, national and local actors’ engages in implementing ‘different financial and policy techniques [...] aimed at creating ‘quick fixes’ to the policy ‘problems’ detected by return and reintegration policy makers and implementers’ elsewhere. This setting offered an entry point to numerous reintegration actors that could be interviewed for the purposes of this research.

Theoretical framework: reintegration as a ‘technology of governance’

Several migration scholars have argued that AVRR programmes have introduced neoliberal rationality and techniques into the governance of the expulsion of irregular migrants (Cleton and Chauvin 2020; Schweitzer, Humphris, and Monforte 2022). Its emergence has been linked with the rise of the so-called migration management discourse and practices, which have complemented securitising coercive practices of migration control with neoliberal modes of governing migration (Geiger and Pécoud 2012; Kalm 2008). Inspired by Foucault’s concept of governmentality, scholars have conceptualised AVRR as a neoliberal technology of governance, interested in shaping the conduct of irregular migrants in a way that facilitates their swift and cost-efficient removal from the host countries (Cleton and Schweitzer 2021; Kalir 2017). Compared to more coercive practices of expulsion such as forced deportation and detention that are oriented in the containment and forced ejection of migrants’ bodies, AVRR’s techniques (financial incentives and counselling) aim to intervene at the level of individuals’ subjectivity, aiming to co-opt irregular migrants and elicit their compliance with the expulsion orders (Junuzi 2026; Lietaert 2016).

Accordingly, since AVRR’s discourse and techniques render the interior/subjectivity of the irregular migrant as the main locus of interventions, critical scholars have linked these dynamics with the ‘psychological turn’ of neoliberalism present in different fields of life – employment, education, social work, the cultural industry – in which the individual’s ‘psyche’ such as attitudes, self-perceptions, and motivations becomes a subject of governance (Chowdhury 2022; Scharff 2016). In this regard, it has been argued that AVRR psychosocial counselling reconfigures the relationship with irregular migrants, who are no longer conceived merely as legal subjects governed through mechanisms of immobilisation (such as detention and deportation), but instead are discursively constructed as psychological subjects capable of making rational decisions and responding to external stimuli (Bartels 2017; Junuzi 2026).

Building on the existing critical work on AVRR, this article makes use of the ‘technologies of governance’ (Lemke 2001) concept to understand how the psychology of the expelled irregular migrants is rendered governable in the post-expulsion phase. More concretely, understanding reintegration assistance as a ‘technology of governance’ allows the analysis to examine how irregular migrants, after being expelled from the host country, are exposed to multiple psychosocial interventions in their countries of citizenship, in which their individual drives towards irregular migration are subjected to reform. Given that ‘technologies of governance’ is a broad concept, the article relies on the ‘analytics of government’ framework (Dean 2009) to operationalise it. The ‘analytics of government’ as a theoretical framework provides five analytical dimensions. These dimensions are: *the fields of visibilities, the episteme, the techne, the ethos*, and

the telos of governmental technologies. The first two dimensions, that of fields of visibilities and episteme, orient the analysis towards examining the knowledge that reintegration actors have about the phenomenon they are governing (fields of visibilities) and the knowledge they have about subjects they assist (episteme) (Dean 2009, 32). *Techné* and *ethos*, on the other hand, looks at the techniques that reintegration actors use in their engagement with the subjects (*techné*) and the subjectivities they want to foster among subjects (*ethos*). And the last analytical dimension, *telos*, examines the broader aspirations or the goals that reintegration actors want to achieve through their psychosocial interventions (ibid: 34).

As will be shown in the analysis, the merits of this theoretical framework consist of providing a holistic analysis of the work of reintegration actors and, at the same time, the linkages that exist between these dimensions (i.e. how the knowledges about expelled irregular migrants inform the techniques of reintegration actors and the aspirations of reintegration assistance). More importantly, these analytical dimensions allow moving beyond current policy evaluations of reintegration towards analysing the politics that underpins the work of reintegration actors and showing the relevance that post-expulsion has in the governance of irregular migration at large.

Data and method: interviews and critical discourse analysis

For the purposes of this research, I conducted interviews with reintegration actors active in the country. The fieldwork took place in the period from March to May 2022 in Kosovo, and in total, 16 interviews were conducted with representatives of state institutions (central and municipal level), EU embassy in Kosovo, non-governmental organisations and one local researcher who has been active in reintegration research. With the exception of the representative from the EU embassy, all other interviewees are Kosovar and hold Kosovo's citizenship. As will become apparent in the analysis, in their responses, these local actors largely invoked AVRR's neoliberal discourse on irregular migration, suggesting the possible role that IOM's training programmes and discursive influence might have in informing the rationale of reintegration interventions.

The sample represents all reintegration actors that were active in the process of reintegration in Kosovo and that could be identified when the fieldwork started. To map and identify actors involved in reintegration processes, I relied on two sources of information. First, I made use of publicly available documents such as state strategies, laws, and policy reports in which reintegration tasks were assigned to different state and non-state actors. Second, I made use of the social media platforms of a project financed by the German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ) in Kosovo (DIMAK), which streamed interviews about reintegration in Kosovo with reintegration actors on their Facebook account.³ Based on these sources, I compiled the final list of contacts and sent invitations for interviews mostly by e-mail. Since the purpose was to get accounts from various actors involved in the process in different capacities, the final list represents this diversity of actors.

Within these organisations, interviewees were selected based on their formal involvement in (a) the drafting, coordination, and oversight of psychosocial reintegration measures at the policy level and (b) the direct provision of psychosocial counselling services. In total, three interviewees were trained psychologists involved in counselling, while the remaining participants were officers who were directly engaged in the

development and institutional design of psychosocial interventions. This dual selection enabled the analysis to capture both the perspectives of those who devise psychosocial measures and of the counsellors directly involved in service provision. As shown in the Table 1 below, it is important to note that although some actors are primarily active in the provision of reintegration assistance, they also participate in national working groups for the drafting of state strategies or administrative instructions on reintegration, which gives them a secondary role as policymakers. The right column of the table below shows their primary and secondary roles in the process. The list below includes the names of all organisations represented by the interviewees, except for four local actors (two NGOs, one psychologist, and one local researcher), who have been anonymised to prevent potential vulnerabilities that could arise from disclosing the names of the organisations for which they work.

For each participant, a list of semi-structured interview questions was prepared based on their profile and role in reintegration. To that purpose, before each interview, I consulted strategic documents and formulated broad questions about the reintegration role that each actor was assigned to perform in these documents. In general, the questions aimed at understanding how actors define expelled irregular migrants, the rationale behind reintegration assistance, and the objectives they aim to achieve by providing assistance. Also, the interviews mainly focused on the ongoing assistance they provide to the expelled migrants of the 2014/15 migration ‘wave’ (see above) as they constitute the majority of Kosovo migrants still supported by reintegration programmes. Prior to fieldwork, the research was granted permission by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority.

To analyse the empirical material, the article makes use of Fairclough’s three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough 1995). Fairclough’s CDA model consists of three methodological dimensions – *text*, *discourse practice*, and *sociocultural practice* – that aim at showing the connections between text and the broader discursive and sociocultural practices in which that text emerges (ibid). The model proposes that

Table 1. List of interviews with reintegration actors and their institutional role in the reintegration process

Research participants (institutions)	Role in reintegration process (primary and secondary role)
Ministry of Internal Affairs	Policymaking and provision of reintegration assistance
Ministry of Finance and Transfers	Policymaking and provision of reintegration assistance
Municipal Office for Communities and Return (Municipality of Prishtina)	Provision of reintegration assistance and policymaking
Kosovo’s Agency for Employment	Provision of reintegration assistance and policymaking
German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ Kosovo)	Provision of reintegration assistance and policymaking
UNDP Kosovo	Provision of reintegration assistance and policymaking
Caritas Switzerland in Kosovo	Provision of reintegration assistance and policymaking
IOM Kosovo	Provision of reintegration assistance and policymaking
NGO 1	Provision of reintegration assistance and policymaking
URA	Provision of reintegration assistance
Psychologist	Provision of reintegration assistance
Kosovo Rehabilitation Center for Torture Victims (KRCT)	Provision of reintegration assistance
NGO 2	Provision of reintegration assistance
EU Embassy in Kosovo	Policymaking
ICMPD in Kosovo	Policymaking
A local researcher engaged in the evaluation of reintegration programmes	Active in producing policy-relevant research for Kosovo’s institutions

any analysis of written or spoken language (text) needs to take into consideration the discourse and the sociocultural context that give rise to that specific text. The text, in other words, is embedded in and draws upon the existing discourses and sociocultural practices in society (Fairclough 1995, 97). For the aims of this research, this method of analysis proved compatible with the ‘analytics of government’ framework, as it provided the tools to examine both (a) the discourses reintegration actors draw upon to explain their engagement with expelled irregular migrants, and (b) the power relations embedded in their representations of these migrants. More specifically, CDA enables an analysis of how irregular migrants are discursively constructed in interview material. It allows tracing how categories such as ‘psychological vulnerability’, ‘laziness’, ‘idleness’, are mobilised to produce expelled migrants as psychological subjects. By examining these discursive constructions, the analysis shows how the psyche of expelled irregular migrants is rendered governable as an object of knowledge and interventions.

Analysis: reintegration actors’ engagement with expelled irregular migrants

The following empirical sections engage in the analysis of the interviews with reintegration actors in Kosovo. The structure follows the order of the five dimensions of ‘analytics of government’ framework presented above. The first two sections look at the understanding that actors have about irregular migration and the knowledge they have about expelled irregular migrants. Based on it, the analysis continues with the techniques of reintegration and the subjectivities they want to elicit through these techniques. The analysis ends with the aspirational dimension, or the broader goals that these actors aim to achieve through their interventions.

The visibilities of irregular migration: the individual as the locus of intervention

In the interviews with reintegration actors in Kosovo, participants expressed their attitudes about the causes of irregular migration from Kosovo. More concretely, providers almost in unison would emphasise that the causes of irregular migration from Kosovo are both *structural* and *individual*, but when it came to interventions, they would exclusively focus on the latter, leaving an impression of incoherence between the problem and the interventions in place to address it.

To begin with their understanding of irregular migration, almost all research participants highlighted the lack of economic opportunities in Kosovo as the structural cause for the irregular migration of 2014/2015, but they did so in connection to some individual factors that would be equally emphasised. The following quote from a UNDP officer captures these two dimensions of migrant irregularity:

Continuous research consistently shows that one of the main reasons people migrate irregularly from Kosovo is for economic reasons, meaning that they do not feel economically fulfilled. The core issue is *the lack of access to employment opportunities or skills to generate sustainable income in Kosovo*. As a consequence, this creates a chain reaction leading to other problems. *Once they do not find economic stability in Kosovo, they start facing social*

issues with their community and later experience psychological problems with themselves. Therefore, the basis of our project focuses on economic reintegration as a foundation for sustainable reintegration *that addresses these other aspects* [of irregular migration drivers]. (UNDP, 2022, emphases added)

It is this complex interplay between objective, structural economic constraints and subjective, individual peculiarities that constitutes the field of visibility of irregular migration and sets the parameters for reintegration interventions. What became obvious in many responses is that the lack of economic opportunities is not seen as a decisive factor in pushing someone to migrate irregularly, but rather as an enabling factor, which, when combined with certain psychological and personal dispositions, may lead to irregular migration.

This understanding of the dynamics of irregular migration echoes the work of the relatively recent research contributions on ‘migration drivers’ (cf. Carling and Talleraas 2016; Czaika and Reinprecht 2022; Dennison 2022) whose assumptions have informed the work of IOM and other specialised organisations on AVRR. The key novelty brought by this research is that it moves away from the deterministic language of ‘root causes’ that has focused exclusively on structural factors to explain irregular migration (Carling and Talleraas 2016). Instead, it is argued that irregular migration is a more complex phenomenon in which individual factors influence the decision to migrate irregularly. The word ‘drivers’ replaces ‘roots’ precisely because the latter makes law-like assumptions about irregular migration (i.e. poverty and corruption lead to irregular migration). To speak of ‘migration drivers’, instead, is to acknowledge the role of psychological factors on the migration process in which perceptions about the future, economic prospects, and attitudes towards the country of citizenship play a mediating role in making the decision to migrate irregularly (Czaika and Reinprecht 2022, 4–5).⁴

Reintegration actors in Kosovo share a similar understanding of irregular migration. The rapport between structural and individual factors was presented as not being strictly causal but rather mutually reinforcing; lack of economic access and skills leads to a desperate mental state that, in turn, perpetuates the economic status quo that ultimately leads to irregular migration. For reintegration actors in Kosovo, it is this cycle or loop effect between structural and individual factors that needs to be broken so that irregular re-migration does not appear as a rational choice in the future. In this regard, in almost all received responses, the structural factors were presented as enduring facts and instead the individual was considered as in need of adaptation to these constraining economic circumstances. On this point, this is how the MIA and GIZ representatives articulated this idea:

The economic conditions in Kosovo are what they are, and Kosovo cannot be compared to Germany, France, or Switzerland [...]. But this [irregular migration] has also to do *with their personal specificities*, mostly related to their *preparations for the job market and their perceptions of the opportunities that Kosovo offers*. (MIA, emphases added)

Irregular migration is a result of the *limited economic opportunities* in the country, but also their [irregular migrants’] *lack of skills for the market and inadaptability for the market demands*. These people could not find themselves in the labor market, maybe *they did not know how to approach it, or they did not have the motivation to access the labor market*. (GIZ, emphases added)

The point made by several respondents is that the structural factors are taken as *fait accompli* and the rationale is to prepare the individual to navigate the constraining economic conditions without opting for irregular migration. As will be shown in the subsequent sections, at the level of interventions, individual factors take prevalence over structural ones, and reintegration assistance becomes a matter of instilling neoliberal subjectivities on individuals.

Epistemic frames: the vulnerabilities of irregular migrants

As research participants expressed their understanding of irregular migration and their interventions on the individual factors, I became interested in knowing in more detail what these factors are that they intervene upon. I asked them to elaborate on what constitutes these ‘attitudes,’ ‘psychological issues,’ and ‘personal specificities’ that they were constantly referring to when explaining irregular drives. As they became more concrete in their answers, they would primarily define the expelled irregular migrants as *psychologically vulnerable* and in need of empowerment.

The problem of psychological vulnerability emerged as they started to talk about the profile of those who migrated in the ‘irregular migration wave’ of 2014/15. The emphasis was focused on explaining the chaotic scenes of departures at the bus stations in Prishtina as people tried desperately to get a place in overcrowded buses leaving towards European countries. This is how the representative of URA explained what happened in 2014/15:

I know the case of a guy from Gjilan [40 years old], and I asked him, ‘how did you decide to migrate?’ He said that he decided to migrate spontaneously; he was having a coffee with his friend when they decided to migrate. Each had 100 euros in their wallets and went home to pack their clothes. The next morning, they crossed the border with Serbia and approached the Hungarian territory [...]. *Everything was very spontaneous, ad hoc, and decisions were made without having a second thought.* (emphases added)

Though emphasising different aspects of what could be referred to as the ‘psychology of an irregular subject,’ other respondents echoed the same attitude when speaking about what happened in 2014/15. Some framed the migrants as the ‘prey of smugglers’ or referred to organised disinformation and propaganda that stated that Western countries were ‘hiring Kosovars to fill their labor gaps’ (MIA, 2022) or as ‘idle persons who go to Germany to exploit the welfare benefits of the country’ (NGO 1, 2022). What comes to the fore in all these reflections is that, for reintegration actors, the decision to migrate irregularly has not been taken by subjects fully in charge of their decisions. The act of leaving was voluntary – no one forced them to leave the country irregularly – but the decision-maker is portrayed as having lacked full autonomy over the decision to migrate. In different instances, they were framed as having fallen to the impulses of the collective hysteria, the spontaneity of events, the deceptive promises of smugglers, or false hopes for welfare benefits in Europe. More specifically, irregular migrants are portrayed as lacking the capacity to ward off external triggers; susceptibility to misinformation, collective moods, or deceptive promises are attributed to deficits in judgment and awareness in reacting ‘properly’ towards these external stimuli. What is ultimately problematised is individual’s inability to resist external triggers that eventually lead to irregular migration. The decision has not gone through a cold, calculative, rational

process but rather was made in response to situational contingencies ('he was having a coffee with his friend when they decided to migrate'). Along the same lines, the following quote by a psychologist highlights this framing of irregular migrants as not fully in control of their decision:

To be honest, all repatriated [persons] have distorted thoughts. Distorted thoughts definitely come *as a result of groundless information* [...]. I would definitely argue that the irregular migration of 2014/15 *came as a result of misinformation and a lack of awareness*. Not to mention that they are *blind followers of the models from the diaspora*. This is especially the case in Kosovo, where during the summer many families who live in the West come here and tell stories about their life there and project themselves as successful migration stories. I do not want to sound judgmental, but if a person hasn't had the chance to visit these countries, that *person will create illusions about life standards* there and naturally will want to live in a perfect world. On the other hand, the economy also plays a role here. When economic development is lacking, people start engaging in irrelevant things and *waste their time by discussing politics, instead of focusing their energy on their workplaces*. (emphases added)

The psychological vulnerability that leads to irregular migration, which is here further specified as distorted thoughts, is exactly what makes irregular migration for reintegration actors an enterprise that is not fully voluntary. There is a totality of elements that are brought together to make this case: distorted thoughts do not emerge in a vacuum; they are a result of 'groundless information,' 'models from the diaspora,' and 'illusions about life standards.' And there is also a profile of the individual who is vulnerable to these sources of distorted thoughts, namely someone who 'lacks awareness,' a 'blind follower who believes in a perfect world,' and 'discusses politics and wastes energy' in unimportant matters. It is this individual deficit in checking and filtering information, resisting unrealistic models, and focusing on productive things that make irregular migrants susceptible to falling into the trap of irregularity. In line with these findings, Bartels's (2017, 327) research on the implementation of AVR projects by IOM in Morocco shows that providers frame the decision of young Moroccans to migrate irregularly 'as an act of innocent immaturity;' they are those who have been 'misguided' by false hopes of migration success in the EU and, as a result, engage in 'naively uninformed behaviour.' This neoliberal infantilisation of individuals by projecting on them these inclinations of engaging in unreflexive decision-making serves as a basis for psychosocial interventions that take the task of 'empowering' and elevating their agential capacities to deal with difficult situations in the future.

The techne and ethos of reintegration: fostering neoliberal subjectivities

Psychosocial counselling is an integral reintegration component in Kosovo, and its importance is reflected in all strategic documents governing the reintegration policy (MIA 2021a, Regulation 22/2022). For instance, each municipality is expected to have at least one social worker with a psychology background to ensure that the 'repatriated are included in the labor market and adapted to socio-cultural norms of Kosovo' (MIA 2018). Based on the interviews, these psychosocial interventions are market-oriented and are informed by two interconnected psychological registers: the correction of attitudes and motivations deemed misaligned with participation in the labour market, and the therapeutic interventions on subjects whose migration-related traumas are

understood to impair their functional capacity to engage in the social and economic life of the country.

The initial emphasis is on aligning individual attitudes and motivations with the normative expectations of the labour market. This is how one counsellor framed the role of psychosocial interventions:

We try to inculcate in their heads that *laziness* and *idleness* are not paid for here or there. To get you out of laziness you have to adapt to the conditions of where you live. They have two choices: go there and be a hard-working employee and integrate yourself there or return and *do your best to employ yourself*. We provide all the opportunities. We professionalize you, rehabilitate you, we teach you how to prepare a business plan, send you to vocational schools, and we open all the doors. But you also need to be interested in finding a job and refuse idleness. (emphases added)

There is a recognition that the successful reintegration depends on and should be preceded by psychological interventions that make the individual attuned to active participation in the labour market. In this sense, psychosocial counselling plays the role of addressing the presumed psychological obstacles that are considered to hold them back from participating in remunerative economic activities. For reintegration actors, there is something internal to the subjects that makes their participation in the labour market difficult. In addition to laziness, it is their mindset, and their passive attitude towards opportunities in Kosovo that are to be addressed by psychosocial techniques. This is how one psychologist spoke about the role of psychosocial interventions:

We provide career counseling to young returnees, and we focus on their self-esteem and their personal views so they can find perspective in Kosovo. What we see among the beneficiaries is that *they do not even consider opportunities in Kosovo, they do not see if there is any opportunity*. They stick to their negative views that Kosovo does not offer jobs or career opportunities [...]. We provide career counseling, which asserts that is essential that these young people first change their mindset about the market opportunities [...]. *We work with their perception* on whether we should always wait for and be dependent on a [welfare] scheme or *instead do something on our own* in order to overcome challenges. (emphases added)

Optimistic, autonomous, proactive subjects who seek and create opportunities for themselves constitute the ethical substance that psychosocial reintegration aspires to foster through its interventions. The representative of NGO 2, an organisation that is focused on providing training and psychosocial mentoring to expelled women, elaborated in more detail the presumed empowering role of psychosocial counseling:

[NGO 2] organizes different workshops and activities. Recently, we had a one-day workshop called 'Love Yourself Activity' about stress management techniques. Psychologists and business experts met repatriated women and tried to offer perspective to these women by encouraging them *to find their entrepreneurial spirit in order to assist them in understanding what they want, if they want to have their own businesses or rather work as employees* [...]. We also provided 120 h of business mentorship to assist them with their business ideas and grant applications [...]. *When they got returned, they had nothing, and they felt oppressed, unfree*. We assisted them in applying and being active and self-reliant. (NGO 2, 2022, emphases added)

These reflections corroborate similar research findings on neoliberal resilience discourse in which the individual agency to overcome constraining structural factors is emphasised and presented as a matter of individual responsibility to deal with the unpredictability of life's contingencies (cf. Scharff 2016). Instead of choosing to 'exit' the context, the

receivers are to change their perspectives towards it and find ways of overcoming the context's real or imagined constraints.

However, psychosocial interventions do not only target perceived attitudinal misalignments. It also operates through a therapeutic register in which impaired market participation is attributed to trauma and depression incurred during the migration cycle. This therapeutic role of psychosocial interventions was articulated by several respondents, and the following response given by the Caritas Switzerland representative speaks about this function:

We have considered that a person cannot benefit from the economic component without first getting psychosocial help, because we have assessed that many of the returnees, upon their arrival, have symptoms of depression that make their adaptation to reality and integration in the economy difficult. To give you an example, we had a case of a person who benefited from the economic component and got employed for three months in a company. We thought that the person is fully reintegrated, and his case was closed, but after some time he contacted the psychologist and told her that he is still having visions or flashbacks from there, or whatever is the proper psychological term [...].

In this quote, the conditional link between the psychosocial and economic components is made explicit. The receiver's depression manifested through 'flashbacks from there,' which interrupts the integration into the market and justifies the involvement of a psychologist's intervention in the process. To get more insights into the link between depression and economic reintegration, I decided to directly contact the organisation KRCT, which is contracted by Caritas Switzerland to provide psychosocial services. In 2020, the organisation published a manual with the aim of 'providing guidelines to all actors about the vulnerabilities of repatriated persons' and 'better understanding how these vulnerabilities may affect the reintegration process' (KRCT 2020, 10). The document states that 'repatriated persons may have been subjected to traumatic experiences during their return' and may suffer from 'stress, anxiety, and depression,' which 'damages their general functioning in society and their adaptation with social norms in Kosovo' (ibid., 2020, 32–33). Drawing on these statements, I asked the psychologist working for KRCT to further elaborate on the relation between traumas and 'damaged social functions', and the psychologist responded:

The issue is that many of the returnees have experienced traumas during their migration cycle, on their way to destination countries, their stay there, and, in most cases, [during] their forced return. So, in one way or another, they may have depression, and their *social function is affected* in different ways. For instance, a mother who suffers from depression because she has had a traumatic experience [...] is not able to wake up in the morning, take care of her kids, and perform her daily tasks [...] That person would have problems adapting to [societal] norms in the sense that it is difficult in our culture to understand a person who lies in bed all day. [...] *It is also about their functioning in the labor market.* If someone experiences a trauma or feels spiritually broken because of an event, she may not feel ready to participate in the labor market, to overcome [market] challenges. In Kosovo, it is a challenge to find a job. But even if that person has found a job, if the psychological side is not addressed, the *performance will be poor* [...]. The depressed person will have difficulties in waking up in the morning, in respecting the work schedule [...]. (emphases added).

There are two elements that stand out in the answers about the relationship between the psychological condition and the reintegration process that invite attention. The first is

that there is an acknowledgment that the migration experience may have been a traumatising event for the irregular migrants, and that traumas incurred in the host state may have detrimental effects on their prospects in the country of citizenship. Here, it is possible to infer the ‘cancelling out’ effect of reintegration assistance, which, through subtle, neoliberal interventions, addresses the negative consequences of coercive interventions during the expulsion procedure. By addressing the detrimental effects of prior coercive measures, psychosocial counselling ameliorates these consequences and stabilises the subjects from traumas originating elsewhere. The second element is that treating ‘depression’ and ‘traumas’ is not an objective in itself but rather a necessary intervention of aligning the subject with social and economic norms in Kosovo. Addressing depression is not grounded primarily on humanitarian principles of alleviating the suffering that the individual may experience because of depressive symptoms. Instead, depression is to be dealt with because it stands in the way of reintegration, the performance of social/gendered roles in Kosovar society (motherhood, womanhood), and, crucially, their desire and readiness to find and keep a job (active job-seeking, prudent employee).

The telos of reintegration: deterring irregular re-migration and manufacturing ‘proper’ mobile subjects

To get a grasp on the aspirations that reintegration actors in Kosovo have in engaging with expelled irregular migrants, I asked them about the end goals they want to achieve by giving reintegration assistance. The responses brought into the picture the link between reintegration techniques and their expected effect in deterring irregular migration. In this section, the analysis delves into this link that respondents made between reintegration assistance and its presumed effects in deterring irregular migration. The end of irregular remigration as an end goal of reintegration assistance came to the fore as many respondents made a direct link between the subjectivities that they aim to foster through their measures and their supposedly deterrent effect on irregular re-migration. Asked about how they would define a successful reintegration case, the KRCT psychologist responded:

The intention of sustainable psychosocial reintegration is that these persons are empowered psychologically so they are ready to function in Kosovo, and, as a positive consequence of this, they do not migrate again to Western countries ... We advise them that all of the support that we give to them is to their benefit, to reintegrate, to be empowered, and [we tell them] please focus on the present, you are here now. We guide them on how to build a future in Kosovo. (emphases added)

The ‘empowered psychological’ individual who has become ‘a functional member of society,’ is assumed to have broken the loop effect between structural and individual factors that led to irregular migration. Reintegration interventions are thought to have such a transformative effect on both individual predispositions and material conditions that migrating again irregularly does not appear as a choice. Through reintegration measures, the receivers are expected to address the individual predispositions of their ‘irregularity’ by coming to terms with their vulnerabilities and establishing economic livelihoods in Kosovo. On this point, this is how the EU officer in charge of coordinating

migration policy reforms in Kosovo expressed optimism about the effects of reintegration policy:

Well, you know, if reintegration is sustainable, you have these people staying. The thing is to give them some economic livelihoods or give them some jobs [...]. So, they won't go back, they won't use irregular channels to go back again, and I would also say that would contribute to the awareness that they do not benefit by going irregularly ... (emphases added)

The problem of irregularity appears to be solved. Both the material and psychological conditions of irregularity are presented as being addressed through the creation of an economic livelihood in Kosovo, combined with a reflexive individual who is aware of the problems of living as an irregular migrant.

However, these interventions are not just about restricting and controlling irregular migration drives. While its primary end is to ensure that these people do not initiate another irregular journey, these interventions do not foreclose the possibility of individuals engaging in future mobility through authorised channels. On the contrary, interventions that are assumed to address their irregularity are considered to having a positive effect in preparing these individuals towards legal migration channels. The findings show that the eliciting of self-reflexive and market-oriented individuals is considered imperative in containing their irregular drives and, at the same time, preparing them for the European labour markets. The broader ambitions of reintegration are about 'freeing' the individuals from migration as a necessity and making it a matter of choice. This is how the representatives of Caritas made this case:

[...] what we do with the professional skilling of the repatriated is that if a person wants to go back [to Europe] he will fill a labor gap in that country. We all know that with the existing wage difference [between Kosovo and the EU] the tendency of Kosovars to migrate will continue, but it will be good for the host countries. They will be made ready to enter the German factories immediately upon their arrival for the second time.

The subject is not just stabilised from irregular drives, but in the process is made a 'proper' im/mobile subject. Reintegration thus serves to capacitate them to be economically productive in Kosovo's market, to improve their material conditions, and to enhance their future chances to compete in foreign labour markets. In other words, reintegration assistance could be considered a corrective mechanism over mobility that not only addresses the conditions of irregularity but also creates conditions for individuals to engage in proper forms of labour migration in the future. When asked if, based on their experience, it is common among the receivers to migrate again to the EU countries, one psychologist responded:

To tell you the truth, we do not stop anyone from their migration ambition ... The reason why we work with their mindset is to make them think if they know where they are going, because in many cases they do not know where they are heading to ... have never been there before and think that once in an airport the jobs will be waiting for them. And I would insist that we have achieved good results, because I know some cases that have returned [to the EU], but in a regular manner.

Equipped with skills and having the right expectations and mindset about what migration is and how it should be conducted, expelled migrants are expected to be ready to make the choice of migrating through 'proper', legal channels. This dual

framing of reintegration as both preventive and enabling resonates with existing research that has shown how sustainable reintegration has come to function simultaneously as a tool to curb irregular remigration and as a mechanism that prepares the expelled migrants for regular mobility pathways in the future (Majidi and Nozarian 2019; Marino and Lietaert 2022). Sustainable reintegration, with all the expectations that it entails, becomes both an index of individual empowerment to resist their irregular drives and of an enhanced individual capacity to migrate through the authorised, state-sanctioned migration pathways.

Conclusion

This article provided empirical and analytical insights into the work of reintegration actors in Kosovo, who assist expelled irregular migrants in the post-expulsion period. Given the increased scholarly attention to the work of AVRR actors in the pre-expulsion process in host countries, the article shifted the focus towards knowledges and the techniques that inform the work of reintegration actors in the post-expulsion phase. The aim was to examine the politics of reintegration and its role in the governance of irregular migration, beyond the current policy-relevant research that has approached it mainly from a technical perspective. In this regard, using interviews with reintegration actors in Kosovo, the article conceptualised reintegration assistance as a technology of governance that subjects expelled migrants to neoliberal interventions. Methodologically, the analysis relied on CDA to locate neoliberalism as the main discursive and social practice that informs the daily engagement of reintegration actors with the expelled irregular migrants.

For the analysis, the article relied on the five dimensions of the 'analytics of government' framework (Dean 2009) to look at the knowledge that reintegration actors have about irregular migration (fields of visibilities), the subjects they assist (episteme), the techniques and subjectivities they aim to foster (techne and ethos), and the broader goals they want to achieve through their interventions (telos). The findings showed that these actors understand irregular migration as emerging from the intersection of economic and individual factors. However, while the lack of economic opportunities is acknowledged, the article argued that at the level of interventions, reintegration actors intervene on the presumed individual psychological predispositions towards irregular migration. The analysis also showed how expelled irregular migrants are framed as psychologically vulnerable individuals that are susceptible to believe misinformation, collective moods, or deceptive promises. It further argued that reintegration assistance is given to address these psychological predispositions because it is *in* the individual that the problem of irregular migration can be managed, and, consequently, it is the individual who needs to be intervened with and 'empowered' to ward off future irregular drives. Regarding the ambitions, the article argued that reintegration actors aim to deter future irregular migration but also create 'proper' mobile subjects who, in the future, could engage in regular, legal migration.

By engaging with the work of reintegration actors in the countries of citizenship, the article complements the critical research on AVRR actors that have examined how these actors use subtle techniques to elicit migrants' compliance to their expulsion orders. Extending the spatial and temporal analytical scope of the existing critical scholarship

towards the politics that underpin the post-expulsion interventions, the article shows that the role of reintegration actors is to achieve a broader migration governance objective. As the interventions take place after expulsion, the objective is no longer the physical removal of the irregular migrant, but addressing the perceived psychological factors that lead to irregular migration in the first place by subjecting expelled migrants to mechanisms that aim to transform their relationship with the markets, mobility, and their attitudes towards themselves. Thus, the article shows how expulsion to the country of citizenship does not represent the last act, a kind of finality, of the migration saga for the expelled irregular migrant. Rather, it represents yet another stage in which their 'irregularity' is addressed as a psycho-economic condition and new forms of disciplined, state-sanctioned mobility pathways enter their field of possibility.

Notes

1. At the global level, the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration, adopted by UN members (2018), though legally non-binding, calls for all parties to ensure that "return and readmission are safe and dignified and in accordance with obligations under international law and that reintegration into home communities is sustainable" (UN Assembly 2018: 15). At the regional level, the EU Commission has adopted the Strategy for European Return and Reintegration (2021) which highlight the importance of 'voluntary returns' and 'sustainable reintegration' as cost-effective and humane solutions for the expulsion of irregular migrants.
2. See: <https://mpb.rks-gov.net/f/40/Publikime>
3. See: <https://www.facebook.com/DIMAKKosovo/videos>
4. The psychological factors of the individuals, such as being pessimistic, depressed, or feeling frustrated with socioeconomic situation in a region, have become part of IOM's predictive analyses. For more, see: Dennison 2022; 2024.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the author and Malmö University Library. The data are not publicly available due to containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

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