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Assessing Disengagement
from Violent Extremism in
the Western Balkans:
**Institutional Judgement
under Uncertainty**

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Foreword

More than a decade has passed since the first nationals of the Western Balkans travelled to Syria and Iraq. The initial response — mobilisation of legal frameworks, criminalisation of foreign-fighter participation, the prosecution and incarceration of those who returned — has now given way to a less visible and considerably more demanding phase. Many of those convicted have already been released. Many more will be released in the coming years. The question that animates this volume is the question that confronts the institutions tasked with making those decisions: how do we know that someone is ready to be released?

When we began this work, we expected to find a more developed answer than we did. The literature on disengagement from violent extremism has grown rapidly in recent years, and the institutional architecture of prevention and rehabilitation in the region has expanded accordingly. Risk-assessment instruments are available, training has been delivered, strategic documents have been written and revised. We anticipated that the difficulty of disengagement assessment lay primarily in the application of these tools to particular cases. What we encountered instead was a deeper and more honest difficulty: the recognition, among the practitioners we interviewed, that what can be observed about an individual is not the same thing as what can be known, and that decisions about release must be made in the gap between the two.

This recognition is not a failure of practice. It is, in our view, the most important professional insight that emerges from the empirical material assembled in this volume. The practitioners we spoke with — prison psychologists, social workers, educators, probation officers, civil-society and municipal actors — work daily at the limits of what institutional knowledge can establish. Their professional caution, their reflexive doubt, and their reluctance to certify outcomes that they know they cannot verify are not signs of inadequacy. They are signs of professional integrity. One of our aims in this volume is to make that integrity visible.

The volume is the product of sustained collaboration across four jurisdictions: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. The legal frameworks, institutional architectures, and politi-

cal conditions of these four countries are not identical, and the empirical material the chapters present reflects this variation. What is striking, however, is the convergence the comparative chapter draws out. The constraints under which practitioners work, the interpretive challenges they face, and the cautious judgements they reach are recognisable across all four cases. Disengagement, as the comparative analysis argues, is not so much discovered by institutional assessment as constructed through it. We hope this argument provides a useful starting point for conversations across the region, and beyond.

We are conscious of two limits to what the volume offers. First, this is not a programme evaluation. We do not claim to assess whether particular rehabilitation interventions reduce reoffending, nor to predict the trajectories of individuals. Our focus is on institutional practice — on how decisions are made, not on whether they prove to be correct. Second, this is not the final word. The cohort of returnees, family members, and individuals convicted of terrorism-related offences in the Western Balkans is heterogeneous, and the institutional responses are still evolving. The findings here describe a moment in an ongoing process. We expect, and hope, that further research will refine, complicate, and in some respects revise what we present.

The volume would not have been possible without the willingness of institutions to open their doors to the research team. We are aware that the questions we asked were not always comfortable, and that the candour of the practitioners who agreed to be interviewed required trust that was not theirs to give lightly. We are grateful for that trust, and we have done our best to honour it by representing the practitioners' professional reasoning as faithfully as the constraints of academic writing allow.

This volume is offered to policymakers, practitioners, and researchers who share the conviction that decisions of this consequence deserve the most honest analytical engagement we can collectively bring to them. If it contributes, even modestly, to that engagement, it will have done its work.

The Editors

Sarajevo, 2026

Acknowledgements

This volume is the product of sustained collaboration between researchers, practitioners, and institutional partners across the Western Balkans. The editors are grateful to all those whose participation made the work possible.

The study would not have been feasible without the cooperation of the institutions that opened their doors to the research team. The editors thank the General Directorate of Prisons of Albania, the National Centre for Countering Violent Extremism of Albania, the State Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina and State Prison of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the entity prison administrations of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska, the Kosovo Correctional Service, the Probation Service of Kosovo, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Kosovo, the Directorate for the Execution of Sanctions of North Macedonia, the Ministry of Interior of North Macedonia, and the municipal authorities and social-welfare services that engaged with the research across the four jurisdictions. The cooperation of these institutions, often under conditions of significant operational pressure, has been essential to the empirical depth of the volume.

The editors are particularly indebted to the practitioners who agreed to share their professional experience through interviews: prison psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, educators, probation officers, and institutional administrators, alongside civil-society practitioners and policy-level interlocutors. Their willingness to speak candidly about the limits as well as the strengths of their work has been the foundation of the analysis presented here.

The editors thank the contributing authors — Erinda Bllaca Ndroqi, Rudinë Jakupi, Delajda Kurić-Hodžić and Afrodita Musliu — for their country-level expertise and for sustained engagement throughout the analytical phase of the project. They carried the fieldwork and analytical work across the four jurisdictions. The reviewers, Majda Halilović and Sead Turčalo, provided detailed and constructive feedback that strengthened the manuscript considerably. The editors are grateful for the time and care they invested in the review.

The research and publication were supported by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Sarajevo, whose engagement with the questions addressed in this volume has been a consistent source of intellectual and practical encouragement. The volume was prepared at the Atlantic Initiative in Sarajevo. The editors thank colleagues at the Atlantic Initiative for their ongoing institutional support, and the wider research community in the Western Balkans for the conversations and exchanges that have shaped the work. Any errors or shortcomings remain the responsibility of the editors and authors alone.

The Editors

Sarajevo, 2026

List of Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used throughout the volume.

BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
CoE	Council of Europe
CPT	European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment
CREST	Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats
CTC Sentinel	Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel
CTED	United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate
CVE	Countering Violent Extremism
ERG22+	Extremism Risk Guidelines 22+
EU	European Union
FTF	Foreign Terrorist Fighter
HCR-20	Historical Clinical Risk Management-20 (violence risk assessment instrument)
ICCT	International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (The Hague)
ICSR	International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, King's College London
KPZ	Kazneno-popravni zavod (Correctional Facility, Bosnia and Herzegovina)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
P/CVE	Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism
RAN	Radicalisation Awareness Network (European Commission)
RAND	RAND Corporation
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
US	United States
USIP	United States Institute of Peace
VERA-2R	Violent Extremism Risk Assessment, Version 2 Revised

About the Lead Authors and Editors, Contributing Authors, and Reviewers

This section introduces the people behind *Assessing Disengagement from Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans: Institutional Judgement under Uncertainty*. It brings together the lead authors and editors who shaped the volume's overall direction, the contributing authors responsible for the country and thematic chapters, and the reviewers whose critical reading helped refine the manuscript prior to publication.

The biographies that follow are deliberately concise. They are intended to situate each contributor's institutional affiliation, areas of expertise, and prior engagement with the questions addressed in this monograph, disengagement, rehabilitation, reintegration, and the institutional assessment of individuals convicted of terrorism-related offences, without substituting for the full record of their work.

Lead Authors and Editors

Vlado Azinović is Full Professor at the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Sarajevo, Department of Security and Peace Studies. His research focuses on terrorism, violent extremism, foreign-fighter mobilisation, radicalisation, and the rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees from conflict zones, with particular emphasis on the Western Balkans. He is the editor of *Between Salvation and Terror: Radicalization and the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in the Western Balkans* and co-author of studies on security risks and foreign-fighter dynamics in the region. Azinović has advised government institutions, security agencies, judicial actors, and international organisations on counterterrorism policy, repatriation, rehabilitation, and reintegration of returning FTFs and their families. He is a co-founder and Secretary General of the non-governmental organisation Atlantic Initiative.

Mirza Buljubašić is Assistant Professor in the Department of Criminology at the University of Sarajevo and Postdoctoral Researcher on the project *Transitional Punishment: Moderating Legacies of Mass Atrocities? A Case Study of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Czechia* at the Netherlands Institute for the Study of Crime and Law Enforcement. His research focuses on atrocity crimes, terrorism, extremism, and intergenerational transmission after mass violence, with recent work also addressing extreme right movements in Southeast Europe. He serves as an Executive Board Member of the European Society of Criminology. He has contributed to policy and practitioner work on violent extremism, sentencing enforcement, and reintegration in the Balkans, including through consultancy for the Council of Europe and the European Union. His publications have appeared with Oxford University Press, Routledge, and Palgrave.

Nejra Veljan is a Senior Researcher and Project Manager at the Atlantic Initiative in Sarajevo, where she leads work on violent extremism and supports institutional efforts on the reintegration of individuals returning from conflict zones. She holds a PhD from De Montfort University and both an MA in Security Studies and an LLM from the University of Sarajevo. Her research addresses radicalisation, violent extremism, and gender-based crimes, drawing on mixed-method and OSINT approaches. She has collab-

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Contributing Authors

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Rudinë Jakupi is a PhD candidate at the School of Law and Government, Dublin City University, researching security, gender, and security sector reform in post-conflict settings, with particular attention to NATO's Women, Peace and Security agenda and its diffusion and adaptation in Kosovo. She has worked extensively on counter-terrorism, preventing and countering violent extremism, rehabilitation and reintegration, and regional security in the Western Balkans. She previously served as Senior Officer for Security and Stability at the Embassy of the Netherlands in Pristina, covering security developments, P/CVE, social polarisation, and regional dynamics. As a former researcher at the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, she authored and contributed to several studies on countering violent extremism and community resilience in Kosovo.

Delajda Kurić-Hodžić holds a master's degree in criminology and serves as Head of the Treatment Service for Convicted Persons at the State Institution for the Execution of Criminal Sanctions, Detention, and Other Measures of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Her work focuses on the treatment, rehabilitation, resocialisation, and reintegration of persons convicted of terrorism and violent extremism offences. She is a member of Council of Europe working groups on the management of violent extremist prisoners, with particular attention to deradicalisation, reintegration, and post-release support. She contributed to the *Syllabus for Basic and Specialist Training of Prison Staff Working with Violent Extremist Prisoners* and to guidelines on the mental health and well-being of prison officers working with this population.

Afrodita Musliu is Founder and Executive Director of NEXUS Civil Concept in North Macedonia. Her work focuses on the rehabilitation and reintegration of violent extremist offenders and returnees, alongside the prevention of radicalisation, youth resilience, media literacy, cyber security, and intercultural dialogue. She has contributed to the development of national strategies, training curricula, and applied research supporting government institutions, local multidisciplinary teams, and youth organisations. She is a certified OSCE trainer and a member of regional and international expert networks, including the UNESCO Chair in Prevention of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism (UNESCO-PREV) and the OSCE Regional Network on P/CVE.

Reviewers

Majda Halilović is Head of Research and Policy at the Atlantic Initiative in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and a family systems psychotherapist. Her work focuses on gender-based violence, hate speech and hate crimes, violent extremism, radicalisation, and security-related social research. She has extensive experience in qualitative research, policy analysis, curriculum development, and professional training for judicial institutions, law enforcement agencies, and civil society organisations. She is the author and co-author of several recent publications, including *Words That Hurt: The Consequences of Hate Speech in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, *Gender and Violent Extremism*, and *Radicalization to Reintegration: Narratives of Bosnian Women in and Beyond ISIL*.

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Preface

This book examines one of the most difficult questions facing institutions that respond to violent extremism: how can disengagement be assessed when the most important forms of change are only partly visible?

Across criminal justice systems, decisions about detention, release, supervision, rehabilitation, and reintegration require institutions to make judgements about people whose future conduct cannot be known with certainty. These judgements are always difficult. In cases involving individuals convicted of terrorism related offences, they become especially sensitive. Public expectations are high, political pressure is often intense, and the consequences of error can be severe. Yet the information available to practitioners is rarely complete. Institutions must assess change through behaviour, interaction, participation, documentation, and professional interpretation. They are asked to make decisions in the space between what can be observed and what cannot be known.

This study was developed in response to that problem. It does not seek to determine whether particular individuals have truly disengaged from violent extremism. Nor does it evaluate specific rehabilitation programmes or claim to predict future behaviour. Its concern is different. The book asks how practitioners and institutions interpret disengagement in practice, how they make sense of partial and sometimes contradictory indicators, and how they translate professional judgement into decisions at the point of release.

The analysis draws on qualitative research conducted across Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. These four cases share experiences of foreign fighter mobilisation, return, prosecution, imprisonment, and reintegration. They also differ in legal frameworks, institutional arrangements, sentencing practices, professional capacity, and post release coordination. This combination of shared challenge and institutional variation allows the study to examine how disengagement is assessed across different settings, while also identifying common pressures faced by practitioners throughout the region.

The book focuses on the perspectives of those directly involved in institutional assessment and case management. These include prison staff, psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, educators, probation officers, civil society practitioners, municipal actors, and institutional administrators. Their accounts show that assessment is not a simple technical exercise. It is a form of professional reasoning carried out under uncertainty. Practitioners observe behaviour, assess consistency, interpret communication, consider family and social context, review participation in programmes, and document signs of progress or concern. Yet they also recognise the limits of what these indicators can prove.

A central finding of the book is that disengagement is not directly discovered by institutions as a fixed inner state. It is made institutionally meaningful through assessment practices. Observable stability, compliance, cooperation, or programme participation may all inform judgement, but none can confirm cognitive change. At the same time, doubt alone cannot be the basis of practice. Institutions must still decide how to classify risk, how to prepare release, how to organise supervision, and how to support reintegration. The challenge is therefore not to eliminate uncertainty, but to manage it responsibly.

This perspective has important implications. It cautions against unrealistic expectations that assessment tools can verify disengagement with certainty. It also cautions against dismissing professional judgement as merely subjective. Tools, documentation, multidisciplinary discussion, and professional discretion all matter, but they are strongest when they support each other. More reliable assessment depends not only on forms and procedures, but also on continuity of information, trained staff, institutional memory, and the ability to carry case understanding from prison into the community.

The release phase receives particular attention throughout the book. Release is not simply the end of imprisonment. It is a critical point at which uncertainty, accountability, and institutional responsibility converge. Practitioners must draw together what has been observed in custody and translate it into decisions about supervision and support in less controlled environments. Where information transfer is weak, where professional roles are unclear, or where community services are underdeveloped, assessment becomes more fragile. For this reason, the book treats release not as a final judgement on disengagement, but as a moment that requires renewed coordination and continued assessment.

The book is intended for policymakers, practitioners, researchers, and international partners working on violent extremism, criminal justice, rehabilitation, and reintegration. It does not offer a universal model or a simple checklist. Instead, it provides an empirically grounded account of how assessment is actually carried out, what practitioners can reasonably know, and where institutional expectations need to be adjusted.

Readers interested in the conceptual argument may begin with the introduction and conceptual chapter. Those interested in the regional context will find the country chapters useful as standalone analyses of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. The comparative chapter brings these cases together and identifies patterns that cut across national systems. The conclusion sets out what these findings mean for assessment practice, policy design, and future research.

The aim of this book is to support a more honest conversation about disengagement from violent extremism. Institutions cannot be expected to certify inner transformation. They can, however, be supported to make better grounded, better documented, and more transparent judgements under uncertainty. Recognising the limits of assessment is not a weakness. It is the starting point for more responsible practice.

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1. Research Problem and Rationale

Disengagement from violent extremism has most often been examined as an individual process involving change in beliefs, motivations, and identity (Horgan, 2009; Bjørgo & Horgan, 2009; Altier et al., 2014; for deradicalisation see Koehler, 2017). The criminal justice institutions responsible for detention, supervision, and release, however, do not have direct access to such cognitive changes. In practice, they must construct judgements about disengagement under conditions of uncertainty, drawing on observable behaviour, partial information, and professional interpretation.

This produces a fundamental gap between how disengagement is conceptualised in research and how it is assessed in institutional settings. While the scholarship has generated substantial insight into processes of radicalisation, recruitment, and exit, far less empirical attention has been devoted to how disengagement is interpreted and acted upon within systems responsible for custody, supervision, and release (Disley et al., 2012; OSCE, 2020; UNODC, 2016; Council of Europe, 2016). These decisions are made at critical institutional moments — particularly during imprisonment and at the point of release — where uncertainty is high, information is incomplete, and the consequences of error are significant.

Within criminal justice practice, disengagement becomes an institutional judgement rather than a directly verifiable psychological state. Practitioners infer it from behaviour, interaction, responsiveness to institutional authority, relational positioning, and available documentation. The present study examines how such judgements are formed, justified, and used in decisions about release, supervision, and reintegration.

The countries of South-Eastern Europe provide a particularly relevant setting for examining these dynamics. Since 2012, the region has experienced significant mobilisation of foreign terrorist fighters, followed by successive waves of return and repatriation. Available regional estimates indicate that more than 1,000 individuals travelled to Syria and Iraq, with several hundred subsequently returning, including women and children (Azinović & Bećirević, 2017; Azinović, 2018, 2020; Holmer & Shtuni, 2017; Metodieva, 2022; Shtuni, 2019, 2022). These developments have required criminal justice systems to shift from a primary focus on prosecution and incapacitation toward the longer-term challenges of detention

management, rehabilitation planning, and reintegration support — often within systems characterised by limited specialist capacity and fragmented institutional coordination.

Sentencing practices in several jurisdictions further intensify these challenges. Comparative evidence suggests that terrorism-related offences frequently result in relatively short custodial sentences, including cases resolved through plea arrangements (Buljubašić & Azinović, 2023; Shtuni, 2019, 2022). Short sentences limit opportunities for sustained observation, structured intervention, and longitudinal documentation of change. At the same time, large proportions of those convicted have already returned to the community, increasing the importance of how readiness for release is assessed, and how uncertainty is managed in the absence of prolonged institutional engagement.

At the European level, institutional responses are shaped by policy frameworks that emphasise risk assessment, case management, and inter-institutional coordination (Council of Europe, 2016; OSCE, 2020; UNODC, 2016). Translating such guidance into coherent practice, however, remains difficult, particularly in contexts marked by resource constraints, limited specialist expertise, and fragmented information-sharing. Release therefore emerges not as a single administrative act but as a coordination point requiring the transfer of case understanding across institutional boundaries. Where such continuity is weak, documentation becomes fragmented, professional judgement turns defensive, and interpretations of disengagement remain inconsistent across custodial and post-release phases (Disley et al., 2012).

Against this background, the study examines how institutional actors in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia interpret and assess disengagement at the point of release. By focusing on institutional practice rather than solely on individual narratives or programme outcomes, it shows how judgements about disengagement are constructed under conditions of uncertainty, constraint, and accountability.

1.2. Conceptual Positioning and Scope

The study focuses on perpetrator disengagement from violent extremism as it is understood and assessed within criminal justice institutions. The literature has consistently shown that behavioural withdrawal from violence does not reliably coincide with ideological transformation, and that internal motivational change is difficult to observe, verify, or sustain over time (Bjørge & Horgan, 2009; Horgan, 2009; Silke, 2011). While qualitative interviews and programme evaluations provide important insight into exit processes, they remain constrained by retrospective rationalisation, social-desirability bias, and limited access to high-risk populations. Within custodial and supervisory settings these challenges are further intensified by security constraints, restricted opportunities for open engagement, and the strategic incentives individuals face as release approaches.

Institutional actors are therefore rarely in a position to determine whether deep cognitive or ideological transformation has occurred. They infer disengagement indirectly, through observable conduct, relational patterns, emotional regulation, and responsiveness to institutional authority. These indicators are interpreted through professional judgement, documented in institutional records, and translated into assessments that guide release planning and post-release supervision. Disengagement thus functions less as a verifiable psychological state than as an institutional judgement that structures decision-making under conditions of unavoidable uncertainty (Lloyd & Dean, 2015; Jensen et al., 2024).

The study explicitly adopts this epistemological position. Rather than attempting to resolve uncertainty through stronger measurement or predictive claims, it examines how institutional actors work within uncertainty: how they interpret ambiguous indicators, negotiate doubt, and justify assessment judgements in practice. This perspective does not deny the possibility or significance of individual transformation. It acknowledges the limits of institutional knowledge and focuses on how criminal justice systems act on partial, indirect, and context-dependent evidence.

Analytically, the study approaches disengagement through a set of interrelated dimensions that structure institutional assessment in practice. These include observable behaviour, relational positioning, engagement with institutional processes, documentation practices, and professional judgement. Together, these dimensions capture how disengagement becomes legible within institutional settings — not as a single indicator or outcome but as a pattern inferred over time and across contexts.

The objectives of the study are threefold. First, it examines how disengagement is constructed and interpreted within everyday institutional practice, rather than how it is defined in theory. Second, it identifies shared interpretive patterns and cross-national variation in assessment practices, highlighting how legal frameworks, institutional capacity, sentencing structures, and professional cultures shape judgements about disengagement. Third, it situates these findings within broader debates on risk assessment, rehabilitation, and reintegration, contributing to a grounded understanding of the limits and possibilities of institutional knowledge in terrorism-related cases.

1.3. Contribution of the Study

The study makes three interrelated contributions, at the conceptual, empirical, and practical levels.

At the conceptual level, it reframes disengagement as an institutionally mediated judgement rather than a directly observable psychological outcome. While existing scholarship distinguishes disengagement from deradicalisation, empirical research has often struggled to operationalise this distinction beyond ideological benchmarks. By focusing on how institutional actors interpret behavioural, relational, and contextual indicators in practice, the study aligns conceptual understandings of disengagement with the realities of criminal justice work. Disengagement is treated as a working judgement based on observation, documentation, professional interpretation, and the quality of information available at the time of assessment.

At the empirical level, the study provides original qualitative evidence from four jurisdictions. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with prison staff, probation officers, psychologists, social workers, and institutional administrators — complemented by analysis of institutional documentation — it offers comparative insight into how similar behaviours and expressions are interpreted across different institutional settings. The analysis highlights the central role of ambiguity, partial change, and interpretive caution, elements that are often under-represented in policy-oriented evaluations of rehabilitation and reintegration programmes.

At the level of policy and practice, the study clarifies the structural and professional conditions under which disengagement assessments are produced. Rather than assuming that improved tools alone can

resolve assessment challenges, it emphasises the role of interpretive labour, organisational constraints, and accountability pressures in shaping institutional judgements. This perspective supports more realistic expectations of assessment practice and points toward incremental improvements in documentation continuity, professional support, and inter-institutional coordination, rather than toward claims of definitive prediction or certainty.

1.4. Structure of the Monograph

Chapter 1 introduces the research problem, outlines the analytical focus, and situates the study within the existing scholarship on violent extremism, disengagement, and institutional assessment.

Chapter 2 develops the conceptual framework and reviews relevant literature, focusing on disengagement as a behavioural and institutional process and examining how assessment has been approached in prior research and policy guidance.

Chapter 3 provides the regional and institutional context, outlining key legal, policy, and organisational developments related to terrorism-related offending and countering violent extremism across the Western Balkans.

Chapter 4 details the research design and methodology, including data sources, case selection, analytical strategy, and ethical considerations.

Chapters 5 to 8 present in-depth country analyses of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. Each chapter examines institutional context, assessment practices, practitioner interpretations of disengagement, observed trajectories of change, and the constraints shaping professional judgement.

Chapter 9 offers a comparative analysis across the four cases, identifying shared patterns, points of divergence, and the institutional logics that structure assessment practices.

Chapter 10 synthesises the findings across four sections: what the study found, what the findings mean for assessment, what they imply for policy and practice, and what they suggest for the future research agenda. Particular attention is given throughout to the release phase as a moment of heightened uncertainty.

Chapter 2. Conceptualising and Assessing Disengagement from Violent Extremism

This chapter establishes the conceptual foundations of the study. It reviews the central debates on disengagement from violent extremism, distinguishes disengagement from related processes such as deradicalisation and desistance, and examines the epistemic and institutional constraints under which assessment takes place. The chapter closes by setting out the analytical framework that guides the empirical analysis in subsequent chapters.

2.1. Disengagement and Deradicalisation as Distinct Concepts

Research on violent extremism has long focused on explaining how individuals come to adopt beliefs and practices that justify political violence. Within this body of work, radicalisation and deradicalisation have dominated conceptual debates, often framed as opposing cognitive processes through which individuals either adopt or abandon extremist belief systems (Horgan, 2009; Neumann, 2010). By comparison, disengagement has received less sustained theoretical attention, despite its direct relevance for criminal justice institutions responsible for the custody, supervision, and release of individuals convicted of terrorism-related offences (Morrison et al., 2021; Windisch et al., 2016).

The distinction between disengagement and deradicalisation is now widely recognised. Disengagement refers primarily to behavioural change, involving withdrawal from violent activity, extremist organisations, or operational networks. Deradicalisation, by contrast, denotes cognitive or ideological change, including the rejection or substantial moderation of beliefs that previously justified violence (Horgan, 2009; Horgan & Braddock, 2010; Silke, 2011). Empirical research consistently shows that these processes do not necessarily occur simultaneously or follow the same trajectory.

Several adjacent concepts are frequently used alongside disengagement but refer to analytically distinct processes. Resocialisation generally denotes adjustment to social norms and roles following withdrawal from extremist involvement, while reintegration refers to practical outcomes such as stable housing, employment, social support, and lawful participation in society (Veldhuis, 2015; Zeuthen, 2021). Exit is often used to describe the act of leaving an extremist group or network. Desistance focuses more narrowly on the cessation of offending behaviour, drawing on criminological traditions (Bjørge, 2008; Corner

& Gill, 2020). While these concepts overlap empirically, disengagement is analytically broader, capturing behavioural withdrawal alongside evolving relational positioning and interpretive change. This distinction is important for assessment because custodial and supervisory settings are better positioned to observe conduct than belief.

2.2. Ideology, Behaviour, and the Limits of Ideological Benchmarks

A second, related debate concerns the role of ideology in assessing disengagement. Some approaches to assessing change prioritise the rejection of extremist ideology, treating belief change as the central marker of meaningful transformation. Others emphasise the cessation of violent behaviour as the operational outcome that matters most, regardless of whether internal beliefs have shifted (Horgan, 2009; Silke, 2011).

Empirical evidence increasingly supports the second position. Individuals may continue to hold extremist beliefs while withdrawing from violent action (Altier et al., 2014; Bjørge & Horgan, 2009). At the same time, the assumption that ideological change must precede behavioural withdrawal has been criticised as both empirically unwarranted and methodologically problematic, because it requires institutional actors to verify internal states that cannot be directly observed (Horgan & Braddock, 2010).

For institutional assessment, the implication is significant. Treating ideological change as a primary benchmark introduces an evidentiary requirement that institutions are structurally unable to meet. Verbal declarations of changed belief can be strategic, and silence or continued religious or political identification cannot be reliably interpreted as evidence of persistent extremism. Assessment frameworks that rely heavily on ideological indicators therefore risk producing either overconfident judgements based on rhetorical expression or unduly cautious judgements that discount any evidence of behavioural stability.

This study therefore treats behavioural withdrawal — sustained over time and across contexts — as the central observable dimension of disengagement, while recognising that behaviour alone is not sufficient. The interpretive challenge for institutions lies in distinguishing durable behavioural change from strategic adaptation, and in making this distinction with limited access to the internal processes that shape conduct. Behaviour is therefore treated in this study as the main available evidence for assessment, not as proof of internal transformation.

2.3. Psychological and Relational Dimensions of Disengagement as a Non-Linear Process

Disengagement is not a single decisive event but a process that unfolds unevenly across multiple domains. Psychological dimensions — including emotional regulation, identity development, trauma, and the search for personal significance — interact with relational dynamics such as family ties, peer networks, and social embeddedness (Barrelle, 2015; Kruglanski et al., 2014; Kruglanski et al., 2022; McCauley & Moskalkenko, 2011). These domains do not always move in step. An individual may demonstrate behavioural withdrawal while continuing to identify with an extremist worldview, or may reject violence in principle while retaining relationships with former associates.

The non-linear character of disengagement has been documented across a wide range of contexts and ideological traditions. Trajectories are shaped by personal experience, opportunity structures, and life events that may catalyse change in one domain without producing change in another (Altier et al., 2017; Jensen & Simi, 2019). Disillusionment with the group, exposure to alternative narratives, the death or injury of close associates, and the formation of new social ties have all been identified as factors that may contribute to disengagement, but none operates as a sufficient cause on its own.

This complexity has direct consequences for assessment. Indicators that emerge in one domain — for example, increased family contact — cannot be read as a reliable signal of change in others. Practitioners are therefore required to weigh multiple, sometimes contradictory, signals and to form judgements that account for the partial and non-linear nature of the process. The implication is that disengagement assessment cannot be reduced to a checklist; it requires interpretation across domains and over time.

Relational dimensions deserve particular attention. The literature suggests that disengagement is closely linked to changes in social ties, including distancing from extremist peers and the development of new, non-extremist relationships (Barrelle, 2015; Bjørge & Horgan, 2009; Jensen & Simi, 2019). At the same time, relational change is difficult to observe directly in custodial settings, where contact with the outside world is mediated by institutional control. Practitioners must therefore infer relational positioning from indirect signals: visiting patterns, correspondence, interactions with peers within the institution, and the individual's response to discussion of family or community life.

2.4. Epistemic and Institutional Constraints on Assessing Disengagement

Even where the conceptual distinction between behavioural and ideological change is accepted, the assessment of disengagement remains constrained by what institutional actors can plausibly know. Internal belief and intention cannot be directly observed. Behavioural indicators are mediated by the institutional environment, where incentives, surveillance, and constraint shape what is visible. Relational ties, future plans, and contextual exposures lie largely outside institutional control and observation.

These epistemic limits are amplified by structural constraints. Short custodial sentences in many jurisdictions reduce the time available for sustained observation. Limited specialist expertise — particularly the scarcity of psychologists with experience in terrorism-related cases — narrows the depth of engagement. Fragmented documentation and weak inter-institutional information-sharing disrupt continuity of knowledge between prison, probation, and community services (Disley et al., 2012; Perteshi & Ilazi, 2020; UNODC, 2016).

Political and accountability pressures further shape what can be assessed. Terrorism-related cases attract heightened scrutiny, and the perceived consequences of error are asymmetric: the cost of overestimating disengagement and releasing someone who reoffends is treated as far greater than the cost of underestimating change and prolonging supervision. Decision-makers respond rationally to this asymmetry by adopting cautious interpretive strategies, prioritising defensibility over confident affirmation (Basra & Neumann, 2020; Silke, 2014).

These constraints shape assessment without making it impossible. Institutions document observable conduct, compare information across sources, and decide whether the available evidence is sufficient to support release, supervision, and reintegration decisions.

2.5. Institutional Assessment, Structured Judgement, and Professional Discretion

Institutional assessment of extremist offenders is most commonly organised through structured professional-judgement frameworks. These approaches occupy a middle position between unstructured clinical judgement and actuarial prediction by combining standardised domains of inquiry with professional interpretation. Rather than producing probabilistic forecasts, they provide a shared structure for identifying relevant factors, documenting concerns, and articulating reasoned judgements across institutional settings (Lloyd, 2019; Logan & Lloyd, 2019).

In the context of violent extremism, structured frameworks typically focus on domains such as engagement, intent, capability, social context, and protective factors. Tools such as the VERA-2R and the ERG22+ reflect this logic, organising assessment around patterns of behaviour and situational context rather than relying on abstract notions of radicalisation. As Lloyd and Dean (2015) note, this distinction matters because individuals may identify with extremist ideologies without engaging in violence, while others may disengage behaviourally without abandoning their beliefs. Assessment domains are therefore not treated as independent variables but as elements to be interpreted together through professional formulation.

The literature consistently emphasises that such frameworks function as decision-support tools rather than predictive instruments. Comparative analyses of extremist assessment tools show that they are often misinterpreted as capable of predicting future behaviour with precision, when their primary function is to structure, categorise, and communicate information relevant to case management (van der Heide et al., 2019). Their effectiveness depends less on technical design than on how they are applied within institutional contexts, including assessor training, experience, and organisational support (Lloyd, 2019).

A study of VERA-2R assessments based on judicial files of Dutch convicted terrorists found average interrater agreement ranging from good to excellent, although agreement was low for six indicators (Duits & Kempes, 2023). This supports attention to individual indicators and assessor training without treating structured assessment as a substitute for professional judgement.

Implementation in practice further reflects institutional constraints. Research shows that assessment frameworks are embedded within organisational routines shaped by time pressures, resource limitations, and training gaps. In some contexts, tools are applied as checklist exercises; in others, they support more developed case formulation. These variations influence how indicators are selected, weighted, and interpreted, particularly in cases approaching release (Lloyd, 2019; van der Heide et al., 2019).

Professional judgement therefore remains central to assessment practice. Practitioners draw on experiential knowledge, longitudinal observation, and relational familiarity when interpreting behaviour and evaluating risk. Formal tools are treated as one input among many, and their outputs may be qualified or overridden based on contextual knowledge of the individual case (Borum, 2015; Lloyd & Dean, 2015).

Empirical studies consistently show that discretion functions as the mechanism through which abstract assessment criteria are translated into concrete decisions. Practitioners may interpret similar patterns of behaviour differently depending on professional role, institutional culture, and perceived risk tolerance.

This variation is particularly pronounced in terrorism-related cases, where the perceived consequences of error are high (Perteshi & Ilazi, 2020; Neumann, 2010; Silke, 2014). Practitioner guidance further emphasises the importance of ongoing interaction and relational knowledge, reflected in the concept of dynamic security, which treats everyday staff engagement as a key source of information for understanding behavioural change (UNODC, 2016).

Institutional context strongly shapes how discretion is exercised. High-security environments limit opportunities for relational observation while incentivising compliance, complicating efforts to distinguish adaptive behaviour from meaningful disengagement. Political sensitivity and public scrutiny create asymmetric accountability pressures, where the consequences of underestimating risk are perceived as significantly greater than those of overestimation. This dynamic encourages cautious interpretation and sustained emphasis on residual risk, particularly as release approaches (Basra & Neumann, 2020).

Documentation practices reflect these pressures. Assessment reports may prioritise defensibility, procedural consistency, and articulation of uncertainty rather than definitive claims about change. Practitioners report that it is generally easier to justify restrictive decisions by referencing unresolved concerns than to substantiate claims of reduced risk, especially in the absence of verifiable indicators of ideological transformation (Abbas, 2021; Silke, 2014).

Inter-institutional dynamics further complicate assessment. Information transfer between prison and probation services is frequently fragmented, limiting continuity in how disengagement is understood across phases. Prison-based assessments emphasise institutional behaviour under controlled conditions, while probation services must anticipate behaviour in less structured environments with limited direct observation. Where documentation lacks clear formulation, receiving agencies may default to cautious interpretations, reinforcing conservative supervision strategies after release (CTED, 2023; Disley et al., 2012; Perteshi & Ilazi, 2020).

Differences in professional roles also shape assessment outcomes. Psychologists, probation officers, and custodial staff draw on different forms of knowledge and emphasise different indicators based on their training and institutional position. Specialist assessors may produce more elaborate formulations, while operational staff rely more heavily on pattern recognition and day-to-day observation. These differences contribute to variation in how disengagement is interpreted and how uncertainty is communicated (Lloyd, 2019).

Assessment frameworks organise information and support consistency, but they do not remove the need for professional judgement. Their value depends on how they are used within institutional settings, especially when release decisions must be justified with partial evidence.

2.6. The Release Phase as a Critical Assessment Juncture

The point of release constitutes a distinct and consequential moment in the institutional assessment of extremist offenders. Unlike earlier phases of custody, where assessment can remain iterative and provisional, release requires institutions to reach determinate judgements under conditions of heightened uncertainty. At this stage decision-makers must synthesise longitudinal observation, incomplete information, and competing interpretations into recommendations that carry significant legal, political, and reputational consequences (Horgan & Braddock, 2010; Lloyd, 2019). Release is treated here as a decision point, not as a point at which uncertainty is resolved.

The literature consistently emphasises that such decisions are made in contexts where empirical prediction is structurally limited. Terrorism-related reoffending remains rare and heterogeneous, constraining statistical generalisation and limiting the precision of individual-level risk assessment. Even where assessment tools perform adequately at the aggregate level, margins of error at the individual level remain substantial, particularly in low base-rate conditions (Monahan, 2012). A low risk assessment therefore does not imply the absence of residual risk at release.

Under these conditions, assessment practice shifts from prediction toward defensibility. Rather than establishing whether future violence can be anticipated with certainty, institutional actors must demonstrate that reasonable steps have been taken to identify, document, and manage plausible risk scenarios. This emphasis reinforces cautious interpretation and supports framing disengagement as provisional rather than conclusive (Monahan, 2012; Lloyd, 2019).

Time constraints further intensify these dynamics. While disengagement unfolds gradually and unevenly, institutional decisions must be made at fixed procedural moments, most clearly sentence completion and release review. At these points, decision makers are required to justify action in the absence of reliable prediction, which encourages cautious reasoning and attention to plausible harm scenarios (Monahan, 2012).

Decision-making under time pressure and accountability may increase sensitivity to potential harm and encourage reliance on precautionary reasoning, particularly where future outcomes are uncertain.

Political and psychological factors reinforce this tendency. Terrorist violence is perceived as intentional, symbolic, and morally charged, which amplifies fear and elevates the perceived consequences of error. Decision-makers tend to overweight worst-case scenarios and prioritise error avoidance over proportional assessment, especially at the moment of release (Sinclair & Antonius, 2013; Sunstein, 2003).

These pressures shape how observable indicators are interpreted. Behavioural stability in custody may reflect adaptation to institutional conditions rather than durable disengagement, yet institutions have limited means to verify the distinction. As Silke (2011) notes, behaviour in extremist contexts is often shaped by strategic adaptation, suggesting that late-stage compliance should not be interpreted straightforwardly as evidence of internal change. This reinforces scepticism toward apparent progress as release approaches.

Institutional documentation produced at this stage reflects these constraints. Assessment reports frequently emphasise residual uncertainty, unresolved concerns, and monitoring requirements rather than clear statements of reduced risk. This framing supports defensible decision-making and prepares for

post-release supervision, but it also limits the extent to which disengagement can be formally recognised (Abbas, 2021).

The release phase is further complicated by discontinuities between prison and probation perspectives. Prison-based assessments draw on prolonged observation within structured environments, while probation services must anticipate behaviour in less controlled contexts with limited direct data. Where information transfer lacks clarity or consistent formulation, receiving agencies may default to cautious interpretations, reinforcing conservative supervision practices after release (Disley et al., 2012; Ilazi & Perteshi, 2020).

Release therefore concentrates the main pressures of assessment. Institutions must decide whether available evidence is sufficient to support a plan for supervision, support, and risk management outside custody. This does not mean that disengagement has been verified. It means that institutions have reached a reasoned judgement about how remaining uncertainty should be managed.

2.7. Indicators of Disengagement

Research on disengagement from violent extremism has identified a wide range of indicators intended to signal withdrawal from violence and reduced risk. Rather than converging on a single framework, the literature reflects ongoing debate about what constitutes meaningful change and how it can be observed in institutional contexts. Indicators are commonly grouped into cognitive, behavioural, relational, and institutional domains, although these categories frequently overlap, and no single indicator is considered sufficient to establish disengagement (Bjørge & Horgan, 2009; Horgan, 2009).

Across this body of work, there is strong agreement that disengagement cannot be assessed through isolated signals. Indicators require contextual interpretation, longitudinal observation, and triangulation across multiple domains. Consistency over time is treated as more meaningful than short-term change, particularly in custodial and release-phase settings where incentives and constraints shape behaviour (Barrelle, 2015; Jensen & Simi, 2019).

Cognitive indicators refer to shifts in beliefs, attitudes, and interpretive frameworks that previously supported violence. These may include rejection of violence as a legitimate means of action, increased cognitive complexity, and recognition of contradictions within extremist narratives (Barrelle, 2015; Horgan, 2009; Kruglanski et al., 2014; Silke, 2011). Empathy has also been examined in prevention research. In a study with adolescents and young adults, higher empathy was associated with less favourable attitudes towards ideological violence (Feddes et al., 2015). This finding does not by itself validate empathy as an indicator of disengagement among prisoners. Cognitive indicators are therefore generally treated as suggestive rather than determinative (Horgan & Braddock, 2010; Lloyd & Dean, 2015).

Behavioural indicators are the most visible and the most frequently used in institutional practice. They include cessation of violent or illegal activity, withdrawal from extremist networks, compliance with institutional rules, and participation in education or rehabilitation programmes (Horgan, 2009; Silke, 2014). The literature consistently warns, however, against equating compliance with disengagement. Behavioural stability may reflect adaptation to institutional conditions rather than durable change, particularly where incentives are linked to sentence progression or release (Neumann, 2010; Silke, 2011). Lon-

itudinal consistency across contexts is therefore treated as more reliable than short-term improvement (Altier et al., 2014; Jensen & Simi, 2019).

Relational indicators focus on changes in social ties and identity. Disengagement is often associated with distancing from extremist peers and networks, alongside the development of alternative relationships with family members, mentors, or non-extremist peers (Barrelle, 2015; Bjørge & Horgan, 2009; Jensen & Simi, 2019). Research suggests that relational change may be particularly important for the durability of disengagement, as continued ties to extremist networks increase the likelihood of re-engagement (Altier et al., 2021). At the same time, relational indicators are difficult to observe directly in custodial settings and often rely on incomplete or self-reported information (Horgan & Braddock, 2010). Qualitative research further shows that relational disengagement may involve social rupture, identity loss, and emotional strain, complicating its interpretation as a stable indicator (Carroll, 2022).

Institutional indicators refer to engagement with formal processes such as treatment programmes, counselling, mentoring, and case management. Participation, completion of programmes, and positive staff assessments are commonly used as indicators of progress, alongside reintegration-related outcomes such as housing, employment, and compliance with supervision (Council of Europe, 2016; UNODC, 2016; Veldhuis, 2015; Zeuthen, 2021). However, these indicators often measure participation rather than transformation and may reflect institutional expectations rather than underlying change (Horgan & Braddock, 2010; Silke, 2014).

Across all domains, the literature emphasises that indicators must be interpreted relationally and over time. Apparent contradictions are common: individuals may demonstrate behavioural stability without cognitive change, or relational distancing without institutional engagement. Such patterns reflect the uneven and non-linear nature of disengagement rather than failure (Horgan, 2009; Jensen & Simi, 2019).

Interpretation is further shaped by contextual and demographic factors. Similar indicators may be evaluated differently depending on gender, particularly where women's caregiving roles, trauma narratives, social isolation, or community based supervision shape what practitioners are able to observe (Jakupi & Kelmendi, 2017; Bllaca Ndroqi, 2022; Veljan et al., 2025, Halilović, & Azinović, 2025).

Several shared principles emerge from this body of work. Disengagement should be assessed longitudinally rather than at a single point in time. Multiple domains must be considered together rather than in isolation. Professional judgement is unavoidable and must be structured and supported rather than replaced. No single indicator demonstrates disengagement; meaning emerges through interpretation across domains and over time.

Gender is relevant to disengagement assessment not because women and men can be assigned fixed risk profiles, but because gender shapes the conditions under which institutional knowledge is produced. It affects pathways into prosecution, custody, alternative measures, supervision, family based reintegration, and access to practitioners. In some cases, especially where women are supervised in community settings rather than in prison, assessment depends less on custodial conduct and more on cooperation with probation, household stability, child welfare, engagement with counselling, and everyday functioning. Gender therefore influences what institutions are able to observe, who is able to observe it, and how signs of change or concern are interpreted (Veljan et al., 2025, Halilović & Azinović, 2025).

A gender sensitive approach must also avoid two opposite errors. The first is to treat women associated with violent extremism primarily as passive victims, thereby overlooking agency, ideological commitment, recruitment activity, or continued attachment to extremist worldviews. The second is to treat trauma, dependency, caregiving, or social isolation only as signs of risk, without recognising how coercion, violence, stigma, and family responsibility may shape behaviour after return. Research on Bosnian women returnees shows that women's trajectories often combine agency and victimisation, and that disengagement from ISIL does not automatically amount to deradicalisation (Veljan et al., 2025, Halilović, & Azinović, 2025). This is directly relevant for assessment because cooperation, silence, motherhood, emotional distress, or social stabilisation may carry different meanings depending on the person's history, current environment, and institutional setting.

For this reason, gender is treated in this study as a cross cutting condition of assessment rather than as a separate indicator of disengagement. It shapes the behavioural, relational, institutional, and interpretive dimensions of assessment. Gender affects what becomes visible to practitioners, how family and community relations are evaluated, how access to the individual is organised, and how uncertainty is managed. The question is therefore not whether women are more or less disengaged than men, but how gendered pathways and expectations structure the evidence on which assessment depends.

2.8. Analytical Framework of the Study

The preceding sections show why disengagement assessment cannot rely on one type of evidence. Behaviour, relational change, institutional engagement, and professional interpretation each provide partial insight, but none is sufficient on its own. The framework below therefore organises the empirical analysis around four dimensions: behavioural, relational, institutional, and interpretive.

The framework rests on three core premises derived from the literature.

First, disengagement is analytically distinct from deradicalisation. Behavioural withdrawal from violence does not require ideological transformation, and institutional actors are structurally better positioned to observe conduct than to access belief.

Second, disengagement unfolds as a non-linear and relational process. Different dimensions of change — behavioural, cognitive, affective, and social — do not necessarily align in time, and may remain partial, reversible, or context-dependent.

Third, assessments of disengagement are shaped by epistemic and institutional constraints. Internal states cannot be directly known, observable indicators are context-dependent, and judgements must be made under conditions of uncertainty, accountability, and limited information.

Within this framework, the study examines four analytical dimensions through which institutional assessment operates. The first is the observable behavioural dimension — the conduct, interactions, and patterns that institutional actors can directly observe and record. The second is the relational dimension — the social ties, peer interactions, and family connections that practitioners assess indirectly through observation and inquiry. The third is the institutional dimension — the documentation practices, organisational routines, and inter-institutional flows of information that translate observation into formal

assessment. The fourth is the interpretive dimension — the professional judgement, contextual knowledge, and discretionary reasoning through which practitioners construct meaning from partial evidence.

These dimensions do not function as objective indicators of disengagement. They represent the domains through which institutional actors interpret available information and translate it into assessment outcomes.

Critically, these processes intensify at the point of release, where uncertainty, consequence, and accountability converge. At this stage disengagement is not established as a confirmed outcome but provisionally accepted as a basis for decision-making under uncertainty.

This framework allows the study to move beyond the question of whether disengagement has objectively occurred. It examines how disengagement is constructed, stabilised, and acted upon within institutional contexts. In doing so, it aligns conceptual analysis with the realities of criminal justice practice, where decisions must be made despite the absence of definitive knowledge.

Table 1. Analytical framework for assessing disengagement in institutional practice

Analytical dimension	What institutions observe or document	Main interpretive problem	How this guides the empirical analysis
Behavioural dimension	Conduct in custody or supervision; compliance with rules; participation in programmes; interaction with staff; emotional regulation; conflict avoidance; visible changes in everyday behaviour.	Behaviour may indicate meaningful change, but it may also reflect adaptation to institutional expectations, sentence progression incentives, or preparation for release.	The country chapters examine how practitioners distinguish sustained behavioural stability from conformism, strategic adaptation, or short term compliance.
Relational dimension	Family contact; peer relations; distancing from former extremist networks; interaction with other prisoners; community ties; social support; reintegration environment.	Relational change is difficult to observe directly, especially in custody. Family or community ties may support reintegration, but they may also reproduce pressure, grievance, isolation, or risk.	The country chapters assess how practitioners interpret family relations, peer positioning, gendered roles, community stigma, and post release support as part of disengagement assessment.
Institutional dimension	Assessment forms; treatment reports; prison records; probation files; multidisciplinary meetings; case plans; release documentation; information transfer between institutions.	Documentation can make assessment more consistent, but it can also fragment knowledge if information does not travel clearly between prison, probation, social welfare, police, municipal actors, and civil society.	The country chapters examine how institutional routines, tools, staffing, documentation practices, and coordination structures shape what becomes known about the individual case.
Interpretive dimension	Professional judgement; caution; doubt; disagreement between actors; confidence or lack of confidence in indicators; reasoning about change, risk, and release readiness.	Assessment requires decisions even when evidence is partial. Practitioners must attach meaning to uncertain indicators while managing legal, political, professional, and public accountability.	The country chapters analyse how practitioners convert partial evidence into release related judgement, and how uncertainty shapes assessment across the four systems.

This framework is used in the empirical chapters to examine how disengagement becomes institutionally legible across Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. It also provides the basis for the comparative analysis in Chapter 9, where the study considers how similar indicators are read differently across systems and how institutional judgement is shaped by uncertainty at the point of release.

Chapter 3. Regional and Institutional Context

This chapter situates the study within the regional and institutional environments in which disengagement from violent extremism is assessed in practice. Building on the analytical framework developed in Chapter 2, it shifts the focus from conceptual debates toward the structural conditions that shape how disengagement is interpreted, documented, and acted upon within criminal justice systems.

The chapter examines four Western Balkan contexts — Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. These cases were selected because of their shared exposure to the foreign-fighter phenomenon, comparable legal and policy developments, and sustained engagement with international counter-terrorism and prevention frameworks. They also exhibit important variation in institutional capacity, governance structure, sentencing practices, and coordination mechanisms. This combination of similarity and variation provides a suitable basis for comparative analysis of how disengagement is assessed under different institutional conditions.

Rather than offering a descriptive overview of regional developments, the chapter adopts a focused analytical approach. It examines those aspects of legal frameworks, institutional arrangements, and operational practices that directly shape the assessment of disengagement, particularly at the point of release.

Across all four cases, particular attention is given to several interrelated dimensions: the organisation of custodial and post-custodial systems, the availability and use of assessment tools, the continuity of information between institutions, and the role of professional judgement in interpreting behavioural and relational indicators. The four cases are presented in alphabetical order.

3.1. Albania

Since 2012, Albania has confronted challenges related to the mobilisation and return of foreign terrorist fighters, alongside concerns about domestic radicalisation. Official estimates indicate that approximately 144 Albanian citizens travelled to Syria and Iraq, with a substantial number subsequently returning or remaining in conflict zones (Holmer & Shtuni, 2017; Shtuni, 2019). While the outward mobilisation has declined, the legacy of returns continues to shape institutional priorities.

Albania has developed a legal and policy framework that addresses violent extremism through both prevention and criminal justice instruments. The Criminal Code criminalises participation in foreign armed conflicts and related offences, and successive national strategies have addressed prevention, rehabilitation, and reintegration (Council of Ministers of Albania, 2015; Government of Albania, 2023a). The National Coordinator for Countering Violent Extremism plays a central coordinating role, working alongside the Ministries of Interior, Justice, and Social Welfare.

Within the criminal justice system, the General Directorate of Prisons is responsible for the custodial management of individuals convicted of terrorism-related offences. Practitioners — including psychologists, psychiatrists, educators, and social workers — conduct assessments based on general professional standards rather than terrorism-specific tools. Specialist assessment instruments are not consistently applied, and structured frameworks for evaluating disengagement remain underdeveloped. As Chapter 5 documents in detail, assessment in practice relies heavily on professional judgement, behavioural observation, and clinical interpretation.

Reintegration support after release is fragmented. The Probation Service supervises individuals subject to alternative measures, while municipal social services provide more general support. Inter-institutional information flow is limited, and structured post-release programming for terrorism-related cases is not consistently available. This produces a pattern in which custodial assessment, however cautious, does not translate into sustained community-level engagement.

3.2. Bosnia and Herzegovina

By June 2022, 35 individuals had been prosecuted before the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina for offences related to terrorist activity on foreign battlefields (Buljubašić & Azinović, 2023, p. 15). These proceedings provide part of the legal context for the custodial assessment and release practices examined in Chapter 6.

The institutional landscape is shaped by the country's complex constitutional structure. The State Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina adjudicates terrorism-related cases under state-level legislation, while custodial management is distributed across state-level and entity-level facilities, including the State Prison and the entity prisons in Tuzla, Zenica, Sarajevo, and Bihać. This distribution has direct implications for the consistency of assessment practices, programme availability, and inter-institutional coordination.

Sentencing in terrorism-related cases is characterised by extensive use of plea agreements and relatively short custodial sentences compared with other European jurisdictions (Buljubašić & Azinović, 2023; Shtuni, 2022). Short sentences compress the time available for sustained observation and structured intervention, while plea-driven sentencing reduces the evidentiary depth available to institutional actors at the point of incarceration.

Within the custodial system, Bosnia and Herzegovina has one of the more developed documentation frameworks in the region. Structured classification systems, periodic multidisciplinary evaluations, and formal pre-release reports are in place. However, as Chapter 6 demonstrates, the existence of formal procedures does not translate into confidence in assessment outcomes. Practitioners report sustained scepticism toward observable change and emphasise the difficulty of distinguishing strategic adaptation from durable transformation.

Post-release supervision is provided through state and entity-level probation arrangements, with municipal social services and civil society organisations playing supplementary roles. Coordination between custodial and post-release actors remains uneven, and feedback loops from post-release supervision back to custodial assessment are limited.

3.3. Kosovo

A report on Kosovo recorded 403 nationals who had travelled to Syria and Iraq between 2012 and 2018 (Perteshi & Ilazi, 2020). Regional reporting recorded 242 returnees to Kosovo by mid 2019, including 110 people repatriated in April 2019 (Shtuni, 2019). Earlier research examined differences in community vulnerability and resilience to violent extremism within Kosovo (Jakupi & Kraja, 2018).

The institutional response has developed rapidly, supported by substantial international engagement. The 2015–2020 National Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalisation Leading to Terrorism established a coordinated multi-actor framework, and subsequent revisions have continued to refine institutional responsibilities. The Ministry of Internal Affairs Division for Prevention and Reintegration plays a central coordinating role, supported by the Kosovo Correctional Service, the Probation Service, social welfare centres, the Kosovo Intelligence Agency, and a range of civil society organisations.

Sentencing patterns reflect the heterogeneity of the returnee cohort. Men associated with combat roles have typically received custodial sentences, while women and minors have more commonly been subject to alternative measures and community-based supervision. This distribution has shaped the practical meaning of disengagement assessment, as Chapter 7 documents: a significant proportion of the assessment caseload is managed outside custodial settings, where indicators and interpretive frameworks differ markedly from prison-based assessment.

Custodial assessment within the Kosovo Correctional Service draws on structured tools developed with international partners, including the Council of Europe. Periodic multidisciplinary review processes are in place, and intervention programmes such as anger-management courses have been introduced. However, the integration of these custodial tools with community-based assessment remains uneven, and inter-institutional information flow is not systematically standardised.

Existing reporting on Kosovo's response has tended to focus on activities and outputs rather than measurable outcomes, and there is limited longitudinal data on reintegration trajectories or behavioural change after release. Political and social dynamics — including strong public expectations for accountability and persistent stigma toward returnees — further shape institutional responses (Balaj, 2022; Perteshi & Balaj, 2021).

3.4. North Macedonia

North Macedonia has addressed challenges related to violent extremism since 2012, primarily through the mobilisation, return, and reintegration of individuals involved in conflicts in Syria and Iraq (European Commission, 2024; U.S. Department of State, 2023). Published figures vary by source and category, but the Government's 2025 submission reports that 102 individuals have returned to North Macedonia

from Syria and Iraq, of whom 76 have been prosecuted, while earlier European Commission and U.S. State Department reporting placed the adult foreign fighter caseload at 143 citizens who travelled or attempted to travel to Syria or Iraq (European Commission, 2021, 2022; U.S. Department of State, 2024; Government of North Macedonia, 2025). While outward mobilisation has declined, the terrorism risk continues to be assessed as moderate, owing to regional dynamics, online radicalisation, and residual networks.

North Macedonia has developed a legal and strategic framework aligned with international standards, including criminalisation of participation in foreign armed conflicts and adoption of national strategies addressing prevention, rehabilitation, and reintegration (Criminal Code of North Macedonia; Government of North Macedonia, 2023). Strategic documents explicitly reference disengagement and deradicalisation as policy objectives — an articulation that is less common in neighbouring jurisdictions. However, these concepts have not been translated into legally defined assessment criteria or standardised procedures within criminal justice institutions.

Institutional responsibilities are distributed across the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Justice, and the Directorate for the Execution of Sanctions, alongside intelligence and judicial actors. While this framework formally supports a multi-sector response, implementation is constrained by limited staffing, insufficient specialisation, and uneven access to training. The loss of psychologist posts from the prison system has been particularly consequential, leaving social workers to carry the resocialisation function without consistent specialist support (OSCE, 2020; U.S. Department of State, 2023).

Sentences in North Macedonian terrorism cases have been comparatively short in relation to the seriousness of the offences, with previous cases averaging 4.4 years and repatriated adult male cases averaging 6.4 years, which still compresses the window for sustained observation and structured intervention (Shtuni, 2022; for criminal code commentary see Kambovski, 2015). Recent reforms under the EU–Council of Europe Horizontal Facility III have introduced more structured approaches to release preparation, including a national handbook on the rehabilitation and reintegration of foreign terrorist fighters and their families (Council of Europe, 2025). However, as Chapter 8 documents, implementation at the custodial level remains uneven, and the gap between strategic policy ambition and operational capacity is a defining feature of the North Macedonian case.

Chapter 4. Research Design and Methodology

This chapter sets out the research design, data sources, case-selection logic, analytical strategy, ethical considerations, and limitations of the study. The methodology follows the analytical framework developed in Chapter 2. The research design is therefore qualitative, comparative, and case-based, drawing on practitioner perspectives and institutional documentation across four Western Balkan jurisdictions.

4.1. Research Design and Analytical Orientation

The study employs a qualitative, comparative, case based design. This orientation allows the study to examine professional reasoning, institutional routines, and assessment practice across the four cases. Instead, it must be examined through the interpretive practices, professional reasoning, and institutional routines through which it is constructed.

The design is cross-sectional rather than longitudinal: it captures institutional practices and practitioner perspectives at a specific period in time, rather than tracing individual trajectories over the course of a sentence. This choice reflects both methodological necessity — long-term access to individuals convicted of terrorism-related offences is restricted across all four jurisdictions — and analytical priority. The study is concerned with how institutions interpret disengagement at the point of decision, not with tracking individual change.

The research is exploratory and analytical rather than evaluative. It does not seek to assess whether specific programmes or interventions reduce reoffending, nor does it aim to validate or compare specific risk-assessment tools. Instead, it examines how institutional actors interpret behavioural, relational, and contextual indicators in practice, and how those interpretations are translated into formal judgements that inform release.

4.2. Conceptual Approach to Disengagement and Assessment

The conceptual approach draws directly on the framework developed in Chapter 2. Disengagement is treated as a non-linear, context-dependent process whose institutional recognition is shaped by epis-

temic and organisational constraints. Assessment is examined as a structured practice of interpretation rather than as technical measurement.

This conceptualisation shapes data collection and analysis in three ways. First, the focus is on practitioner reasoning, not on the verification of individual outcomes. Second, both formal documentation and informal professional judgement are treated as legitimate objects of analysis. Third, ambiguity, doubt, and disagreement among practitioners are not treated as methodological problems to be eliminated but as analytically meaningful features of the assessment process.

4.3. Data Sources and Empirical Material

The study draws on three principal data sources: semi-structured interviews with institutional practitioners; institutional documentation, where access was granted by the relevant institutions;¹ and legal, policy, and strategic documents relevant to each jurisdiction.

The core empirical material consists of semi-structured interviews conducted across the four countries during 2025. Interviewees included prison psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, educators, security staff, prison administrators, probation officers, representatives of national coordinating bodies, civil society practitioners, and, where accessible, intelligence and law-enforcement actors.

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format, allowing consistency across cases while enabling exploration of context-specific practices. Topics included how practitioners recognise change, distinguish between compliance and disengagement, interpret ambiguity, manage uncertainty, and translate observations into formal documentation and release recommendations. Interviews also explored institutional constraints, including time pressure, limited rehabilitative capacity, gaps in documentation, challenges in inter-institutional coordination, and the political sensitivity of terrorism-related cases.

These data were complemented by analysis of institutional documents, where accessible, including risk and needs assessments, classification records, sentence-execution plans, psychosocial evaluations, and pre-release reports. Documents are treated as institutional artefacts that reflect organisational priorities and accountability requirements. The analysis focuses on how disengagement is represented, framed, or omitted within formal records.

Triangulation between interviews and documents enabled examination of convergence and divergence between formal documentation and practitioner interpretation.

4.3.1. Empirical Material and Interview Sources

The empirical material consists of qualitative interviews, institutional and policy documents, legal and strategic materials, and country level analytical notes produced during the research process. The study does not seek statistical representation. Its empirical value lies in the access it provides to practitioners and institutions directly involved in the assessment, supervision, management, or coordination of individuals convicted of terrorism related offences or persons associated with foreign fighter return.

¹ Access varied across countries and did not include the same categories of documents in each case.

Interview material was collected across the four country cases at different points in the research process. The fieldwork in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia was conducted in 2025. Interviewees included prison psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, educators, probation officers, institutional administrators, civil society practitioners, municipal actors, and policy level representatives. These categories were selected because they occupy different positions in the assessment process. Some observe individuals in custody, some prepare or contribute to formal reports, some supervise persons after release, and others coordinate reintegration or prevention work at policy or community level.

The table below summarises the empirical material used in the study. It records interview sources and institutional locations rather than individual participant numbers, because several interviews were conducted with more than one practitioner and some entries in the empirical record refer to multiple interviews within the same institution.

Table 2. Empirical material by country case

Country	Period of fieldwork	Main interview sources	Institutional coverage
Albania	2025	Senior official from the General Prisons Directorate; policy level practitioner from the National CVE Centre; psychosocial staff; prison psychiatrist; prison psychologists; prison educators; probation representative; community psychologist; municipal child protection officer	General Prisons Directorate; National CVE Centre; Korça Prison; Korça High Security Prison; Peqin High Security Prison; Burrel High Security Prison; Probation Service; community psychological support
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2025	State Prison staff; State Prison psychologist; staff, psychologist, and educator from KPZ Tuzla; staff, psychologist, and educator from KPZ Zenica; prison staff from Bihać; prison security staff	State level prison facility; entity level correctional facilities in Tuzla, Zenica, and Bihać; prison treatment and security services
Kosovo	2025	Probation Service representatives; social welfare centre representative; group interview with Kosovo Correctional Service, High Security Prison in Dyz; Ministry of Internal Affairs Division for Prevention and Reintegration	Probation Service; Social Welfare Centre in Fushë Kosovë; Kosovo Correctional Service, High Security Prison in Dyz; Ministry of Internal Affairs
North Macedonia	2025	Prison practitioner; prison social worker; NGO psychosocial practitioner	Prison system; social work practice; civil society psychosocial support

4.3.2. Interview Approach

The interviews were qualitative and semi structured. They were designed to elicit practitioner accounts of how disengagement is understood, observed, documented, and translated into assessment practice. The interviews did not ask practitioners to reveal confidential case details or to provide definitive judgements about named individuals. Instead, they focused on professional reasoning, institutional routines, assessment indicators, information flows, release preparation, supervision practices, and perceived limits of knowledge.

Interview questions were organised around several shared themes. These included the meaning of disengagement in practice, indicators of change and concern, use of assessment tools or professional forms, interpretation of compliance, role of family and social context, prison based observation, release preparation, information transfer between institutions, post release supervision, and the perceived reliability of available evidence. The flexible interview format allowed country researchers to adapt questions to the institutional context while preserving a common analytical focus across the four cases.

The study treats interview material as evidence of institutional practice and professional interpretation. It does not treat practitioner accounts as neutral descriptions of objective reality. Practitioners speak from particular institutional positions, professional backgrounds, and accountability contexts. Their accounts are therefore analysed not only for what they report about individuals convicted of terrorism related offences, but also for what they reveal about the institutional conditions under which assessment takes place.

4.3.3. Documentary and Legal Sources

Interview material was complemented by review of legal, policy, strategic, and institutional documents. These included criminal law provisions, national strategies, prison and probation frameworks, rehabilitation and reintegration guidance, assessment related documents, international policy guidance, and previous research on foreign fighter mobilisation, prosecution, sentencing, return, rehabilitation, and reintegration in the Western Balkans.

The documentary material served three purposes. First, it provided legal and institutional context for each country case. Second, it allowed the study to compare formal policy commitments with reported practice. Third, it helped identify gaps between strategic language and operational capacity. This was particularly important because several countries have adopted policy frameworks that refer to rehabilitation, reintegration, disengagement, deradicalisation, or risk assessment, while implementation remains uneven at the level of prisons, probation services, social welfare centres, and local coordination structures.

4.4. Case Selection and Comparative Logic

Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia were selected because they combine shared regional exposure to the foreign fighter phenomenon with meaningful variation in institutional arrangements. All four countries have dealt with mobilisation to Syria and Iraq, return, prosecution, detention, and reintegration. At the same time, they differ in legal structures, sentencing patterns, prison and probation systems, availability of specialist staff, use of assessment tools, and forms of coordination between custodial and community actors.

The comparative logic is therefore based on controlled similarity and institutional variation. The four cases face a broadly similar policy problem, but they organise assessment through different professional, legal, and administrative arrangements. This makes it possible to examine which challenges are common across the region and which are shaped by country specific institutional conditions.

The comparison does not aim to rank the four countries or identify a best performing model. Instead, it asks how different systems make disengagement assessable under conditions of limited knowledge. The analysis therefore focuses on recurring interpretive problems: how practitioners distinguish behavioural change from strategic adaptation, how they interpret silence or compliance, how they weigh family and social context, how they use tools and documentation, and how they manage uncertainty at the point of release.

4.5. Analytical Strategy

Data analysis followed an iterative, thematic approach combining deductive and inductive coding. Deductive categories were derived from the analytical framework, including behavioural, relational, institutional, and interpretive dimensions of disengagement. Inductive coding captured emergent themes such as ambiguity, strategic compliance, impression management, documentation gaps, and institutional risk-sensitivity.

Analysis proceeded in three stages. First, data were coded within each national context to identify dominant themes and institutional patterns. Second, country-level findings were synthesised into analytical summaries. Third, cross-case comparison was conducted to identify shared patterns and contextual variation.

Triangulation was central to the analysis. Practitioner accounts were compared with institutional documents and contrasted across professional roles to examine differences in interpretation. Rather than treating inconsistency as error, the analysis treats ambiguity and disagreement as core features of institutional assessment practice.

4.6. Ethical Considerations

The study addresses a sensitive research domain involving incarceration and terrorism-related offences. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Interviews were anonymised, and identifying details were removed to protect individuals and institutions.

Particular care was taken to avoid indirect identification through contextual detail. Citation of interview material follows a single harmonised standard across all four country chapters: professional role and facility are recorded, but exact dates and individual identifiers have been removed. Data were securely stored and accessible only to the research team.

Reflexive awareness was maintained throughout the research process, particularly regarding researcher positionality and the interpretation of sensitive professional narratives.

4.7. Limitations

The qualitative design does not aim for statistical generalisation or prediction of individual outcomes. The findings provide analytical insight into institutional practices rather than measurable outcomes.

Access to documentation varied across contexts, limiting direct comparison in some cases. Where documents were unavailable, reliance on practitioner accounts may reflect institutional perspectives or retrospective framing.

The study does not include interviews with incarcerated individuals. This limits insight into subjective experiences but aligns with the focus on institutional interpretation.

Finally, assessment practices are shaped by evolving legal and political contexts. The findings therefore reflect specific institutional conditions rather than fixed or universal patterns.

These limitations are themselves analytically significant. They reflect the structural constraints that also shape practitioner assessment in the field — limited access, partial documentation, evolving frameworks — and the study's interpretive approach is designed to engage with, rather than to overcome, these conditions.

Chapter 5. Assessment of Disengagement from Violent Extremism in Albania

5.1. Institutional Context and Conditions of Assessment

Within the Albanian prison system, disengagement from violent extremism is not assessed through a dedicated conceptual or methodological framework. It is inferred through everyday observation, psychosocial interaction, and behavioural monitoring conducted by educators, psychologists, psychiatrists, and prison administration. Practitioners consistently report the absence of terrorism-specific assessment tools, relying instead on general indicators of conduct, participation, and interaction interpreted through professional judgement (interview, General Prisons Directorate). As one practitioner explains, “we lack specialised tools for terrorism-related cases, so our assessments are based mostly on general behaviour.”

Assessment practices are further shaped by structural constraints, particularly limited staff capacity. Continuous monitoring across the full sentence is difficult to sustain, and evaluations are often concentrated near the point of release. This temporal concentration reduces confidence in final assessments and increases the risk that earlier patterns of behaviour remain insufficiently examined (interviews, General Prisons Directorate; psychosocial staff, Korça Prison). As a Korça practitioner notes, “Ideally, we would monitor throughout, but staff shortages make this difficult. Often, evaluations cluster near release, which risks overlooking earlier patterns of behaviour.”

The gap between observable behaviour and underlying orientation is compounded by institutional capacity constraints in religious engagement. The General Directorate of Prisons highlights limited access to vetted religious actors and uneven distribution of imams across facilities, leaving some prisons without consistent religious engagement. Practitioners also note that staff often lack the religious literacy required to distinguish religious expression as a coping mechanism from religious expression as a form of resistance. As one practitioner explains, “while moderate religious discourse can help some inmates reflect and rebuild, others use religious rhetoric to justify resistance. Staff often lack the capacity to interpret these distinctions effectively” (interview, General Prisons Directorate).

At the level of daily practice, assessment is described as cumulative and relational rather than event-based. Across institutions, psychosocial staff emphasise that change is observed through repeated interaction over time, not through discrete evaluation moments. This logic of cumulative observation shapes how every category of indicator — behavioural, relational, and emotional — is read within Albanian practice, and frames the conceptual position set out in the following section.

5.2. Conceptualising Disengagement in Practice

Across institutional and clinical settings, practitioners in Albania converge on a behavioural definition of disengagement that explicitly sets aside the question of internal ideological transformation. Disengagement is not assessed through explicit ideological renunciation; practitioners express scepticism toward verbal declarations of change and emphasise observable conduct instead. The most direct articulation of this position comes from the policy level: “For us, genuine change is seen in actions, not words” (interview, National CVE Centre). Assessment therefore prioritises behavioural consistency, relational engagement, and responsiveness to institutional routines.

This behavioural framing is reinforced by clinical practitioners working with terrorism-related offenders. Across interviews, psychologists and psychiatrists consistently link disengagement to psychological stabilisation rather than ideological transformation. Behaviours often interpreted as ideological rigidity, withdrawal, or resistance are frequently understood as defensive strategies rooted in unresolved trauma, anxiety, and mistrust, rather than as evidence of entrenched belief (interview, prison psychiatrist, Korça High Security Prison). Within this perspective, even early refusal to engage or hostility toward staff is not immediately treated as an indicator of entrenched extremism.

The shift toward behavioural assessment reflects an explicit institutional recognition that internal beliefs cannot be reliably accessed or verified. Practitioners across institutions describe sustained scepticism toward declarative expressions of ideological change, privileging consistency between emotional expression, behaviour across contexts, and patterns observed over time. Sudden or strategically timed expressions of change are treated with caution and require further observation (interview, prison psychiatrist, Korça High Security Prison).

In practice, three overlapping domains of behaviour become the principal sites of assessment. The first is conduct within institutional routines — adherence to rules, participation in activities, interaction with staff. The second is relational engagement — emotional openness, willingness to communicate, capacity to tolerate sustained interaction. The third is initiative — voluntary requests for support, sustained interest in non-religious activities, engagement that extends beyond formal requirements. These three domains correspond to the categories of indicator developed in greater detail in section 5.5.

None of these domains provides definitive evidence of disengagement, and practitioners are explicit about this limitation. Behavioural compliance, participation in activities, and the absence of disciplinary violations are formally documented and routinely used in evaluation, yet are widely recognised as insufficient for capturing deeper processes of disengagement. Cases regularly emerge of individuals who maintained institutional discipline while continuing to exert ideological influence over others — influence operating through informal authority, persuasive interaction, selective withdrawal from programmes, or

the use of religious discourse, and remaining difficult to detect within standard monitoring mechanisms (interview, General Prisons Directorate). This conceptualisation has important consequences for assessment. It accepts that what is observed reflects the conditions of observation as much as it reflects the individual. It also accepts that disengagement is gradual, uncertain, and context-dependent — reflected in behavioural stabilisation, reduced resistance, and diminished capacity to influence others, rather than in any explicit moment of ideological reversal. Within the Albanian system, disengagement is therefore not measured or verified but constructed through institutional observation and professional judgement.

5.3. Clinical Interpretation and Psychological Engagement

Clinical practitioners working with terrorism-related offenders in Albania develop a distinctive interpretive perspective that frames disengagement as an indirect and fragile process grounded in psychological stabilisation, emotional regulation, and relational trust. This perspective gives the Albanian case a clinical depth that warrants treatment as a section in its own right, alongside but distinct from the conceptualisation set out above.

Within this perspective, early refusal to engage, hostility toward staff, or rigid ideological expression are not immediately interpreted as indicators of entrenched extremism. They are often understood as defensive strategies shaped by prior experiences of violence, incarceration, and perceived injustice. Practitioners warn that direct confrontation of beliefs at early stages can reinforce resistance rather than facilitate reflection (interview, prison psychiatrist, Korça High Security Prison).

Change is therefore first observed at the emotional and relational level. Clinical practitioners identify progress through subtle shifts: the ability to remain present during sessions, tolerate discomfort, and accept interaction with staff. Reduced agitation, willingness to describe emotional states, and acknowledgement of anxiety are treated as meaningful developments, even when they do not involve any explicit shift in ideological positioning (interview, prison psychiatrist, Korça High Security Prison).

This gradual process is echoed in accounts from prison psychologists. In Korça Prison, initial interactions with terrorism-convicted inmates are described as marked by avoidance, silence, or active rejection of psychological support. Over time, engagement is sometimes achieved through consistent presence rather than verbal persuasion. Progress may first appear as tolerance of interaction, where inmates no longer resist sessions but remain minimally responsive. Such tolerance is interpreted as a reduction in perceived threat and the emergence of basic relational trust (interview, prison psychologist, Korça High Security Prison).

Clinical practitioners also highlight significant interpretive challenges. Emotional flatness, limited affect, and controlled presentation may appear as stability, yet can reflect psychological withdrawal or strategic self-presentation. Distinguishing emotional regulation from emotional numbing requires longitudinal observation and contextual knowledge; short-term assessments are considered insufficient for reliable interpretation (interview, prison psychologist, Korça High Security Prison).

Environmental conditions further shape clinical interpretation. In high-security settings such as Burrel, limited contact time and restrictive regimes intensify psychological defences and constrain opportunities for engagement. Indicators of change are necessarily minimal and incremental — sustained eye contact,

acknowledgement of distress, expression of emotions beyond anger. These signals are highly sensitive to contextual changes, including transfers or disciplinary measures, complicating causal interpretation (interview, prison psychologist, Burrel High Security Prison).

Clinicians emphasise the importance of cross-contextual validation. Apparent progress observed in clinical settings may not translate into behaviour in other environments — family, community, or peer interaction. Practitioners therefore stress the need to corroborate clinical observations with information from other institutional actors, including probation, social services, and education systems (interview, community psychologist, Tirana).

Gender dynamics also shape clinical engagement. Female practitioners report initial resistance from male inmates, requiring careful negotiation of authority and trust. Engagement sometimes becomes possible only when psychological support is framed in terms of wellbeing rather than ideological evaluation (interview, prison psychologist, Korça High Security Prison).

Finally, clinicians highlight the limits of their institutional role. While they may observe meaningful psychological shifts, they lack authority to translate these observations into formal judgements about disengagement or risk. Clinical insights are often reduced when communicated to non-clinical actors, creating a gap between nuanced interpretation and institutional decision-making at the point of release (interview, prison psychologist, Burrel High Security Prison). This gap is taken up directly in section 5.7.

Clinical interpretation in the Albanian context therefore frames psychological stabilisation, emotional regulation, and relational trust as necessary but not sufficient conditions for disengagement. Assessment at the clinical level remains conditional, context-dependent, and constrained by both institutional conditions and the limits of interpreting internal states through observable behaviour.

5.4. Compliance, Resistance, and Manipulation within Custody

Across Albanian prisons, practitioners describe compliance among terrorism-related offenders as analytically ambiguous and insufficient as a stand-alone indicator of disengagement. Rather than signalling internal change, compliance is frequently interpreted as situational, strategic, and shaped by institutional incentives. Adherence to prison rules, participation in activities, and cooperative behaviour must be evaluated in relation to broader patterns of interaction and influence (interview, General Prisons Directorate).

Formal compliance is structurally rewarded within the prison regime. Good-behaviour reports, access to activities, and favourable evaluations are tied to observable conformity, creating incentives for individuals to align their behaviour with institutional expectations. Practitioners describe multiple cases in which inmates demonstrated consistent rule compliance while maintaining ideological rigidity or exercising informal authority over others. Compliance in such cases is interpreted not as disengagement but as adaptation to institutional conditions.

The distinction between formal compliance and substantive engagement is central to practitioner assessment. Educators and psychosocial staff describe inmates who attend sessions, use appropriate language,

and fulfil institutional requirements yet avoid personal reflection and remain emotionally distant. Such behaviour is often characterised by rehearsed narratives and minimal disclosure. Over time, staff interpret these patterns as strategic compliance — performed behaviour without corresponding internal or relational change (interview, prison educator, Peqin High Security Prison).

What practitioners identify as meaningful engagement is often marked by uncertainty rather than consistency. Hesitation, emotional discomfort, and gradual openness are interpreted as more credible indicators of change than polished or controlled interaction. This reverses conventional expectations: apparent stability may be treated with greater scepticism than partial or uneven engagement (interview, psychosocial staff, Peqin High Security Prison).

Resistance presents a different but equally complex interpretive challenge. Refusal to participate in programmes, rejection of psychosocial support, or engagement in protest behaviour, including hunger strikes, are not automatically interpreted as indicators of heightened risk. Practitioners assess refusal in relation to intent, context, and relational dynamics. In some cases refusal reflects ideological commitment and functions as an assertion of authority, particularly among individuals identified as recruiters or influential actors within prison populations. In others, refusal is associated with mistrust, trauma, or fear of institutional control (interviews, psychosocial staff, Peqin High Security Prison and Korça High Security Prison).

This divergence highlights a central tension within the assessment process. The same observable behaviour — refusal — may be read either as strategic resistance or as psychological withdrawal, depending on the professional lens applied. Such ambiguity cannot be resolved through isolated observation; it requires prolonged engagement and triangulation across professional roles.

Manipulation further complicates assessment, particularly in relation to peer dynamics. Practitioners describe cases in which inmates use religious discourse, social positioning, and selective engagement to establish authority and influence others while limiting direct exposure to institutional scrutiny. These dynamics operate informally and remain only partially visible within official documentation (interviews, psychosocial staff, Peqin High Security Prison, and prison educator, Korça Prison).

In several cases, influential inmates actively discouraged participation in institutional programmes, framing engagement as a form of compliance with authorities and reinforcing group cohesion and resistance. Transfers between institutions were sometimes used as a response to such dynamics, yet practitioners report that influence often persisted across settings, suggesting that institutional control measures do not fully disrupt informal authority structures (interview, General Prisons Directorate).

A shared analytical position emerges across interviews. Neither compliance nor resistance can be interpreted in isolation; both may reflect a range of underlying processes, including adaptation, strategic behaviour, psychological distress, or genuine change. Practitioners emphasise the importance of identifying contradictions, inconsistencies, and shifts over time rather than relying on stable categories of cooperative versus non-cooperative behaviour. Compliance, resistance, and manipulation are therefore not distinct categories but overlapping and context-dependent behaviours that require continuous interpretation. Disengagement, within this framework, is not directly observable but inferred through the navigation of these ambiguities.

5.5. Indicators of Change and Indicators of Concern

Within the Albanian system, indicators of change and indicators of concern are inferred through everyday observation rather than applied through formalised checklists. In the absence of terrorism-specific tools, practitioners across the prison estate have developed shared informal heuristics that distinguish meaningful engagement from strategic adaptation.

Positive indicators are most fully articulated by psychosocial staff in Peqin High Security Prison, where change is observed through repeated interaction over time rather than discrete evaluation moments. Indicators of progress include emotional openness, willingness to engage, and voluntary requests for support — therapy, vocational activities, books (interview, psychosocial staff, Peqin High Security Prison). These signals are weighed against initiative and consistency: voluntarily requesting books, engaging in discussion without prompting, or demonstrating sustained interest in non-religious activities (interviews, psychosocial staff, Korça Prison and Peqin High Security Prison).

Clinical practitioners contribute a parallel set of indicators centred on emotional and relational change. Reduced agitation, willingness to describe emotional states, and acknowledgement of anxiety are treated as meaningful developments even when they do not involve any explicit shift in ideological positioning (interview, prison psychiatrist, Korça High Security Prison). Under high-security conditions such as Burrel, where contact time is constrained and regimes are restrictive, indicators are necessarily more incremental: sustained eye contact, acknowledgement of distress, expression of emotions beyond anger (interview, prison psychologist, Burrel High Security Prison). Across both clinical and psychosocial settings, what emerges is a consistent emphasis on engagement that is initiated by the individual rather than performed in response to evaluation criteria.

Indicators of concern are equally context-dependent. In Peqin, risk is associated with persistent grievance narratives, refusal of services, and efforts to organise resistance among inmates (interview, psychosocial staff, Peqin High Security Prison). Central administration highlights cases where outward discipline coexisted with continued ideological rigidity, including instances of influential inmates maintaining personal compliance while exercising authority over others (interview, General Prisons Directorate). Influence within prison populations operates through persuasive interaction, selective withdrawal from programmes, or the use of religious discourse, and remains difficult to detect within standard monitoring mechanisms.

A particularly significant indicator of concern is what practitioners describe as “over-compliance,” where inmates exceed institutional expectations by consistently attending all activities, requesting documentation, and aligning their behaviour closely with perceived evaluation criteria (interview, prison educator, Korça Prison). Rather than interpreting this as positive change, staff approach such cases with increased caution, treating over-compliance as a potential indicator of strategic self-presentation. This reverses conventional expectations: apparent stability may be subjected to greater scrutiny than partial or uneven engagement.

The asymmetry between positive and negative indicators is structurally significant. Positive indicators rely on the difficult interpretive task of distinguishing genuine engagement from strategic performance. Negative indicators — influence over others, persistent grievance, organising of resistance — are read with greater confidence because they signal continued investment in extremist objectives rather than situational

adaptation. Across the Albanian system, indicators of concern therefore tend to carry greater evidentiary weight than indicators of change, reinforcing the cautious and conditional character of assessment.

Across all categories, practitioners emphasise that indicators do not operate in isolation. Their meaning is shaped by context, timing, and accumulated experience. The same behaviour — cooperation, withdrawal, religious expression — may be interpreted as stability, strategy, mistrust, or vulnerability depending on the institutional setting and the experience of the observer. Indicators function as interpretive resources, organised through professional judgement, rather than as definitive markers of change.

5.6. Trauma, Family, and Social Context

Disengagement in the Albanian context unfolds within a relational and social environment that extends well beyond the institutional perimeter. Trauma, family dynamics, and community conditions are repeatedly identified by practitioners as central to understanding individual trajectories, yet they remain only partially integrated into formal assessment frameworks.

Trauma emerges across clinical interviews as a central explanatory factor for behaviours that might otherwise be interpreted in ideological terms. Practitioners describe trauma not only as a result of exposure to conflict or extremist environments but also as a consequence of incarceration itself. Isolation, stigma, and uncertainty are identified as ongoing stressors that shape behaviour and limit engagement (interviews, prison psychiatrist and prison psychologist, Korça High Security Prison). The absence of structured trauma-focused interventions within the prison estate is repeatedly highlighted as a significant institutional limitation, resulting in fragmented and reactive clinical work.

This trauma-centred perspective extends beyond prison. Community psychologists report that psychological distress often intensifies after release, as individuals face stigma, economic insecurity, and social isolation. Withdrawal from services in this phase is frequently driven by fear, mistrust, or shame rather than ideological commitment, complicating the interpretation of disengagement in community settings (interview, community psychologist, Tirana). The behaviours that prison-based assessment might read as disengagement from violence may, in the community phase, signal disengagement from institutions themselves — a distinction that institutional actors are not always equipped to make.

Family dynamics introduce an additional and analytically important dimension. Municipal-level actors approach assessment through a broader and more relational lens than prison-based practitioners. Child protection officers and local practitioners assess change through family dynamics, caregiving practices, and the wellbeing of children. In this context, disengagement is not evaluated as an individual ideological process but as a household-level trajectory reflected in everyday routines and social functioning (interview, municipal child protection officer, Tirana).

Practitioners also note that family instability, anxiety, or frequent relocation raise concerns about vulnerability and potential exposure to harmful influences (interview, municipal child protection officer, Tirana). These observations are inherently longitudinal and cannot be reduced to discrete evaluation moments. They also shift the unit of assessment from the individual to the family, with significant analytical consequences.

Broader social conditions further shape post-release trajectories. National CVE Centre representatives highlight cases in which housing insecurity, community stigma, and public scrutiny undermined earlier progress observed during custody. Families were reported to relocate due to neighbourhood pressure, disrupting social support networks and institutional engagement. In some cases, rumours and public narratives intensified stigma, reinforcing isolation and complicating reintegration (interview, National CVE Centre).

Prolonged disengagement from support systems introduces its own interpretive risks. When individuals consistently avoid contact with services, refuse assistance, or remain socially isolated, practitioners face difficulty distinguishing protective withdrawal from deliberate disengagement from reintegration processes. This ambiguity reflects the limits of community-based assessment, where observation depends on voluntary interaction rather than institutional control (interview, community psychologist, Tirana).

Across these accounts, a consistent pattern emerges. Practitioners across the Albanian system are highly aware that behaviour cannot be understood without reference to psychological, familial, and structural context. These contextual factors are not, however, systematically integrated into assessment frameworks. They remain interpretive background, shaping professional judgement without being formally captured or standardised. The Albanian case therefore illustrates how disengagement is shaped by relational and social conditions that extend beyond institutional control and exceed institutional capacity to track.

5.7. The Release Phase and Post-Release Coordination

The transition from prison to the community represents a critical rupture in the Albanian system of disengagement assessment. While assessment in custody is based on continuous observation within a controlled environment, post-release evaluation unfolds across fragmented institutional settings characterised by limited authority, indirect observation, and reduced access to information. Across interviews with probation officers, municipal actors, community psychologists, and representatives of the National CVE Centre, the transition is consistently described as marked by discontinuity rather than continuity (interview, Probation Service representative, Tirana).

Probation officers do not always have access to detailed prison-based assessments, particularly regarding psychological, relational, or behavioural patterns observed during incarceration. Supervision therefore begins with partial knowledge of the individual's prior trajectory, requiring practitioners to rely on immediate post-release behaviour and self-reporting (interview, Probation Service representative, Tirana). Within this framework, disengagement is inferred indirectly through routine indicators such as attendance, adherence to reporting requirements, and absence of violations. Practitioners explicitly recognise that these indicators reflect procedural compliance rather than substantive change.

In contrast to probation, municipal-level actors adopt a broader and more relational mode of observation. Child protection officers and local practitioners assess change through family dynamics, caregiving practices, and the wellbeing of children, as set out in section 5.6. The shift in observational unit — from the individual to the household — is one of the most analytically significant features of the Albanian post-release phase.

Clinical practitioners describe the loss of information at the point of release as particularly consequential. Psychological observations related to trauma, emotional regulation, and relational patterns are difficult to translate into standardised reporting formats and are frequently excluded due to confidentiality constraints. Subtle warning signs observed during custody — patterns of withdrawal, emotional numbing, strategic engagement — are not effectively communicated to probation or municipal actors. One prison psychologist emphasises that the moment of release is precisely when such information becomes most critical, yet it is also the point at which it is most likely to be lost (interview, prison psychologist, Burrell High Security Prison).

Psychosocial staff make the same point in concrete operational terms. As staff in Korça explicitly state, reports prepared inside prison “often do not reach probation officers or municipalities on time,” undermining continuity and increasing uncertainty at the point of release (interview, psychosocial staff, Korça Prison). Where formal documentation does accompany release, it is typically limited to administrative summaries — disciplinary records, participation in programmes, general behavioural evaluations. Qualitative insights into engagement, resistance, relational dynamics, and psychological vulnerability are often condensed or omitted entirely (interview, General Prisons Directorate).

The National CVE Centre is explicitly positioned as a mechanism to address these discontinuities. Its role involves collecting and synthesising information from prisons, probation, municipalities, and civil society actors in order to construct longitudinal case profiles. This centralised perspective allows the Centre to identify inconsistencies between institutional assessments and to detect patterns that may not be visible within single settings. The effectiveness of this role is constrained, however, by the Centre’s lack of formal authority and its reliance on voluntary cooperation. Information sharing remains uneven, and coordination mechanisms depend heavily on local engagement (interview, National CVE Centre).

Even where coordination structures exist — including Local Public Safety Councils and Regional CVE Committees — their functionality varies significantly across municipalities. In some, they enable regular information exchange and early identification of concerns. In others, they remain procedural or symbolic, with limited practical impact. This unevenness reflects broader disparities in institutional capacity, professional expertise, and political commitment across local contexts (interview, National CVE Centre).

Beyond information transfer, a deeper discontinuity exists at the level of interpretation. Different institutional actors operate with distinct and often incompatible conceptual frameworks. Prison staff focus on behaviour, discipline, and influence within the custodial environment. Clinical practitioners emphasise trauma, emotional regulation, and relational trust. Probation services prioritise compliance with legal conditions. Municipal actors assess family functioning, social integration, and child wellbeing. While each perspective is internally coherent, the absence of mechanisms for integration produces parallel rather than cumulative assessments. Indicators that signal concern in one institutional context may not be recognised in another.

In response to these challenges, practitioners describe efforts to develop more integrated support models, including the introduction of centralised service points such as one-stop-shop approaches at the municipal level. These initiatives are presented as ways to reduce fragmentation, build trust, and facilitate sustained engagement, but they remain unevenly implemented and dependent on external support (interview, National CVE Centre).

Post-release assessment in Albania is therefore characterised by indirect observation, fragmented information, and high levels of uncertainty. Unlike the prison environment, where behaviour can be continuously monitored, community-based assessment relies on partial, context-dependent indicators shaped by social and economic conditions. Disengagement is inferred not only from individual behaviour but from the broader environment in which reintegration takes place. The transition transforms disengagement from an institutional assessment into a fragile and contingent social process. Stability in the community depends not only on individual trajectories but on the availability of support, the presence of stigma, and the capacity of institutions to coordinate their responses. Assessment at this stage becomes less about evaluating change and more about interpreting vulnerability, risk, and adaptation under conditions of limited control.

5.8. Conclusion

The Albanian case is distinctive because assessment takes place in a setting where terrorism specific tools are not consistently embedded in everyday practice and where professional judgement relies heavily on clinical interpretation, behavioural observation, and institutional experience. It shows that assessment can function even without highly formalised specialised instruments, but that this also places considerable weight on individual practitioners and on the quality of institutional communication. For the comparative argument, Albania demonstrates how uncertainty is managed through professional interpretation in a context where post release coordination and structured continuity remain limited.

The Albanian case demonstrates that disengagement from violent extremism cannot be understood as a stable or directly verifiable individual outcome but rather as an institutional judgement constructed through partial evidence, limited observation, and bounded institutional knowledge. This finding aligns with scholarship that distinguishes behavioural disengagement from ideological change and emphasises the limited observability of cognitive change (Björge & Horgan, 2009; Horgan, 2009; Silke, 2011). Institutional actors do not access disengagement as an internal state; they infer it through partial and context-dependent indicators embedded in everyday interaction.

Within custodial settings, disengagement is interpreted through behavioural, relational, and emotional patterns observed over time. These indicators remain inherently ambiguous, reinforcing long-standing critiques of indicator-based approaches to radicalisation and disengagement assessment (Jensen et al., 2024; Lloyd & Dean, 2015). Compliance may reflect adaptation to institutional incentives rather than substantive change; resistance may signal either ideological persistence or psychological distress. The Albanian evidence supports the conceptual distinction drawn in Chapter 2 between observable conduct and underlying cognitive transformation: institutional assessment necessarily operates at the level of inference rather than verification.

Clinical perspectives deepen this limitation. Internal cognitive and emotional processes remain difficult to access, measure, or validate within institutional settings (Horgan, 2009; Silke, 2011). In the Albanian context, psychological stabilisation, emotional regulation, and relational trust are treated as preconditions for disengagement, not as evidence of it. Disengagement unfolds unevenly across domains and cannot be reduced to a single measurable dimension.

Family and community conditions add a further interpretive layer. Trauma, household stability, child welfare, and exposure to stigma and economic insecurity all shape behaviour in ways that exceed institutional capacity to observe or document. The Albanian case is distinctive in the extent to which municipal-level and child-protection actors contribute to a relational understanding of disengagement that shifts the unit of assessment from the individual to the household. This relational logic is not consistently integrated into formal assessment frameworks but constitutes a significant feature of how disengagement is interpreted in practice.

At the point of release, these epistemological limitations are compounded by structural discontinuities. The transition from prison to community supervision disrupts the continuity of observation and introduces new social, economic, and relational pressures. The Albanian case shows how the partiality of institutional knowledge is intensified across institutional boundaries, where fragmented information transfer and divergent interpretive frameworks prevent the accumulation of knowledge over time. Different actors operate with distinct conceptual frameworks; the result is parallel rather than cumulative assessment.

Chapter 6. Assessment of Disengagement from Violent Extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina

6.1. Institutional Context and Conditions of Assessment

Assessment of disengagement among individuals convicted of terrorism-related offences in Bosnia and Herzegovina unfolds within a legal and institutional environment shaped by early criminalisation, extensive use of plea agreements, and comparatively short custodial sentences. These structural conditions significantly constrain the temporal space available for observation, intervention, and interpretation. Practitioners consistently emphasise that assessment takes place under compressed timelines, where expectations to produce release-related judgements often exceed the available depth of engagement and longitudinal insight (interview, State Prison staff; interview, KPZ Zenica staff).

In some institutional settings, these constraints are further compounded by limited case exposure. Respondents from certain facilities report periods in which no individuals convicted of terrorism-related offences were present, restricting opportunities for experiential learning and case-based comparison (interview, prison staff, Bihać).

Beyond sentence length, practitioners highlight the concentration of assessment pressure in the final phase of imprisonment. While monitoring formally extends across the sentence, the period approaching release becomes the primary moment of evaluation. This temporal concentration is viewed critically by practitioners, who note that inmates frequently intensify cooperation and participation at this stage in pursuit of institutional benefits, including improved conditions, work placements, and visitation rights (interview, State Prison staff; interview, KPZ Tuzla staff).

Late-stage behavioural change is therefore treated with scepticism. Practitioners describe the pre-release phase as a high-risk environment for impression management, where apparent improvements may reflect strategic adaptation rather than substantive change. Abrupt shifts in behaviour are actively discounted unless they align with earlier patterns observed over time (interview, State Prison staff; interview, KPZ Tuzla staff).

The short duration of imprisonment further limits opportunities to observe sustained behavioural, relational, or emotional change. Assessment is frequently described as taking place under conditions of time pressure, where practitioners are required to form judgements on the basis of fragmented interaction and incomplete trajectories. This contributes to a cautious and defensive orientation toward assessment, particularly in relation to expressions of remorse or openness that emerge late in the custodial period (interview, KPZ Tuzla staff).

Bosnia and Herzegovina nonetheless has one of the most formally developed documentation frameworks in the region. Institutional practices include classification systems, periodic evaluations, multidisciplinary case files, and structured reporting procedures. Practitioners consistently stress, however, that the existence of formal tools does not translate into confidence in assessment outcomes. Documentation is described as necessary but insufficient, capturing participation and conduct while offering limited insight into underlying motivation, belief change, or internalised disengagement (interview, State Prison psychologist).

To compensate for these limitations, practitioners rely on triangulation across multiple sources of information. This includes internal multidisciplinary observations as well as external verification through family networks, social protection services, and communication with law-enforcement and security agencies. Such cross-checking is seen as essential for evaluating whether observed cooperation reflects sustained change or situational strategy (interview, State Prison staff).

A further structural feature concerns the uneven distribution of institutional knowledge and authority. Practitioners note that those who maintain the most continuous contact with inmates — including security staff and frontline personnel — are not always directly involved in formal assessment decisions. These actors develop longitudinal insights through daily observation, which are only partially integrated into official evaluations (interview, KPZ Tuzla staff; interview, prison security staff).

Assessment is formally structured through periodic evaluation cycles, often conducted at six-month intervals, which aim to build a cumulative record of behaviour and engagement. Practitioners emphasise, however, that such cycles do not eliminate uncertainty. As one respondent notes, an evaluation is conducted every six months, but the final phase is not always valid in itself (interview, KPZ Tuzla staff). Other practitioners describe assessment as continuous, indicating variation in practice across institutions and roles.

Across interviews, there is no fully unified understanding of what disengagement assessment entails. Some practitioners frame it primarily as risk management; others as a psychological or moral evaluation; still others as a measure of institutional compliance. This lack of conceptual alignment further complicates interpretation and contributes to variability in assessment outcomes (interview, KPZ Tuzla staff).

These structural conditions produce an assessment system that is fundamentally defensive rather than developmental. Short sentences, early plea agreements, and concentrated release-phase evaluations compress the temporal horizon of observation and limit opportunities for longitudinal interpretation. Although formal documentation and procedural structures are well developed, they do not resolve the core problem of limited access to internal change.

Assessment therefore relies heavily on cautious professional judgement, triangulation, and systematic scepticism toward late-stage cooperation. Disengagement is not measured as a stable outcome but inferred through partial and context-dependent indicators. Assessment functions less as a process of verifying transformation and more as a strategy for managing uncertainty and institutional risk under constrained conditions.

6.2. Conceptualisations of “True Change” and Disengagement

A defining feature of the Bosnia and Herzegovina material is the extent to which practitioners question whether disengagement, understood as “true change” (*istinska promjena*), is achievable or observable within the prison context. Across institutions and professional roles, respondents consistently distinguish between formal, observable change and deeper transformation, which they describe as rare, fragile, and difficult to verify (interview, KPZ Zenica psychologist; interview, KPZ Tuzla educator).

When practitioners describe what they would accept as “true change,” they emphasise reduced ideological rigidity, visible expressions of remorse, and clear distancing from prior beliefs and networks. This includes signs that individuals no longer organise their identity or future plans around extremist frameworks, alongside the development of alternative social ties and life trajectories. Even these markers are treated cautiously, as practitioners note that most observed changes remain partial, formal, or context-dependent (interview, prison staff, Bihać).

There is no shared understanding, however, of what disengagement should entail. Some practitioners adopt a normative framework in which disengagement requires explicit ideological rejection of violent extremism and acceptance of the constitutional and legal order of the state. From this perspective, behavioural compliance without ideological transformation is considered insufficient and potentially deceptive (interview, State Prison staff).

Other practitioners explicitly reject ideological transformation as a realistic or necessary benchmark. They argue that expecting deep belief change is methodologically unsound and practically unattainable, particularly given short custodial sentences and limited therapeutic capacity. They define disengagement instead in terms of reduced violent intent, withdrawal from extremist networks, improved emotional regulation, and stabilisation of everyday behaviour (interview, KPZ Tuzla psychologist).

This divergence produces two competing conceptual logics operating within the same institutional space. One is normative and moral, focused on belief transformation and alignment with state authority. The other is pragmatic and risk-oriented, focused on behavioural containment and reduction of threat. These logics are not formally reconciled, resulting in parallel and sometimes contradictory approaches to assessment.

In some cases, scepticism extends beyond methodological caution to a more fundamental rejection of the possibility of change. Several respondents state explicitly that individuals convicted of terrorism-related offences primarily adapt to institutional conditions rather than undergo genuine transformation. As one practitioner puts it, there is no true change — only adaptation to the environment in line with personal needs (interview, State Prison staff). This position functions as an interpretive baseline, shaping how all subsequent behaviour is evaluated.

Practitioners describe individuals as oriented toward situational benefit, adjusting behaviour strategically in response to institutional incentives. This perspective reinforces a cautious stance toward all indicators, as observable conduct is interpreted through the possibility of adaptation rather than transformation (interview, KPZ Tuzla staff).

Narratives of the offence emerge as a central domain of interpretation. Practitioners distinguish between expressions of regret related to incarceration and explicit condemnation of violent acts. While some individuals acknowledge personal loss or hardship, they may avoid condemning violence itself or relativise responsibility. Such narratives are treated as key indicators of non-disengagement, even when accompanied by compliant behaviour (interview, KPZ Tuzla staff).

In some cases, individuals present the offence as a source of pride or refuse to distance themselves from it, further reinforcing practitioner scepticism toward verbal accounts. Other narratives reframe participation in conflict in neutral or depoliticised terms — for example, characterising the conflict as “brother fighting brother” — thereby avoiding explicit acknowledgement of responsibility or wrongdoing (interview, KPZ Tuzla staff). Such formulations are interpreted as ambiguous, signalling distancing without full disengagement.

Practitioners further differentiate between narrative ownership and narrative repositioning. While some individuals fully reject prior actions, others shift the narrative toward personal circumstances or external pressures, without clearly condemning violence. This distinction becomes central to assessment, as narrative ambiguity is treated as evidence of incomplete or superficial change.

Religious practice represents another contested domain of interpretation. Practitioners report monitoring religious expression, discourse, and engagement, yet differ in how they interpret such indicators. For some, moderation in religious practice may signal distancing from extremist interpretations; for others, it may represent strategic adjustment to institutional expectations. Religious indicators are therefore treated as context-dependent and require corroboration with other forms of observation (interview, State Prison psychologist). Religious indicators cannot be interpreted on their own. They are incorporated into a broader interpretive framework that emphasises patterns rather than isolated signals (interview, State Prison staff).

A shared conclusion emerges across accounts despite conceptual divergence. Disengagement cannot be conclusively established through a single recorded indicator. Whether framed in normative or pragmatic terms, practitioners rely on partial indicators, interpretive judgement, and longitudinal observation. The absence of a shared conceptual framework, however, produces internal inconsistency in assessment criteria and reinforces professional uncertainty.

The Bosnia and Herzegovina case illustrates that the challenge of disengagement assessment is not only empirical but epistemological. Institutional actors do not operate with a unified definition of what constitutes change and therefore cannot apply consistent criteria in evaluating it. Disengagement is not assessed against stable benchmarks; it is interpreted through competing logics that reflect both structural constraints and divergent professional perspectives.

6.3. Professional Doubt, Reflexivity, and Institutional Limits

A defining feature of the Bosnia and Herzegovina data is the extent of professional doubt expressed by practitioners. Across institutions and roles, respondents repeatedly describe themselves as underprepared, insufficiently trained, and structurally unsupported in working with terrorism-related cases. This uncertainty is not implicit but explicitly articulated: practitioners openly acknowledge that they do not fully trust their own assessments and remain concerned about being misled by strategic behaviour (interview, KPZ Zenica educator; interview, State Prison staff).

This reflexivity extends to methodological awareness. Practitioners consistently emphasise that verbal statements are unreliable and that greater weight should be placed on long-term behavioural observation, particularly in informal or high-stress situations. They acknowledge, however, that existing institutional conditions — including short sentences and limited contact time — make such observation difficult to sustain. This produces a tension between what practitioners consider necessary for credible assessment and what is structurally possible (interview, KPZ Tuzla staff).

A recurring theme is the perceived need for specialisation. Respondents argue that effective assessment requires staff with specific expertise in radicalisation processes, psychological change, and religious discourse. Several emphasise the importance of knowledge of Islam, both to interpret religious language and to distinguish between normative and instrumental practice. As one respondent puts it, assessors require knowledge of psychological change as well as of the basic principles of Islam (interview, KPZ Tuzla staff).

Practitioners recognise, however, that such expertise is largely absent or unevenly distributed. Limited experience with terrorism-related offenders further reinforces uncertainty, leading some respondents to frame doubt as an inherent component of professional judgement rather than as a correctable limitation. Uncertainty thus becomes normalised within assessment practice (interview, KPZ Zenica staff; interview, State Prison psychologist).

This reflexivity does not translate into increased institutional confidence. It reinforces a conservative assessment culture characterised by caution, scepticism, and reluctance to affirm disengagement. Practitioners consistently treat disengagement as provisional, reversible, and largely unverifiable within the constraints of custody.

Disengagement is rarely affirmed positively across interviews. Rather than identifying clear evidence of transformation, practitioners infer reduced risk through the absence of overtly problematic behaviour. Assessment therefore operates primarily through negative inference, where the lack of visible risk indicators substitutes for confirmation of change (interview, KPZ Zenica staff; interview, KPZ Tuzla psychologist).

This orientation is reinforced by a broader interpretive premise shared across respondents: definitive proof of readiness does not exist. Several practitioners state explicitly that assessment can only be partial, individualised, and tentative, and that certainty is structurally unattainable in this domain. This premise explains the emphasis on triangulation, the systematic discounting of late-stage improvement, and the reluctance to rely on any single indicator (interview, KPZ Tuzla staff).

Within this context, compliance is treated as expected, manipulation as endemic, and regression as a recurring risk. These patterns further limit confidence in assessment outcomes and reinforce the perception that observable behaviour cannot be taken at face value.

Practitioners emphasise that prison-based assessment cannot provide definitive answers regarding disengagement. Several respondents state that only post-release trajectories can reveal whether distancing from violent extremism is durable. Custody-based evaluation is therefore understood as limited to identifying reduced-risk indicators rather than confirming disengagement itself (interview, State Prison staff; interview, KPZ Zenica psychologist).

Disengagement assessment in Bosnia and Herzegovina therefore operates as an epistemically fragile enterprise. It is shaped by compressed timelines, institutional fragmentation, and deep professional doubt. Rather than functioning as a mechanism for validating transformation, assessment operates as a defensive practice oriented toward minimising uncertainty and institutional risk.

Disengagement does not emerge as an observable or verifiable outcome. It functions instead as a cautious working hypothesis, continuously revised in response to incomplete information, strategic adaptation by individuals, and the structural limitations of the institutional environment.

6.4. Behavioural Compliance, Conformism, and Strategic Adaptation

Across all institutional sites in Bosnia and Herzegovina, practitioners consistently identify conformism as the dominant behavioural pattern among individuals convicted of terrorism-related offences. Conformism is not understood as evidence of internal change but as deliberate adaptation to institutional expectations in pursuit of benefits, improved conditions, or favourable release outcomes (interview, KPZ Zenica staff; interview, KPZ Tuzla staff).

Within this interpretive framework, behaviours typically associated with progress — participation in educational programmes, respectful interaction with staff, expressions of remorse, and verbal rejection of extremist violence — are treated with caution. Practitioners describe multiple cases in which inmates complied fully with institutional rules and expectations, only to revert to rigid positions, reduce engagement, or reassert ideological identity as release approached (interview, State Prison staff).

Expressions of remorse are particularly contested. In Tuzla, staff describe instances in which inmates repeatedly expressed regret, yet this regret was interpreted as directed toward personal loss — such as time spent in prison — rather than toward the offence itself. Such narratives are understood as instrumental, functioning as part of negotiation strategies rather than as indicators of moral or ideological change (interview, KPZ Tuzla staff).

Practitioners frequently situate conformism within what they describe as a cycle of personal interest. Behavioural change is observed to persist only as long as there is a perceived benefit, with cooperation diminishing once incentives are removed or expectations are unmet. This pattern is treated as diagnostic, reinforcing the interpretation of compliance as strategic rather than substantive (interview, State Prison staff).

Conformism is therefore not described as exceptional but as expected. Practitioners characterise it as a learned mode of navigating institutional authority and constraint. This normalisation further reduces the evidentiary value of compliance, as rule adherence is interpreted as a baseline survival strategy rather than a meaningful indicator of disengagement (interview, KPZ Zenica staff). Practitioners therefore treat everyday interaction as a form of behavioural testing, particularly in unstructured situations or under conditions of stress, where underlying patterns are believed to become more visible (interview, KPZ Tuzla staff).

Strategic adaptation is also observed in horizontal relationships among inmates. Practitioners describe cases in which individuals simultaneously demonstrate compliance toward staff while attempting to influence peers, assert authority, or reinforce ideological narratives within inmate groups. These dynamics are considered particularly significant, as they suggest that outward adjustment to institutional norms may coexist with continued ideological engagement (interview, KPZ Tuzla staff).

Attempts to influence or recruit other inmates are treated as strong indicators of failed disengagement. Such behaviour is weighted more heavily than individual rule violations, as it signals continued commitment to extremist objectives rather than situational adaptation. Practitioners consistently emphasise that peer-directed influence reveals dimensions of engagement that remain concealed in staff-facing interactions (interview, State Prison staff; interview, KPZ Tuzla staff).

Additional observational fields, including gender-based interaction, further illustrate the ambiguity of behavioural indicators. In Tuzla, staff describe cases in which inmates initially refused communication with female staff, followed by later acceptance of interaction. This shift is interpreted cautiously, as it may reflect either pragmatic adaptation to institutional conditions or a limited loosening of rigid norms. Practitioners explicitly caution against treating such changes as evidence of deeper value transformation (interview, KPZ Tuzla staff).

These patterns produce what may be described as a culture of institutional suspicion. Within this environment, compliance is rarely interpreted as evidence of disengagement and is instead subjected to continuous doubt, verification, and reinterpretation. While this caution reflects a rational response to the risks of manipulation, it also narrows the space for recognising genuine change.

This dynamic creates a structural paradox. Practitioners are tasked with identifying indicators of disengagement, yet operate within an interpretive framework that systematically questions the validity of those same indicators. Assessment therefore becomes less a process of identifying transformation and more a process of filtering out potential deception.

Behavioural observation in Bosnia and Herzegovina therefore does not provide direct access to disengagement. It generates a field of competing interpretations in which compliance, resistance, and influence must be continuously re-evaluated. Disengagement remains inferred rather than observed, and assessment is shaped as much by institutional scepticism as by empirical evidence.

6.5. Indicators of Change and Their Interpretive Limits

Despite pervasive scepticism toward observable change, practitioners in Bosnia and Herzegovina do articulate a range of indicators associated with potential positive movement. These include improved emotional regulation, willingness to engage in dialogue, acceptance of responsibility, more constructive interaction with staff, renewed family contact, and distancing from former radical peer networks (interview, KPZ Tuzla psychologist).

In terrorism-related cases, however, practitioners consistently emphasise that such indicators are insufficient in the absence of more specific thresholds. Minimum expectations for a positive assessment include clear distancing from violent action, absence of recruitment or influence behaviour, and the ability to articulate a non-violent future trajectory. Without these elements, improvements in emotional or relational domains are treated as limited in evidentiary value (interview, KPZ Tuzla psychologist).

Beyond these core criteria, practitioners refer to a broader set of observable changes, including shifts in personal appearance, reading habits, participation in mixed-group activities, and the ability to manage conflict without aggression. These indicators are immediately qualified as ambiguous. Emotional openness may reflect situational vulnerability rather than reflection. Family contact may be driven by practical dependency rather than relational repair. Participation in work or education is frequently interpreted as instrumental rather than transformative (interview, KPZ Zenica staff).

This ambiguity is reinforced through practitioner experience. Respondents describe cases in which apparent openness to alternative perspectives coexisted with efforts to reinforce prior ideological positions among peers. Similarly, visible changes in behaviour or appearance are treated as weak evidence when not supported by consistent conduct across time and contexts. Practitioners therefore consistently prioritise longitudinal observation over single-point assessments (interview, prison staff, Bihać).

Practitioners also identify a set of stabilising factors that may support non-violent trajectories. These include structured work, participation in vocational activities, improved visitation opportunities, and renewed emotional investment in family relationships. In some cases, the influence of a trusted individual, or significant life events such as the birth of a child, are described as motivating shifts toward more conventional life orientations (interview, KPZ Zenica staff; interview, prison staff, Bihać).

Even these stabilising factors are treated with caution. Practitioners explicitly note that such developments may reflect conformism or situational adaptation rather than internalised change. As one respondent remarks in relation to positive developments: possible conformism — underscoring the persistent uncertainty attached to even the most favourable indicators (interview, KPZ Zenica staff). Even apparently positive indicators may represent accommodation to institutional expectations rather than substantive reorientation (interview, KPZ Tuzla staff).

Practitioners emphasise that negative or destabilising indicators often carry greater analytical weight than positive ones. Withdrawal from activities, renewed isolation, refusal of engagement, or re-adoption of visible markers of radical identity are treated as warning signs, particularly when they follow periods of apparent compliance. Such reversals are interpreted as evidence of the fragility of observed change (interview, State Prison staff).

Triangulation is therefore described as central to assessment practice. Practitioners cross-check observations across professional roles, compare behaviour in different contexts, monitor influence on peers, and evaluate consistency between verbal accounts and everyday conduct. Particular attention is given to behaviour in emotionally charged situations — frustration, disappointment, or conflict — which are seen as revealing underlying patterns that remain hidden in routine interactions (interview, KPZ Tuzla staff).

Future orientation emerges as an additional interpretive dimension. The ability to articulate realistic post-release plans is treated as a relevant indicator, while avoidance of future planning is interpreted as a limitation in readiness, even when individuals are able to reflect on past experiences. Future orientation functions not as an administrative requirement but as a proxy for engagement with a non-violent trajectory (interview, KPZ Tuzla staff).

Narratives of trauma and hardship are similarly evaluated for their structure and implications. In some cases, individuals recount experiences of injury or loss without acknowledging responsibility or condemning their actions. Such narratives are treated as incomplete, limiting their interpretive value despite apparent openness (interview, KPZ Tuzla staff).

Indicators of change in Bosnia and Herzegovina are therefore inherently unstable and context-dependent. No single indicator is treated as decisive, and even clusters of positive signals remain open to competing interpretations. Assessment relies not on identifying definitive markers of disengagement but on navigating a field of ambiguous and often contradictory evidence.

Indicators do not resolve uncertainty; they reproduce it. They provide a necessary basis for assessment yet simultaneously require continuous reinterpretation. Disengagement remains inferred rather than observed, and the evidentiary value of indicators is always provisional.

6.6. Trauma, Disillusionment, and Psychological Factors

Disillusionment is sometimes linked to direct exposure to violence, injury, or the death of peers during conflict. Practitioners describe moments of cognitive rupture in which previously held beliefs are destabilised — including recognition of internal contradictions, such as violence directed against members of the same religious community, or disillusionment with the gap between ideological promises and lived reality (interview, State Prison staff).

In several accounts, these experiences are linked to processes of distancing from prior engagement, though not necessarily to full ideological transformation. One Tuzla respondent describes a case in which the desire to return to a “normal life” emerged following injury and subsequent reflection on the nature of the conflict. This moment was reinforced through later communication with professionals who addressed previously unresolved questions, contributing to a gradual shift in perspective without producing complete ideological reversal (interview, KPZ Tuzla staff).

More detailed accounts illustrate this process. In the same Tuzla case, the turning point is associated with a specific moment in which the individual, shortly before being wounded, heard religious chants from opposing fighters and later came to understand that those involved belonged to the same faith but different sectarian positions. This realisation, combined with subsequent dialogue with practitioners, is

presented as destabilising prior certainties and opening space for reinterpretation of the conflict. Practitioners emphasise, however, that such experiences lead to partial distancing rather than comprehensive transformation (interview, KPZ Tuzla staff).

Disillusionment is also linked to post-conflict expectations and social reception. Some respondents highlight disappointment with the external environment, including limited social acceptance, stigma, and difficulties in reintegration. These factors are described as shaping both post-release trajectories and the interpretive uncertainty surrounding prison-based indicators of change (interview, KPZ Zenica staff).

Despite frequent reference to trauma and psychological disruption, practitioners consistently acknowledge limited institutional capacity to integrate these factors into systematic assessment. Constraints in time, training, and available tools mean that psychological dimensions are often treated as contextual background rather than as central analytical components. Practitioners express uncertainty about how to interpret unresolved trauma within formal evaluations of disengagement (interview, KPZ Zenica psychologist).

This limitation has direct implications for interpretation. Emotional withdrawal, hostility, or lack of engagement may be read as ideological rigidity, while in some cases they may reflect psychological distress or institutional mistrust. Similarly, detached or emotionally flat narratives of traumatic experience complicate assessment of emotional development, as they may indicate either coping mechanisms or lack of reflection (interview, KPZ Tuzla psychologist).

Unresolved psychological factors are also described as potential risk amplifiers. Practitioners note that trauma may increase vulnerability to negative trajectories after release, particularly under conditions of stigma, stress, and social exclusion. Trauma operates in a dual capacity, functioning both as a potential catalyst for distancing from prior engagement and as a factor that may undermine long-term stability (interview, KPZ Zenica psychologist).

These findings highlight the ambiguous role of psychological processes within disengagement assessment. Trauma and disillusionment may initiate reflection and distancing, yet they do not produce consistent or predictable outcomes. Moreover, institutional limitations prevent these dynamics from being systematically incorporated into assessment frameworks.

Psychological indicators do not clarify disengagement; they complicate it, as similar expressions may signal either movement away from violence or heightened vulnerability. Practitioners operate with partial insight into processes that are central to understanding change, yet remain difficult to interpret within existing institutional structures.

Trauma does not resolve the problem of disengagement assessment but deepens it. It introduces dimensions of change that are both significant and methodologically elusive, reinforcing the broader finding that disengagement cannot be directly observed or conclusively assessed within the constraints of institutional practice.

6.7. Regression and the Release Phase

Regression in the period immediately preceding release emerges as one of the most consistent and analytically significant patterns across interviews in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Practitioners from multiple institutions independently describe trajectories in which individuals who had previously demonstrated sustained compliance begin to withdraw from institutional engagement as the end of the sentence approaches (interview, KPZ Tuzla staff).

This regression is most commonly expressed not through overt escalation but through forms of withdrawal. Practitioners report refusal of work engagement, reduction of communication to a minimum, disengagement from structured activities, and, in some cases, the reappearance of visible markers associated with prior ideological identity (interview, KPZ Tuzla staff). These patterns are interpreted as a shift away from institutional participation once it is no longer perceived as beneficial, suggesting that earlier compliance may have been strategic rather than internalised (interview, State Prison staff).

Regression is not always identifiable in real time. Several practitioners emphasise that manipulative compliance is sometimes recognised only retrospectively, once later behaviour clarifies earlier intent. What may initially appear as consistent engagement can be reinterpreted as instrumental once withdrawal occurs. This temporal uncertainty further entrenches institutional caution and contributes to scepticism toward all late-stage improvement narratives (interview, KPZ Zenica staff).

Practitioners also highlight that the release phase represents a moment in which the limits of institutional assessment become particularly visible. The shift in behaviour near the end of the sentence is interpreted as evidence that engagement in custody is strongly shaped by incentive structures rather than by stable transformation. Practitioners therefore express limited confidence in extrapolating observed change beyond the institutional environment (interview, KPZ Zenica psychologist).

A minority of respondents offer alternative interpretations of regression. Some suggest that withdrawal in the final phase may reflect anxiety related to release, fear of stigma, or uncertainty about reintegration, rather than ideological recommitment. From this perspective, reduced engagement may signal vulnerability rather than renewed radicalisation. Such interpretations are less dominant and are often expressed cautiously, reflecting the broader institutional tendency to privilege risk-oriented explanations (interview, KPZ Tuzla psychologist).

Regression in the release phase highlights the instability of behavioural indicators and the extent to which institutional context shapes observed change. Patterns of cooperation and withdrawal cannot be understood independently of incentive structures, temporal positioning, and expectations surrounding release.

Analytically, this phenomenon reinforces a central finding of the Bosnia and Herzegovina case. Disengagement cannot be treated as a linear or cumulative process observable within custody. Behavioural trajectories may shift as institutional conditions change, revealing the extent to which apparent stability is contingent and reversible.

The release phase does not confirm disengagement. It exposes whether earlier custodial indicators remain plausible when institutional incentives, supervision structures, and controlled routines begin to fall away.

6.8. Conclusion

The Bosnia and Herzegovina case is distinctive because it combines relatively developed documentation and multidisciplinary assessment procedures with persistent professional doubt about the meaning of visible change. It shows that formal reports, treatment records, and repeated evaluations do not remove the central difficulty of distinguishing substantive disengagement from conformity to prison expectations. For the comparative argument, Bosnia and Herzegovina demonstrates that stronger documentation can support assessment, but cannot by itself produce confidence where practitioners remain uncertain about motivation, sincerity, and behaviour after release.

Despite comparatively advanced institutional structures, formalised documentation practices, and multidisciplinary assessment procedures, disengagement from violent extremism does not emerge as a stable or verifiable outcome. It is constructed through interpretive practices shaped by uncertainty, competing understandings of change, ranging from ideological rejection and acceptance of state authority to behavioural containment and reduced risk, and structural constraints, including short custodial sentences, limited specialist staff, weak information transfer, and uneven post release coordination.

This finding directly reinforces the analytical position developed in Chapter 2. Existing scholarship has consistently emphasised that behavioural disengagement does not necessarily coincide with ideological transformation, and that internal change remains difficult to observe or verify (Björgo & Horgan, 2009; Horgan, 2009; Silke, 2011). The Bosnia and Herzegovina evidence extends this argument by demonstrating that even in institutional environments with relatively sophisticated assessment infrastructures, these epistemological limitations persist and remain unresolved in practice.

At the conceptual level, the chapter reveals the absence of a shared institutional definition of disengagement. Practitioners operate with competing logics, ranging from normative expectations of ideological rejection and alignment with state authority to pragmatic assessments focused on behavioural containment and reduction of risk. In the absence of conceptual alignment, assessment criteria become internally inconsistent, reinforcing professional uncertainty and interpretive fragmentation.

At the empirical level, the findings demonstrate that observable indicators do not provide reliable evidence of change. Compliance is normalised as strategic adaptation; resistance is interpreted through multiple and often conflicting lenses; and indicators of progress remain inherently ambiguous. The Bosnia and Herzegovina case shows that these signals do not resolve uncertainty but reproduce it, requiring continuous reinterpretation across contexts.

The release phase further exposes the limits of institutional assessment. Regression patterns highlight the extent to which behaviour in custody is shaped by incentive structures rather than stable transformation. As institutional conditions shift, previously observed patterns may reverse, demonstrating that disengagement cannot be treated as a linear or cumulative trajectory. This finding reinforces the argument that institutional knowledge is context-bound and does not easily translate across phases of the criminal justice process.

Psychological factors add an additional layer of complexity. Trauma and disillusionment may contribute to distancing from prior engagement, yet they do not produce consistent or predictable outcomes. As

emphasised in Chapter 2, internal processes remain only partially accessible to institutional actors. The Bosnia and Herzegovina case illustrates how these processes complicate assessment further, as similar psychological expressions may signal either movement away from violence or heightened vulnerability.

Perhaps most significantly, the chapter highlights the central role of professional doubt. Practitioners explicitly acknowledge the limits of their own knowledge, the possibility of manipulation, and the absence of definitive criteria for assessing disengagement. This reflexivity does not resolve uncertainty but institutionalises it, producing a cautious assessment culture in which disengagement is rarely affirmed and is instead inferred through the absence of overt risk behaviour.

In this context, assessment operates through what can be described as negative inference. Rather than identifying clear evidence of transformation, practitioners construct judgements based on the absence of observable indicators of risk. This aligns with the framework developed in Chapter 2, which conceptualises disengagement as an institutional judgement rather than a measurable psychological state. The Bosnia and Herzegovina case demonstrates how this judgement is produced in practice — through triangulation, scepticism, and continuous reinterpretation of partial evidence.

The findings challenge the assumption that improved tools, indicators, or methodologies can resolve the problem of disengagement assessment. While Bosnia and Herzegovina possesses more developed procedural frameworks than other cases examined in this study, these do not overcome the fundamental limitation of limited access to internal change. The problem is therefore not only methodological but epistemological and structural.

Chapter 7. Assessment of Disengagement from Violent Extremism in Kosovo

7.1. Institutional Roles and Sequencing

In Kosovo, disengagement from violent extremism is not organised as a single programme but as a distributed institutional pathway spanning multiple actors and stages. Practitioners consistently describe this process as fragmented and evolving, with different institutions responsible for distinct phases: return and reception, court processing, custodial or alternative sentencing, supervision, and social reintegration (interview, Probation Service).

Despite the existence of a central coordinating role, assessment is distributed across institutions with different mandates. Prisons assess behaviour, risk indicators, and programme participation; probation services focus on compliance with court-ordered measures and cooperation with supervision; and social welfare actors evaluate everyday functioning, including family relations and access to services. Disengagement therefore does not exist as a single, unified outcome but as a composite judgement emerging across institutional settings.

A key feature of the Kosovo system is the sequencing of institutional involvement. Probation services operate largely downstream of court decisions, rather than as part of an integrated initial response. Practitioners report that the 2019 repatriation process occurred without prior institutional preparation, with probation officers learning about it through media reports rather than formal channels. Their involvement began only after courts issued conditional sentencing decisions, particularly in cases involving women returnees (interview, Probation Service).

This reactive incorporation of probation highlights a broader pattern of institutional adaptation. Social welfare services were similarly integrated into the process after the emergence of returnee cases, without prior planning or clear role definition. As frontline actors in community reintegration, they operate through case visits, service provision, and reporting, often without full prior information about the individuals involved (interview, Social Welfare Centre, Fushë Kosovë).

By contrast, the Ministry of Internal Affairs Division for Prevention and Reintegration is described as playing a central coordinating role. It manages early-stage reception, referral pathways, and inter-institutional coordination, and applies structured tools such as Channel for case allocation and risk identification. This positions the Ministry as a key node connecting returnee management with emerging prevention frameworks targeting new forms of radicalisation (interview, Ministry of Internal Affairs Division).

Within custodial settings, the Kosovo Correctional Service describes a more structured internal approach, particularly for men convicted of terrorism-related offences. Prison-based assessment includes behavioural monitoring, programme participation, and periodic review processes, supported by specialised units and programmatic interventions. Even within this more structured environment, however, disengagement remains linked to observable conduct rather than verified ideological change (Group interview, Kosovo Correctional Service, High Security Prison in Dyz).

Coordination mechanisms exist across institutions but remain uneven in practice. Information sharing, role clarity, and sequencing of involvement vary by case and stage, producing partial visibility rather than a fully integrated system. Practitioners describe a system that functions through adaptation rather than design, in which institutional roles have developed in response to emerging needs rather than through prior strategic planning.

The Kosovo case therefore illustrates a distinct model of disengagement assessment. Rather than being concentrated within a single institutional framework, assessment is distributed across multiple actors, each operating with different mandates, indicators, and time horizons. This produces a form of institutional pluralism in which disengagement is not defined uniformly but constructed through overlapping and sometimes inconsistent interpretations.

Disengagement in Kosovo is best understood not as a fixed outcome but as a process of coordination across fragmented institutional domains. Its meaning shifts depending on where it is assessed, how it is observed, and which institutional logic is applied.

7.2. Conceptualising Disengagement in Practice

Across interviews in Kosovo, the concept of disengagement is used operationally rather than ideologically. It refers less to belief change and more to a managed transition away from violence and toward socially acceptable functioning. Practitioners distinguish between different assessment populations, each associated with distinct pathways and standards of evaluation.

Women returnees are primarily managed through conditional sentencing and community-based supervision, where assessment centres on compliance, cooperation, and family-level reintegration. Men convicted of terrorism-related offences are assessed within custodial settings, where behaviour, programme engagement, and structured review processes are central. The Ministry of Internal Affairs identifies emerging domestic radicalisation cases through early-detection mechanisms, extending the scope of disengagement beyond the returnee cohort. These distinctions are analytically significant, as they demonstrate that disengagement is applied to different populations, timeframes, and evidentiary expectations.

In practice, three overlapping domains of assessment can be identified: behavioural indicators such as non-violence and institutional compliance; relational indicators such as cooperation with authorities and distancing from harmful networks; and institutional indicators such as maintaining contact with services and fulfilling legal obligations. No single actor is positioned to verify disengagement independently, making it a distributed and partial judgement.

Within custodial settings, prison staff explicitly distinguish between disengagement and deradicalisation. They emphasise that the focus is on disengagement from violence, as attempts to directly address beliefs or religion are often perceived as intrusive and counterproductive by prisoners. This distinction shapes both assessment tools and intervention strategies, which prioritise behavioural indicators, intolerance markers, and institutional resistance rather than ideological transformation (Group interview, Kosovo Correctional Service, High Security Prison in Dyz).

A further conceptual nuance emerges in practitioner accounts regarding the heterogeneity of cases. Prison staff emphasise that not all individuals are motivated by ideology, noting that some involvement may be driven by economic or opportunistic factors. This recognition complicates assessment, as it requires differentiation between pathways and challenges assumptions of uniform radicalisation processes. Practitioners also refer to analytical categories such as push factors, pull factors, and personal vulnerabilities, indicating attempts to incorporate broader explanatory models. These frameworks are not consistently applied across institutions, however, and their integration into formal tools remains uneven.

Disengagement in Kosovo is therefore conceptualised pragmatically and contextually rather than according to a unified theoretical standard. What counts as evidence of change depends on the institution doing the assessing, the population under assessment, and the stage of the process. Across these variations, the focus remains on observable behaviour and functional integration rather than verified ideological transformation.

7.3. Community Supervision and Gendered Practice

Community supervision in Kosovo is strongly shaped by the gendered structuring of returnee cases. Across interviews, practitioners consistently report that the majority of individuals subject to conditional sentencing and probation supervision in the returnee cohort were women. This distribution significantly influenced both the design of institutional responses and the practical meaning of disengagement in this context (interview, Probation Service).

Women returnees were commonly treated as a distinct category, often under the assumption that they had been misled or coerced by male partners. This assumption contributed to a policy orientation favouring alternative measures and community-based supervision rather than custodial sentences. Disengagement was therefore primarily assessed outside prison settings, shifting the focus toward household-level reintegration, compliance with court conditions, and engagement with support services.

Within this framework, disengagement becomes closely tied to everyday functioning. Probation officers describe assessment in terms of cooperation, attendance at scheduled meetings, participation in psychological counselling, and the ability to manage family responsibilities. Reintegration support — including

social assistance, vocational training, and employment opportunities — is presented as central to stabilising behaviour and supporting non-violent trajectories (interview, Probation Service, Pristina).

Gender shaped not only policy orientation but also the conditions of supervision itself. A recurring feature across interviews is the strict requirement by women clients to interact exclusively with female probation officers. This was not described as a preference but as a condition for cooperation, requiring institutional adaptation in staff assignment and case management (interview, Probation Service).

This requirement had broader implications for knowledge production within institutions. Male staff, including in managerial roles, reported limited direct access to cases, relying instead on information mediated through female officers. Gendered interaction patterns therefore influenced not only supervision dynamics but also the distribution of information and the depth of insight available across the service (interview, Probation Service).

Despite a general tendency to frame women as less threatening, practitioners caution against treating them as a homogeneous or purely victimised category. Interviews highlight variation within the cohort, including cases where individuals appeared more ideologically committed. Indicators of concern include expressions of dissatisfaction with life in Kosovo, continued glorification of experiences in Syria, and ongoing connections with networks that reinforce prior beliefs.

Detailed case accounts illustrate this variation. In one example, a woman initially presented as reserved and uncertain but gradually increased cooperation following repeated engagement and support-oriented communication. Participation in vocational training and improved interaction with probation services were interpreted as positive steps toward reintegration. Even in such cases, however, practitioners expressed uncertainty about deeper belief change, particularly in light of ongoing contacts with individuals abroad and perceived strategic communication (interview, Probation Service).

By contrast, another case is described as more resistant to change. A probation officer characterises one woman as ideologically rigid, linking this to family influence, social networks, and continued exposure to reinforcing environments. This individual reportedly maintained dissatisfaction with institutional treatment and expressed positive views of her experience in Syria, despite personal hardship. Such accounts highlight the coexistence of outward compliance with persistent ideological attachment (interview, Probation Service, Pristina).

These patterns complicate assumptions about gender and disengagement. While women are often positioned within policy frameworks as lower risk and more amenable to reintegration, empirical accounts indicate that behavioural compliance does not necessarily correspond to ideological distancing. Practitioners therefore remain cautious in interpreting cooperation as evidence of deeper change.

Gender intersects with structural and social factors shaping reintegration trajectories. Practitioners highlight the importance of family support, access to housing, and employment opportunities, as well as the role of stigma and community acceptance. In several accounts, women are described as more easily reintegrated into family and social networks, which may facilitate stabilisation but also obscure underlying beliefs.

Gender is therefore not only a demographic characteristic but a structuring element of institutional practice. It shapes sentencing pathways, supervision modalities, access to information, and the interpretive frameworks used by practitioners. Disengagement is assessed differently across gendered contexts, with distinct indicators, expectations, and uncertainties.

Community supervision of women returnees in Kosovo therefore reveals both the possibilities and the limitations of a reintegration-oriented approach. While material support and relational engagement may facilitate behavioural stabilisation, they do not resolve the underlying challenge of assessing ideological change. Disengagement is reframed as a question of functional integration, leaving deeper transformation uncertain and difficult to verify.

7.4. Assessment Tools, Monitoring, and Reporting

Risk assessment practices in Kosovo reveal a fragmented and uneven landscape in which institutional capacity, tools, and expertise vary significantly across sectors. While some actors operate with structured instruments and defined procedures, others rely on generalised frameworks that are not tailored to violent-extremism cases, producing divergent approaches to assessing risk and disengagement.

Within probation services, practitioners consistently report the absence of specialised risk-assessment tools for this category. Existing instruments are described as generic, applied across all offender groups without adaptation to the specific dynamics of radicalisation or disengagement. Several respondents emphasise that they have received only limited training related to violent extremism, and that current assessment practices are insufficient for capturing the complexity and seriousness of these cases (interview, Probation Service; interview, Probation Service, Pristina).

This lack of specialisation creates a gap between observation and evaluation. Probation officers describe being able to identify concerning behaviours — strategic communication, continued network ties, or ideological rigidity — yet lacking formal frameworks to interpret or classify these observations within risk-assessment procedures. Assessment therefore remains largely experiential and discretionary rather than systematically grounded.

By contrast, custodial settings exhibit a more structured approach. The Kosovo Correctional Service describes the use of instruments developed with international partners, including the Council of Europe, which are designed to identify early indicators of radicalisation, guide observation, and support documentation of behavioural patterns. These tools include structured intake procedures, ongoing monitoring, and periodic reassessment, typically conducted every six months within a multidisciplinary framework (Group interview, Kosovo Correctional Service, High Security Prison in Dyz).

The prison-based assessment process is described as dynamic and iterative. It combines interviews with prisoners, input from staff across different roles, and continuous documentation of observed behaviours. Assessment outcomes are used to categorise individuals, identify needs, and inform individualised rehabilitation plans. Programme participation, including interventions such as anger management, is incorporated into this process and increasingly linked to incentives related to parole decisions.

Even within this more structured environment, practitioners acknowledge limitations. Good behaviour is not treated as reliable evidence of reduced risk, and staff highlight the possibility that individuals may adapt their conduct strategically in response to institutional expectations. This reinforces a cautious approach in which indicators are interpreted contextually rather than taken at face value. As one practitioner notes, an individual may behave perfectly and still remain very dangerous (Group interview, Kosovo Correctional Service, High Security Prison in Dyz).

The Ministry of Internal Affairs introduces an additional layer of assessment, particularly in relation to emerging radicalisation cases beyond the returnee cohort. Practitioners describe the use of tools associated with Channel, which support case identification, referral, and allocation across institutions. These tools are embedded within multidisciplinary teams and extend assessment into early detection, including referrals from schools and online environments (interview, Ministry of Internal Affairs Division).

Monitoring and reporting constitute the primary mechanisms through which disengagement is translated into institutional knowledge in Kosovo. Across interviews, practitioners consistently describe report writing and submission to judicial or coordinating authorities as the central formal output of their work, effectively defining what can be recognised and communicated as evidence of change (interview, Probation Service). Reports become the main channel through which compliance, supervision outcomes, and reintegration progress are communicated to decision-makers. Disengagement is operationalised through what can be documented, including attendance, cooperation, and visible stability (interview, Probation Service; interview, Probation Service, Pristina).

This reporting logic shapes not only communication but also perception. Since probation's authority is exercised through written reports, indicators that can be formally recorded acquire greater significance, while more ambiguous or subjective impressions remain difficult to translate into institutional outputs. Disengagement becomes closely aligned with measurable compliance rather than with less observable forms of change.

In custodial settings, reporting is structured around the release phase. Prison staff describe the preparation of a final assessment during the last months of incarceration, which is then shared with relevant actors, including probation services, police, and coordinating bodies. This process is intended to facilitate transition and ensure continuity of information across institutional boundaries (Group interview, Kosovo Correctional Service, High Security Prison in Dyz).

Probation officers confirm that, in cases of conditional release, a formal case file is transferred from prison authorities, providing a baseline for supervision. Other institutional actors, particularly social welfare services, report gaps in information flow. Practitioners describe situations in which they begin engagement with limited or no prior knowledge of the individual's background, needs, or risk profile, requiring them to reconstruct cases through direct interaction (interview, Social Welfare Centre, Fushë Kosovë).

Social welfare services maintain their own reporting structures, often characterised by frequent documentation and adaptive planning. Practitioners describe developing individual plans based on initial contact, with subsequent reports produced after each visit and submitted to central authorities. Parallel reporting lines to both justice institutions and the Ministry of Internal Affairs are also described, suggesting an attempt to maintain shared situational awareness across sectors (interview, Social Welfare Centre, Fushë Kosovë).

Despite these multiple reporting mechanisms, practitioners consistently highlight limitations in translating observations into actionable institutional knowledge. Concerns, suspicions, or intuitions about risk are not always supported by formal tools, standardised criteria, or clear reporting channels. This creates a gap between what practitioners perceive in practice and what can be formally documented and acted upon (interview, Probation Service, Pristina).

These constraints are not framed as a lack of willingness to act but as a limitation of system design. Reporting structures exist but are not fully aligned with the complexity of the cases being managed. Institutional knowledge is therefore produced through partial and sometimes fragmented documentation, reflecting both the possibilities and the limits of formal reporting systems.

Disengagement in Kosovo is mediated through documentation practices. What counts as evidence is shaped by what can be recorded, standardised, and communicated across institutions. This process privileges observable and reportable indicators, while more complex or ambiguous dimensions of change remain difficult to capture. Monitoring does not simply track disengagement; it actively constructs it. Through reporting routines, institutional actors transform lived interaction into formal categories of compliance, stability, and risk, thereby producing the evidentiary basis on which disengagement is inferred.

The presence of tools does not resolve the fundamental challenges of disengagement assessment. While structured instruments may improve consistency in observation and documentation, they do not eliminate uncertainty regarding the meaning of observed behaviour or its relation to internal change. Risk assessment operates within a fragmented system in which different institutions apply distinct logics, tools, and standards, producing a form of layered assessment in which judgements about disengagement are constructed across institutional boundaries without a unified framework.

7.5. Indicators of Change and Indicators of Concern

Across institutions in Kosovo, indicators of disengagement are defined primarily in behavioural and relational terms rather than through ideological change. Practitioners consistently emphasise that the goal is disengagement from violence, not deradicalisation, reflecting both practical constraints and resistance to interventions perceived as targeting belief systems (Group interview, Kosovo Correctional Service, High Security Prison in Dyz).

Positive change is most often inferred through observable patterns of cooperation and functional reintegration. In probation settings, this includes willingness to engage with supervision, attendance at meetings, participation in counselling, and involvement in vocational or educational activities. Practitioners also highlight the importance of everyday stability, such as managing family responsibilities and maintaining routine social functioning. These indicators frame disengagement as a process of behavioural normalisation within institutional and community expectations (interview, Probation Service). Practitioners identify stable family and community support as a key factor supporting behavioural distancing from violent pathways (interview, Ministry of Internal Affairs Division).

Within custodial settings, participation in rehabilitation programmes and structured activities is also interpreted as a positive indicator, particularly when linked to demonstrated engagement over time. Prison staff explicitly caution, however, that such indicators cannot be taken at face value (Group interview, Kosovo Correctional Service, High Security Prison in Dyz).

Across institutional contexts, concern is consistently associated with patterns that suggest persistence of ideological attachment, network embeddedness, or strategic adaptation. Practitioners identify several recurring indicators of concern, including ongoing contact with individuals abroad, continued affiliation with peer networks, rehearsed or controlled communication, and expressions that signal positive valuation of past involvement. These patterns are often interpreted as signs of surface compliance rather than substantive change (interview, Probation Service; interview, Probation Service, Pristina).

Behavioural indicators of concern are also described in concrete terms. Prison staff highlight sudden changes in appearance, social isolation, low levels of engagement, and resistance toward institutional authority as signals requiring attention. Social welfare practitioners identify persistent ideological framing in everyday interaction — such as repeatedly linking all topics to religious justification — as well as rigid attitudes, distrust of institutions, and refusal to compromise (Group interview, Kosovo Correctional Service, High Security Prison in Dyz; interview, Social Welfare Centre, Fushë Kosovë).

Case-based accounts provide further nuance. Practitioners distinguish between individuals who express regret or disappointment with their experiences and those who continue to glorify them. In one example, a woman is described as outwardly compliant yet consistently expressing dissatisfaction with life in Kosovo and positive views of her time in Syria, despite personal hardship. In contrast, others describe suffering and demonstrate greater openness to engagement, suggesting different trajectories of change within the same cohort (interview, Probation Service, Pristina).

These distinctions point to the coexistence of behavioural compliance and ideological persistence. Across interviews, practitioners repeatedly describe individuals who meet formal requirements, cooperate with institutions, and avoid overtly problematic behaviour, while maintaining underlying beliefs, network ties, or internal valuation of their past involvement. This pattern can be understood as partial or surface disengagement, where observable change does not extend to deeper transformation.

Indicators of change and concern in Kosovo are therefore inherently ambiguous. The same behaviours — cooperation, participation, or withdrawal — can be interpreted in multiple ways depending on context, timing, and practitioner perspective. Indicators do not provide definitive evidence of disengagement; they function as signals requiring interpretation within broader institutional and relational frameworks.

Disengagement is not directly observed through indicators but inferred through patterns of behaviour, interaction, and context. The reliance on observable indicators reflects both the necessity and the limitation of institutional assessment, as practitioners attempt to construct judgements about internal change based on external and often ambiguous evidence.

7.6. Trauma, Family, and Social Context

Across the Kosovo case, trauma, family dynamics, and broader structural constraints are repeatedly identified by practitioners as central to understanding individual trajectories, yet they remain only partially integrated into formal assessment and intervention frameworks. Rather than forming a systematic component of disengagement assessment, these factors appear as contextual explanations that shape interpretation without being consistently captured or evaluated (interview, Social Welfare Centre, Fushë Kosovë).

Practitioners describe trauma in concrete and varied forms — direct exposure to violence in conflict zones, experiences of injury, loss of close family members, and the psychological effects of displacement and forced return. In practice, trauma is often encountered through behavioural expressions such as emotional withdrawal, mistrust toward institutions, reluctance to engage, or difficulty sustaining communication over time. These expressions are difficult to classify, however. What appears as resistance or disengagement from services may in some cases reflect unresolved trauma or fear rather than ideological persistence.

This ambiguity is illustrated in practitioner accounts describing individuals who remain distant or minimally responsive during engagement without expressing overt ideological positions. In such cases, practitioners are left to interpret whether reduced communication signals continued risk or psychological vulnerability. Some respondents explicitly raise this dilemma while acknowledging the absence of tools or structured guidance for making such distinctions within formal assessment processes (interview, Social Welfare Centre, Fushë Kosovë).

The presence of children introduces an additional and highly significant dimension. Many returnee cases involve families with multiple children, making reintegration a collective rather than individual process. Practitioners emphasise that assessment often shifts toward household-level observation, where indicators such as school attendance, behavioural stability of children, and access to education and health services become central. Respondents describe monitoring whether children are regularly attending school, how they interact with peers, and whether they exhibit signs of anxiety or withdrawal.

Interviews highlighted the importance of continued psychosocial support for returnee children. One social worker described support for an orphaned child, including documentation, preschool enrolment and ongoing monitoring (interview, Social Welfare Centre, Fushë Kosovë). The Ministry of Internal Affairs Division described plans for further psychological assessment and individual support (interview, Ministry of Internal Affairs Division). These accounts concern individual needs and planned support, not findings about all returnee children. Existing research identifies broader barriers to reintegration, including stigma and social exclusion (Perteshi & Balaj, 2021; Orana & Perteshi, 2022).

Family dynamics therefore emerge as both a stabilising and a risk factor. In some accounts, extended family networks play a critical role in facilitating reintegration by providing housing, financial support, and emotional connection. Practitioners describe cases in which returnees were reintegrated into existing family structures, enabling relatively stable adjustment. In other cases, family environments are described as restrictive or isolating, reinforcing withdrawal from institutions or limiting engagement with broader society.

Stigma and social reception further complicate these dynamics. Practitioners repeatedly highlight the role of community perception in shaping post-return trajectories. Individuals are often subject to suspicion, labelling, or social exclusion, which affects their willingness to engage with institutions and their ability to access employment or social opportunities. In some cases, practitioners describe individuals avoiding contact with services or limiting public interaction due to fear of judgement. Such withdrawal may be interpreted as disengagement from institutional support, yet may instead reflect external pressure and social marginalisation (interview, Probation Service, Pristina).

Structural constraints intersect with these social dynamics. Practitioners provide concrete examples of administrative barriers affecting reintegration, including delays in obtaining legal documentation, difficulties accessing social assistance, and challenges related to housing. In one case, access to welfare support depended on obtaining a death certificate for a deceased spouse, illustrating how bureaucratic processes directly shape the conditions of reintegration. These factors influence both behaviour and the ability of institutions to assess that behaviour meaningfully.

As in the Albanian material, Kosovo practitioners are highly aware that behaviour cannot be understood without reference to psychological, familial, and structural context. These contextual factors are not systematically integrated into assessment frameworks, however. They remain interpretive background, shaping professional judgement without being formally captured or standardised.

This produces a gap between recognition and incorporation. Institutions acknowledge that disengagement is shaped by factors beyond individual behaviour, yet assessment remains focused on observable and reportable indicators at the individual level. Key drivers of behaviour therefore remain only partially visible within institutional knowledge.

The Kosovo case demonstrates that disengagement unfolds within a relational and structural environment that extends beyond institutional boundaries. Behavioural stabilisation, compliance, or withdrawal cannot be interpreted in isolation from trauma, family context, and social conditions. These factors may support disengagement, hinder it, or produce patterns that resemble it without reflecting underlying change.

Rather than clarifying assessment, these dynamics deepen its complexity. Trauma may lead to distancing or to withdrawal. Family may facilitate reintegration or reinforce isolation. Social context may enable stability or produce disengagement from institutions themselves. Disengagement is therefore not only difficult to observe but difficult to locate, as its drivers and expressions extend across domains that remain only partially accessible to formal systems.

7.7. The Release Phase and Individual Plans

Individual planning and material support constitute central components of Kosovo's approach to disengagement, reflecting a strong emphasis on stabilisation and reintegration rather than direct transformation of beliefs. Across institutions, practitioners describe the use of individualised plans as a primary mechanism for structuring intervention, with each actor adapting planning processes to its specific mandate and stage of engagement.

Within probation services, individual plans are developed following the court decision and initial meeting with the client. These plans define obligations such as attendance at meetings and participation in required activities, while also identifying needs and requests expressed by the individual. Practitioners describe these plans as both supervisory and supportive tools, combining legal requirements with elements of reintegration support. Information generated through these plans, including emerging concerns, is shared with the Ministry of Internal Affairs Division, indicating an inter-institutional channel through which suspicion and observation are communicated and interpreted (interview, Probation Service).

Social welfare services apply a more flexible and needs-based planning logic. Practitioners describe developing individual plans based on initial conversations with clients, with duration and content adjusted according to changing circumstances. Plans may be short-term or extended, depending on immediate welfare needs, and are accompanied by frequent reporting and direct engagement through home visits. This approach reflects a focus on practical reintegration challenges, including housing, access to services, and family support (interview, Social Welfare Centre, Fushë Kosovë). Practical outcomes, such as stable housing, school attendance, access to services, and employment, are presented as indicators of successful reintegration (interview, Ministry of Internal Affairs Division).

Empirical accounts provide detailed insight into how material support operates in practice. Probation officers describe coordinated assistance involving multiple actors, including provision of basic necessities, rent support, school materials, and vocational training programmes such as tailoring courses. In some cases, individuals received certificates and equipment, including sewing machines, enabling continued employment after programme completion. These interventions are framed as supporting both economic stability and continued engagement with institutional structures (interview, Probation Service, Pristina).

Across accounts, material support is consistently linked to behavioural stabilisation. Practitioners emphasise that assistance can reduce immediate pressures, facilitate compliance, and support engagement with institutions. Reintegration measures therefore function as indirect mechanisms of disengagement, addressing structural vulnerabilities that may otherwise contribute to risk.

Practitioners also recognise the limits of this approach. While material and social support can shape behaviour and improve stability, they do not provide clear evidence of ideological change. Individuals may successfully reintegrate into social and economic life while maintaining underlying beliefs or connections that remain difficult to assess.

The Kosovo case therefore illustrates a model in which disengagement is actively supported through intervention rather than simply observed. Individual plans and material assistance serve as tools for structuring behaviour, creating incentives for cooperation, and reducing exposure to risk factors. This approach shifts the focus of assessment toward functional outcomes, including stability, employment, and institutional engagement.

Disengagement is not measured independently of intervention; it emerges within it. The same mechanisms that aim to produce change also shape how that change is recognised and evaluated. This reinforces the broader finding that disengagement is not a fixed state but a process constructed through institutional practices, support structures, and ongoing interaction between individuals and the system.

7.8. Conclusion

The Kosovo case is distinctive because assessment extends beyond custody and is strongly shaped by community supervision, alternative measures, family context, and gendered pathways of return. It shows that disengagement assessment does not always take place primarily through prison based observation, but may depend on probation contact, social welfare involvement, household stability, counselling, child welfare, and local reintegration dynamics. For the comparative argument, Kosovo demonstrates how the

location of assessment changes the meaning of indicators, especially where women and family members are supervised in community rather than custodial settings.

The Kosovo case demonstrates a distinct configuration of disengagement from violent extremism, characterised by institutional pluralism, intervention-driven practice, and persistent uncertainty in assessment. Across institutional settings, disengagement does not emerge as a unified or clearly defined outcome but as a distributed judgement constructed through the interaction of multiple actors, each operating with different mandates, tools, and forms of access.

Unlike more centralised or custodial models, disengagement in Kosovo is not located within a single institutional framework. It is produced across a sequence of institutional engagements, including early detection, community supervision, custodial intervention, and social reintegration. Each stage generates partial and context-specific knowledge, resulting in a process in which disengagement is not assessed once but repeatedly reconstructed across institutional boundaries.

This distributed structure produces both flexibility and fragmentation. Institutions are able to respond to different stages and needs, yet apply divergent criteria and interpretive frameworks. Behavioural compliance, cooperation with authorities, social functioning, and material stability all function as indicators of change, but their meaning shifts depending on institutional perspective. Disengagement therefore lacks a unified definition and is instead shaped by overlapping and sometimes inconsistent interpretations.

A defining feature of the Kosovo model is its emphasis on intervention as a pathway to disengagement. Individual plans, material support, vocational training, and family-based reintegration are not peripheral but central mechanisms through which institutions seek to shape behaviour. In practice, disengagement is not only assessed but actively produced through these interventions. Observable stability — including employment, participation in services, and routine social functioning — becomes both the objective of intervention and the primary basis for assessment.

Empirical accounts illustrate how this operates in practice. Individuals receiving coordinated support, including housing assistance, vocational training, and access to education, are often described as demonstrating increased cooperation and stability. In one case, participation in vocational training combined with provision of equipment enabled sustained employment; in another, continued engagement with probation and counselling facilitated gradual improvement in communication and interaction. Practitioners consistently emphasise, however, that such developments do not provide reliable evidence of deeper transformation, as compliance and stability may coexist with continued ideological attachment or network ties.

Gendered patterns of supervision further reinforce this tension. Women returnees are primarily assessed within community settings, where disengagement is linked to caregiving roles, cooperation, and household stability. While many cases demonstrate gradual reintegration and increased engagement, others reveal the persistence of prior beliefs despite outward compliance. These variations challenge simplified assumptions about gender and disengagement, highlighting the coexistence of functional integration and ideological continuity.

Monitoring and reporting practices further shape how disengagement is constructed. Institutional knowledge is produced through documentation that prioritises observable and reportable indicators, including attendance, participation, and family-level functioning. Practitioners repeatedly note that concerns or suspicions are difficult to formalise, resulting in a system in which what can be written acquires greater weight than what can be intuitively perceived. Disengagement thus becomes aligned with administrative visibility rather than with comprehensive understanding.

Risk-assessment practices reflect a similarly uneven landscape. While custodial institutions employ structured tools developed with international support, probation services rely on generalised frameworks, and preventive actors apply separate mechanisms for early detection. These parallel approaches do not converge into a unified system but produce layered and fragmented forms of assessment.

Trauma, family dynamics, and structural conditions shape disengagement trajectories in ways that extend beyond institutional control. Practitioners describe individuals affected by loss, injury, displacement, and stigma, as well as families navigating reintegration under economic and social constraints. Children's wellbeing, school attendance, and emotional stability become central indicators, shifting assessment toward relational and household-level processes. These dimensions remain only partially integrated into formal frameworks, however, existing as contextual knowledge rather than structured components of assessment.

These findings reinforce the analytical framework developed in Chapter 2. Behavioural disengagement does not necessarily correspond to ideological transformation, and internal change cannot be reliably observed or verified (Bjørge & Horgan, 2009; Horgan, 2009; Silke, 2011). The Kosovo case extends this argument by demonstrating that even in a system characterised by coordinated intervention and extensive support mechanisms, these epistemological limitations persist.

Importantly, the Kosovo case also adds a new dimension to this framework. It shows that disengagement is not only inferred from observation but shaped through intervention. Institutional knowledge is not neutral but intervention-mediated, as the same processes that aim to produce change also shape how that change is recognised and evaluated. Disengagement is therefore constructed through the combined effects of observation, support, documentation, and coordination.

Chapter 8. Assessment of Disengagement from Violent Extremism in North Macedonia

8.1. Institutional Context of Disengagement and Assessment

In North Macedonia, disengagement from violent extremism is situated within a formally coordinated policy framework that emphasises prevention, reintegration, and human-rights compliance. Recent national strategies for countering violent extremism and counter-terrorism outline a multi-actor approach, reflecting increased alignment at the strategic level (Government of North Macedonia, 2023). Practitioner accounts indicate, however, a persistent gap between policy ambition and operational capacity, particularly within custodial and post-release practice.

As noted in Section 3.4, Shtuni (2022) reports average sentences of 4.4 years in earlier terrorism cases in North Macedonia and 6.4 years for repatriated adult male cases. Institutional capacity is also restricted, particularly due to the absence of specialised staff. Practitioners report that resocialisation efforts are largely conducted by social workers, in the absence of psychologist posts, which significantly reduces the system's ability to assess or address psychological dimensions of change (interview, prison social worker).

Although formal frameworks such as cognitive-behavioural therapy are nominally present, practitioners emphasise that they remain largely inactive due to lack of trained personnel (interview, prison practitioner). Assessment therefore relies on observation, interaction, and professional judgement rather than on structured or evidence-based methodologies.

Information-sharing gaps further complicate the assessment process. Practitioners describe cases in which critical information, such as leadership roles within extremist networks, was not communicated at the time of transfer and became known only later through external training or informal channels (interview, prison social worker). These gaps limit situational awareness and reinforce reliance on behavioural observation rather than comprehensive case understanding.

Recent efforts to standardise practice, including the development of a national handbook on rehabilitation and reintegration under the EU–Council of Europe Horizontal Facility III, indicate institutional

learning and alignment with international standards (Council of Europe, 2025). Practitioner accounts suggest, however, that implementation remains uneven, and that formal procedures have not yet translated into consistent practice across institutions.

The institutional context in North Macedonia is therefore characterised by a clear divergence between strategic coherence and operational constraint. While policy frameworks articulate a coordinated and multidimensional approach, assessment in practice remains centred on behavioural management and short-term risk mitigation.

8.2. Conceptualising Disengagement in Practice

Across interviews, practitioners in North Macedonia consistently define disengagement in behavioural rather than ideological terms. While earlier policy discussions referenced deradicalisation, this concept has largely been abandoned in practice, owing to scepticism regarding the feasibility of belief change among individuals perceived as deeply ideologically committed. Practitioners questioned the feasibility of deradicalisation and referred instead to mitigation (interview, NGO psychosocial practitioner; interview, prison social worker). This represents a deliberate shift toward more pragmatic and risk-oriented interpretations.

In the practitioner accounts presented here, disengagement is not described as a consistently standardised assessment category. Disengagement is therefore operationalised through observable behaviour — including non-violence, compliance, and absence of recruitment activity — rather than through structured indicators or measurable cognitive change.

Within this framework, practitioners distinguish between behavioural withdrawal from violence and the persistence of underlying belief systems. The first is treated as accessible to institutional observation and intervention; the second is treated as largely inaccessible and, in some practitioner accounts, as effectively immutable. This pragmatic narrowing reflects both the constraints of the institutional environment and a considered professional judgement about what assessment can plausibly achieve.

The North Macedonian conceptualisation therefore reflects a particularly clear articulation of the broader analytical position developed in Chapter 2: disengagement is treated as an institutional judgement about observable conduct rather than as a verification of cognitive change. This shift has direct consequences for what counts as evidence, how indicators are interpreted, and how decisions about release are framed — themes that recur throughout the rest of this chapter.

8.3. Cognitive Positioning and Perceived Injustice

A distinctive feature of the North Macedonian material is the consistency with which practitioners describe stable cognitive narratives that persist independently of behavioural change. Across interviews, respondents describe individuals who adapt to institutional expectations while maintaining coherent interpretations of their experiences that justify their actions, contest the legitimacy of their conviction, or frame their punishment as unfair (interview, prison practitioner; interview, prison social worker).

These narratives are not typically expressed through overt ideological assertion. They emerge through everyday interaction — comments on the conditions of incarceration, references to perceived discrimination, framings of geopolitical events, or selective reinterpretation of past involvement. Practitioners describe such narratives as operating in the background of compliance, providing internal coherence to individuals whose outward behaviour appears to align with institutional expectations.

A recurring theme is the perception of injustice. Several respondents describe individuals who acknowledge their actions but reject the legitimacy of the legal response, viewing themselves as victims of unjust prosecution rather than as offenders. This framing reorganises responsibility, locating blame in institutional or political actors rather than in the individual's own conduct. Practitioners interpret such cognitive positioning as a significant indicator of incomplete disengagement, even where behaviour is fully compliant (interview, prison practitioner).

Grievance frameworks of this kind are notably resilient. They do not appear to be eroded by participation in programmes, by sustained interaction with staff, or by the passage of time. Practitioners describe them as forming a stable interpretive backbone that may coexist with behavioural change for extended periods. This raises a particularly sharp version of the central analytical question: if cognitive positioning remains essentially unchanged while behaviour stabilises, what does disengagement mean in practice?

Practitioners offer two characteristic responses. Some treat the persistence of grievance narratives as decisive evidence against disengagement, regardless of behavioural compliance. Others argue that, given the absence of tools or capacity to address cognition directly, behavioural stability is what assessment can credibly speak to, while cognitive positioning must be acknowledged as outside the assessment frame. These positions are not formally reconciled, contributing to interpretive variation across cases.

Cognitive positioning in North Macedonia therefore complicates the relationship between behaviour and assessment in a particularly visible way. Where Bosnia and Herzegovina is characterised by scepticism toward compliance because of strategic adaptation or in other words situational adjustment, North Macedonia is characterised by the recognition of compliance accompanied by persistent grievance — a different but related interpretive problem. In both cases, practitioners conclude that what they can observe is not the whole of what matters.

8.4. Behavioural Adaptation, Symbolism, and Prison Norms

Early custodial interaction in North Macedonia is characterised by limited communication, group-based dynamics, and constrained opportunities for individualised assessment. Practitioner accounts consistently describe the initial phase of imprisonment as marked by communicative resistance, where individuals provide minimal responses and restrict interaction to procedural or administrative matters (interview, prison practitioner).

This resistance is not interpreted as an indicator of disengagement or risk reduction but as an initial coping strategy within a controlled institutional environment. Communication at this stage is described as brief, rigid, and highly controlled, limiting the ability of staff to establish rapport or assess underlying attitudes. In some cases, this resistance takes a gendered form, with individuals refusing to speak to female staff as a matter of principle. Such behaviour reflects normative or identity-based positioning

rather than situational hostility, and further restricts access to individual perspectives (interview, prison practitioner).

Over time, communication patterns tend to shift. Practitioners report gradual increases in interaction, not as a result of targeted intervention but as an adaptation to institutional routines. Engagement becomes necessary for navigating everyday processes, including requests, permissions, and access to services. This shift is interpreted as pragmatic adjustment rather than evidence of ideological moderation. Communication is therefore treated as a functional necessity rather than as an indicator of internal change.

Group dynamics play a central role in shaping early interaction. In cases where informal leadership structures are present, communication with staff is often mediated through a single dominant individual. Practitioners describe situations in which others defer to a perceived leader, delaying responses or awaiting visible approval before speaking. Leadership is inferred through these interactional patterns rather than formally designated, yet it significantly structures communication and access to information (interview, prison practitioner).

This mediation effect limits the ability of staff to assess individuals independently. Silence or limited engagement from other group members cannot be reliably interpreted as disengagement, as it may reflect deference, internal hierarchy, or strategic coordination. Early assessment is therefore shaped less by individual expression and more by collective dynamics.

Behavioural adaptation continues into later phases of custody. Initial resistance and limited communication often give way to increased interaction, participation in routine activities, and greater compliance with institutional expectations. These changes are consistently interpreted not as evidence of disengagement but as forms of behavioural adaptation to the custodial environment (interview, prison practitioner).

Adaptation is described as pragmatic rather than transformative. Engagement with staff, adherence to rules, and participation in available activities are understood as necessary strategies for navigating prison life. Communication remains shaped by practical needs, including access to resources, permissions, and services. Practitioners emphasise that such behaviour reflects adjustment to institutional routines rather than internal change in beliefs or identity.

Indicators of disengagement in North Macedonia are defined primarily through observable behaviour within custodial settings. In the absence of formalised tools or standardised criteria, practitioners rely on everyday interaction, routine observation, and professional judgement to interpret signs of change or concern. These indicators are not applied systematically but emerge through practice and experience.

Symbolism and appearance constitute an additional observational field. Practitioners describe paying attention to physical markers such as clothing, grooming, and visible symbols, which may indicate either alignment with or distancing from prior identity. Changes in appearance — such as the removal of religious markers, or shifts in dress consistent with broader social norms — may be interpreted as positive indicators, though always cautiously and never in isolation. The reverse — re-adoption of visible markers associated with prior identity — is treated as a significant warning sign.

Prison norms themselves shape what is considered observable. Practitioners describe a tacit understanding among inmates of what is expected, what is permitted, and what is monitored. Within this environment, compliance becomes the dominant observable pattern. Individuals follow instructions, avoid conflict, and maintain stable daily routines. While these behaviours are formally positive, practitioners consistently caution against interpreting them as indicators of reduced risk or ideological distancing. Compliance is treated as a baseline expectation within a controlled environment where deviation carries immediate consequences.

This cautious interpretation reflects a broader awareness of strategic behaviour. Practitioners describe the possibility that individuals may consciously align their conduct with institutional expectations to secure favourable conditions, including improved treatment, access to activities, or potential benefits related to sentence progression. Observable behaviour is therefore filtered through the assumption that it may be instrumental rather than authentic.

Behavioural adaptation in North Macedonia therefore reinforces the limits of interpretation in disengagement assessment. Compliance, participation, and stability provide necessary indicators of institutional functioning but do not offer conclusive evidence of disengagement. They must be understood as context-dependent responses to a controlled environment, shaped by incentives, constraints, and group dynamics.

Behavioural change does not resolve uncertainty; it reproduces it. Practitioners are able to observe patterns of adaptation, yet remain unable to determine whether these patterns reflect temporary adjustment or more durable transformation. Disengagement therefore remains inferred rather than observed, and assessment continues to rely on cautious interpretation of ambiguous signals.

8.5. Indicators of Change and Indicators of Concern

Positive change in North Macedonia is most often associated with behavioural stability and cooperation. Practitioners refer to reduced conflict, willingness to communicate, participation in daily routines, and compliance with institutional rules as baseline indicators of improvement. Individuals who engage with staff, respond to requests, and avoid disciplinary issues are generally perceived as more stable and manageable within the prison environment (interview, prison practitioner).

Additional indicators include sustained interaction over time, willingness to take on responsibility for routine tasks, and signs of investment in future-oriented activities such as education or vocational engagement. Practitioners are cautious, however, in attaching strong evidentiary weight to these signs, particularly in the absence of structured intervention programmes that could provide a comparative baseline against which to interpret participation.

Indicators of concern are described in more concrete terms. Practitioners highlight withdrawal from interaction, refusal to engage with staff or activities, re-adoption of visible markers of prior identity, and persistent grievance framing. Group dynamics — including evidence of informal leadership, peer mediation of communication, or coordinated behavioural patterns — are also treated as significant concerns, particularly where they suggest continued investment in identity structures associated with prior involvement.

Practitioners further identify cognitive markers of concern that emerge through everyday interaction. These include persistent justification of past actions, refusal to acknowledge harm, framing of conviction as illegitimate, and consistent linking of unrelated topics to ideological framings. As discussed in section 8.3, these cognitive patterns are particularly resistant to change and may persist alongside behavioural compliance, complicating assessment.

As in other cases, indicators of concern carry greater interpretive weight than indicators of positive change. Practitioners are more confident in identifying behaviours that suggest continued risk than in affirming behaviours that demonstrate durable disengagement. This asymmetry reflects both the structural conditions of assessment under uncertainty and the accountability pressures discussed in Chapter 2.

Across both categories, interpretation remains contextual and cautious. No single indicator is treated as decisive, and clusters of indicators are interpreted through longitudinal observation rather than at single points in time. Indicators in North Macedonia therefore function as signals requiring interpretation rather than as evidence of disengagement in any direct sense.

8.6. Family Relations and Social Context

Family relations and broader social context shape disengagement trajectories in North Macedonia in ways that practitioners recognise but only partially incorporate into formal assessment. Family contact is often interpreted as a stabilising factor, providing emotional connection, practical support, and a basis for post-release reintegration. Practitioners describe individuals whose engagement with the institutional environment improved following renewed family contact, attributing this to the grounding effect of relational ties.

The qualitative impact of family contact remains largely inaccessible, however. Practitioners cannot directly observe family dynamics and rely on indirect indicators — frequency of visits, content of communication as reported by the individual, and any externally observable family interaction during prison visits. Family contact may therefore be a stabilising factor or a reinforcing factor for prior beliefs, depending on the family environment, which assessment is poorly positioned to evaluate.

Reintegration environments after release are shaped by stigma, economic constraint, and limited opportunities. Practitioners describe the difficulty individuals face in finding employment, housing, and stable social integration. These structural conditions are recognised as significant for post-release trajectories but lie largely outside the institutional capacity to assess or address during custody. Expectations from families and external actors regarding housing, employment, and social support can also be unrealistic, generating pressure that complicates reintegration during the post-release period (interview, prison social worker).

Social context interacts with cognitive positioning in ways that further complicate assessment. Where individuals return to communities that reinforce grievance frameworks or maintain network ties consistent with prior involvement, the durability of any behavioural change observed in custody becomes more uncertain. Conversely, where individuals return to family or community environments that support reintegration into broader social roles, behavioural stability may be reinforced through external supports rather than through cognitive change.

Practitioners therefore incorporate family and social context into professional judgement, but acknowledge that their understanding remains partial. These dimensions shape behaviour, expectations, and potential trajectories, yet remain difficult to observe, measure, or integrate into formal processes. They contribute to the broader uncertainty that characterises assessment in this context.

8.7. The Release Phase and Post-Release Coordination

Assessment at the point of release in North Macedonia is consistently described by practitioners as cautious, limited, and inherently provisional. While behavioural stability during custody is taken into account, there are no structured mechanisms to evaluate whether such stability reflects deeper or more durable change. Release-stage assessment focuses primarily on observable conduct and risk mitigation rather than on confirmation of transformation.

Practitioners identify several constraints that shape this approach. Information gaps and fragmented follow-up are among the most frequently cited limitations. In some cases, individuals who demonstrated compliant behaviour during custody were later found to have maintained problematic engagement outside prison, including during periods of temporary leave (interview, prison practitioner). These experiences have reinforced scepticism toward behavioural improvement, particularly in the final phase of incarceration, when conduct may influence eligibility for release.

Staffing constraints further limit the depth of assessment. The absence of psychologists is repeatedly emphasised as a critical gap, reducing the ability to explore cognitive processes or provide specialised interventions. Evaluation therefore remains focused on behaviour that can be observed and recorded, rather than on underlying motivations or belief systems (interview, prison social worker).

Reintegration pressures also affect assessment at this stage. Practitioners describe expectations from families and external actors regarding housing, employment, and social support, which are often difficult to meet within existing socioeconomic conditions. These pressures can influence both behaviour and decision-making, adding complexity to an already constrained process (interview, prison social worker).

Drawing together these findings, practitioner accounts and documentary analysis point to five interrelated dimensions that structure assessment at the point of release: the information dimension, the tools dimension, the discretion dimension, the decision-making dimension, and the post-release supervision dimension.

Information depends on the availability and continuity of data across institutions. Practitioners report that documentation is often incomplete or insufficiently updated, while feedback from post-release supervision is limited. This creates gaps in understanding at the moment of decision-making and reduces confidence in assessment outcomes.

Tools are not consistently applied throughout the custodial process. While some risk and needs assessment instruments are used at intake, they are not systematically updated or used longitudinally, limiting their value for evaluating change over time (Council of Europe, 2016; UNODC, 2017).

Discretion plays a central role in the absence of clearly defined disengagement criteria. Professional judgement is exercised throughout, drawing on experience and contextual interpretation to assess behaviour. This allows flexibility but also introduces variability across cases and institutions (OSCE, 2020).

Decision-making is grounded in observable conduct. Release decisions are based primarily on behavioural stability, cooperation, and the absence of disciplinary incidents. These indicators reflect what can be verified within custody but do not provide evidence of deeper change. Decisions are therefore grounded in what can be observed rather than in what cannot be directly assessed.

Post-release supervision focuses on compliance with legal conditions. Existing frameworks do not provide structured mechanisms for monitoring disengagement specifically, limiting the ability to track longer-term trajectories or reassess earlier conclusions (Renard & Coolsaet, 2018; UNODC, 2017).

Across these five dimensions, a consistent pattern emerges. Assessment at release is shaped by structural limitations, uneven information flows, and reliance on observable behaviour. While institutional actors make efforts to evaluate individuals based on available data, the absence of longitudinal tools and consistent follow-up constrains the process.

Recent reforms under the EU–Council of Europe Horizontal Facility III have introduced more structured approaches to release preparation, including inter-agency coordination mechanisms and a national handbook on the rehabilitation and reintegration of foreign terrorist fighters and their families (Council of Europe, 2025). These developments signal institutional learning and alignment with regional standards. Practitioner accounts indicate, however, that implementation at the custodial level remains uneven, reinforcing the discontinuities observed throughout the chapter.

Coordination is described as situational rather than institutionalised. Multi-actor meetings involving prisons, police, social work centres, and municipal services are organised in some cases prior to release, but their scope and consistency depend largely on individual initiative rather than standardised procedure (interview, prison practitioner). These discussions focus primarily on practical issues — housing, social assistance, family dynamics, and employment prospects — while disengagement itself is not formally reassessed. It is implicitly inferred from the absence of disciplinary incidents and from cooperative conduct during custody.

Fragmentation becomes more pronounced after release. Practitioners report that, while prisons are often required to share information prior to release, they rarely receive feedback on post-release outcomes. As one prison social worker explains, this absence of follow-up prevents custodial staff from evaluating whether reintegration plans were implemented or whether prior assessments were accurate (interview, prison social worker). This lack of feedback is described as professionally discouraging and contributes to a cautious and limited approach to assessment.

Employment support provides a clear illustration of these challenges. Practitioners recount cases in which job placements were arranged through cooperation with municipal actors, yet individuals disengaged from employment shortly after starting — in some instances once financial benefits became available (interview, prison practitioner).

From the perspective of NGO psychosocial practitioners, post-release engagement focuses primarily on emotional regulation, stress management, and everyday functioning. Improvements are described in terms of reduced anxiety, calmer interaction, and increased willingness to seek support. While these changes are considered meaningful for social stability, they are not equated with ideological disengagement. Participation in such support remains voluntary, creating a structural gap between institutional expectations of risk reduction and the limits of available assistance (interview, NGO psychosocial practitioner).

Post-release reintegration in North Macedonia therefore emerges as fragmented and weakly institutionalised. Coordination mechanisms exist but lack sustained vertical integration between custodial and community levels. Feedback loops remain inconsistent, and assessment of disengagement effectively concludes at the point of release. Beyond that point, institutional knowledge becomes partial, dependent on indirect observation and voluntary engagement.

Disengagement is not established as a definitive outcome at release. It is treated as a tentative and context-dependent judgement, formed at the intersection of institutional constraints, partial knowledge, and practical decision-making requirements.

8.8. Conclusion

The North Macedonian case is distinctive because assessment takes place in a context marked by limited specialist capacity, uneven staffing, and a gap between policy ambition and operational resources. It shows that formal recognition of rehabilitation, reintegration, and disengagement in strategic documents does not automatically translate into consistent assessment practice at prison or community level. For the comparative argument, North Macedonia demonstrates how institutional capacity shapes what can be observed, documented, and transferred across the release process.

The North Macedonian case reveals a model of disengagement assessment defined less by institutional design than by structural constraint. While formal frameworks for prevention, rehabilitation, and reintegration are increasingly aligned with international standards, practitioner accounts consistently demonstrate that assessment in practice remains limited, fragmented, and oriented toward observable behaviour under conditions of restricted capacity.

Across custodial and post-release stages, disengagement is not approached as a measurable or verifiable outcome. It is inferred through behavioural stability, compliance, and the absence of overt indicators of concern. Early interaction is marked by communicative resistance and group-based mediation, limiting access to individual perspectives. Behavioural adaptation emerges over time but is interpreted as pragmatic adjustment rather than as evidence of internal change. Indicators of progress and concern remain ambiguous, context-dependent, and difficult to interpret in the absence of structured tools or sustained engagement.

A central feature of the North Macedonian context is the persistent gap between strategic policy ambition and operational capacity, including staffing levels, specialist support, continuity of case information, and post release coordination. While strategic documents promote coordinated, multi-actor approaches, implementation is constrained by staffing shortages, particularly the absence of psychologists, limited

programming, and insufficient longitudinal assessment mechanisms. Intervention remains informal and uneven, and assessment is shaped by what can be observed within these constraints rather than by comprehensive evaluative frameworks.

Cognitive positioning further reinforces the limits of assessment. Practitioner accounts highlight stable narratives of perceived injustice, rejection of the legitimacy of conviction, and broader grievance frameworks that persist independently of behavioural compliance. Individuals may adapt to institutional expectations while maintaining coherent interpretations that justify their actions or frame punishment as unfair. This disconnect between outward conduct and internal positioning complicates any attempt to equate observable change with disengagement.

Family relations and social context introduce additional layers of uncertainty. While family contact is often interpreted as a stabilising factor, its qualitative impact remains largely inaccessible. Reintegration environments are shaped by stigma, economic constraint, and limited opportunities, all of which influence post-release trajectories in ways that are difficult to anticipate during custody. These factors are recognised by practitioners but remain only partially integrated into assessment processes.

Post-release coordination reflects similar limitations. Although formal mechanisms for inter-agency cooperation exist, they are applied inconsistently and lack continuity. Information transfer is incomplete, feedback loops are weak, and formal prison based assessment effectively concludes at the point of release. Beyond this stage, institutional knowledge becomes fragmented, and practitioners rely on indirect and often delayed signals to understand outcomes.

The release-stage model developed in this chapter illustrates how these constraints converge. Assessment is structured through information gaps, limited tools, reliance on professional discretion, behaviour-based decision-making, and weak post-release monitoring. Together, these dimensions produce a system in which disengagement is not confirmed but provisionally inferred under conditions of partial knowledge.

The North Macedonian case shows how limited specialist staffing, weak continuity, and uneven post release coordination shape what practitioners are able to observe and document. Behavioural disengagement does not necessarily correspond to ideological transformation, and internal change remains difficult to observe, verify, and sustain over time (Bjørge & Horgan, 2009; Horgan, 2009; Silke, 2011). The North Macedonian case confirms this distinction in a particularly constrained setting, where institutional actors operate with limited resources and reduced capacity to engage beyond surface-level indicators.

The case adds an important qualification, however. It demonstrates that the limits of disengagement assessment are not only epistemological but also structural. Even where practitioners recognise the complexity of change, their ability to assess it is shaped by institutional capacity, available tools, and the organisation of the system itself. Disengagement is therefore not only difficult to know but difficult to assess in practice.

Chapter 9. Cross-Country Comparative Analysis

9.1. What Counts as Disengagement across Systems

This chapter compares how disengagement from terrorism-related violence is interpreted, inferred, and assessed across Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. Rather than restating country findings, it examines how similar empirical challenges are addressed under different institutional conditions, with particular focus on assessment at or near the point of release, where partial and indirect indicators must be translated into consequential decisions.

Across the four systems, practitioners repeatedly distinguish observable behaviour from internal belief, but they do not agree on whether ideological change is necessary for disengagement. Some prioritise withdrawal from violence and extremist networks, while others also require ideological rejection. The common challenge is assessing change through partial evidence rather than applying a single shared definition.

Despite this common baseline, the threshold for what counts as disengagement varies significantly across systems. In Albania and North Macedonia, disengagement is primarily inferred through behavioural adaptation and relational change within prison settings. Indicators such as cooperation, emotional stabilisation, and willingness to engage are treated as tentative signs of movement away from violence, but are consistently interpreted as provisional and reversible.

Bosnia and Herzegovina articulates more explicit but internally inconsistent standards. Some practitioners define disengagement normatively, as rejection of violent ideology and acceptance of the constitutional order, while simultaneously acknowledging that such transformation is rare and difficult to distinguish from conformism. Others reject ideological benchmarks entirely and focus on withdrawal from violence and networks. These parallel interpretations coexist within the same institutional settings, producing assessments that are procedurally consistent but conceptually unstable.

Kosovo presents a distinct configuration. A significant proportion of cases are managed in community settings, particularly among women subject to alternative measures. In this context, disengagement is inferred less from internal change and more from sustained non-violence under supervision, including compliance with reporting requirements, engagement with counselling, and stabilisation of family life. This shifts the meaning of disengagement toward functional reintegration rather than transformation.

Across all systems, perpetrator trajectories are understood as heterogeneous rather than linear. Practitioners differentiate between individuals who show early behavioural distancing, those who remain ideologically rigid, and those whose positions remain ambiguous despite formal compliance. These variations are linked to pathway differences — between conflict-related travel and domestic offending, for example — and to experiences of disillusionment or continued network attachment.

The comparison shows that disengagement is constructed negatively, as the absence of violence and mobilisation, rather than positively, as the presence of ideological moderation. This is not a conceptual preference but a response to institutional limits on what can be observed, documented, and justified within decision-making processes.

Disagreement about disengagement is not marginal but central to practice. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, some practitioners explicitly question whether substantive change occurs at all, interpreting observed improvement as situational adaptation. In Albania and North Macedonia, scepticism is expressed through the distinction between emotional stabilisation and deeper change. In Kosovo, uncertainty emerges from limited visibility in community-based supervision. Across contexts, disengagement therefore operates less as a stable empirical category and more as a contested and context-dependent interpretation, shaped by institutional constraints, professional experience, and the limits of observable evidence.

9.2. Tools, Judgement, and the Authority to Assess

A central point of divergence across the four systems concerns not only how disengagement is assessed, but who is authorised to define its meaning. Assessment is not determined solely by the availability of tools or the quality of observation, but by the distribution of authority across institutional actors and the conditions under which professional judgement is exercised.

Across all four countries, no system operates a fully integrated, terrorism-specific assessment framework that extends coherently from custody to community supervision. Where formal tools exist, they are partial, unevenly applied, or embedded within broader criminal justice instruments not designed for violent-extremism cases. Assessment consequently relies on professional judgement to bridge the gap between observable behaviour and interpretive meaning.

In Albania and North Macedonia, the absence of specialised tools places primary weight on observation-led assessment. Psychologists, social workers, and prison staff document behaviour, interaction patterns, and participation, and then infer significance through experience and relational knowledge. Assessment authority in these contexts is diffuse: those who interact daily with individuals contribute insight, but formal decision-making often occurs elsewhere, creating a gap between observation and conclusion.

Bosnia and Herzegovina presents a more formalised structure, characterised by documentation systems, periodic evaluations, and multidisciplinary files. Increased formalisation does not produce greater certainty. Practitioners repeatedly emphasise that documentation captures conduct rather than motivation, and that formal assessment processes aggregate information without resolving underlying ambiguity. Authority is unevenly distributed: staff who observe behaviour longitudinally are not always central to final decisions, while those responsible for evaluation may rely on mediated or filtered information. Documentation expands, but interpretive confidence does not.

Kosovo introduces a different configuration, where authority is closely tied to reporting obligations within a multi-actor system. Probation officers, social-welfare practitioners, and institutional actors produce structured reports for courts and ministries, translating observation into administrative outputs. Professional judgement here is exercised within formal reporting frameworks that define what must be recorded. Practitioners simultaneously acknowledge that significant aspects of individuals' lives remain inaccessible, particularly in community-supervision contexts shaped by gendered access and limited visibility. Authority to assess is therefore both formalised and constrained.

Across all systems, a consistent separation emerges between those who observe and those who decide. In Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, practitioners describe how daily interaction produces nuanced understanding that is difficult to translate into standardised documentation. Subtle psychological observations, shifts in tone, or relational changes often lose specificity when incorporated into formal reports. In North Macedonia, limited staffing and discontinuity reduce the accumulation of longitudinal knowledge, further weakening the connection between observation and assessment. In Kosovo, this separation is reinforced through institutional layering and, in some cases, gendered supervision structures that restrict direct access.

This separation has important consequences. It produces conservative assessment practices, since uncertainty increases when information is filtered across institutional levels. It also allows different interpretive standards to coexist within the same system, as actors rely on distinct forms of knowledge ranging from relational familiarity to procedural compliance.

The Albanian case illustrates how, in the absence of formal tools, shared heuristics can emerge across institutions. Practitioners consistently distinguish between passive compliance and initiative-driven engagement, treating initiative as a more meaningful indicator of potential change. This distinction appears across prison staff, clinicians, probation officers, and municipal actors, suggesting the development of informal consensus in the absence of standardised frameworks. Practitioners emphasise, however, that even initiative remains fragile and contingent on institutional support.

A broader pattern across all four countries is that professional judgement does not eliminate uncertainty but organises it. Practitioners are aware of the limits of their assessments and frequently acknowledge that their interpretations are provisional. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, this takes the form of explicit disagreement over criteria for disengagement. In Kosovo, practitioners recognise that the absence of negative indicators may reflect lack of access rather than reduced risk. In North Macedonia and Albania, judgement is shaped by accumulated experience with strategic adaptation, leading to increasingly cautious interpretation of positive signals.

These dynamics demonstrate that assessment authority is not a fixed attribute but a relational and institutional construct. It is shaped by who has access to information, how that information is processed, and under what conditions it is translated into formal decisions. The absence of shared benchmarks means that similar observations can carry different meanings depending on the institutional position of the observer and the purpose of the assessment.

Tools and judgement do not operate as alternatives but as interdependent elements within constrained systems. Where tools are limited or poorly integrated, judgement expands to fill the gap. Where tools are more formalised, judgement remains necessary to interpret their outputs. In both cases, authority to assess is inseparable from the institutional context in which knowledge is produced. Disengagement assessment is therefore not simply a technical process but an exercise in institutional interpretation shaped by uneven authority, partial knowledge, and competing logics of evaluation.

9.3. Common Indicators and Divergent Readings

A central comparative finding is that practitioners observe largely similar behavioural patterns yet interpret their meaning in fundamentally different ways. Indicators such as compliance with institutional rules, participation in programmes, polite interaction, and expressions of regret appear consistently across all systems. What diverges is not the presence of these indicators but the weight assigned to them and the conclusions drawn from them.

In Albania and North Macedonia, early experiences with strategic compliance have produced heightened scepticism toward positive behavioural indicators. Practitioners describe a learning process in which cooperation, politeness, and apparent openness were initially interpreted as signs of progress but later re-evaluated as adaptive responses to institutional incentives. Compliance is no longer treated as inherently meaningful. Instead, practitioners look for patterns over time, including consistency, initiative, and forms of engagement that extend beyond formal requirements.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, similar scepticism is articulated more explicitly through temporal reasoning. Practitioners place particular emphasis on the timing of behavioural change. Early expressions of remorse or cooperation are treated with caution, while late-stage improvement, especially near release, is widely discounted as performative. The final phase of custody is described as structurally distorted, as behaviour becomes closely tied to anticipated benefits. Even documented improvement is interpreted conservatively, and positive indicators are systematically downgraded.

In Kosovo's community supervision settings, cooperation with probation, counselling and support programmes is treated as relevant to reintegration. Practitioners nevertheless describe both the possibility of strategic compliance and limits on their visibility into individuals' lives. The challenge is therefore not simply to choose between cooperation and deception, but to interpret observable conduct alongside the information that remains unavailable.

The Albanian material introduces an additional nuance: minimal participation or withdrawal from services does not necessarily indicate persistence of risk. In community contexts, particularly among women and families, practitioners often interpret disengagement from institutions as a response to stigma, fear, or institutional fatigue. Families may avoid repeated exposure across agencies, withdraw children

from school, or limit interaction with authorities, even in the absence of ongoing security concerns. Observable behaviour is shaped not only by individual disposition but by the perceived safety and legitimacy of institutions.

Influence over others emerges as a cross-cutting indicator that illustrates divergence particularly clearly. In Albania and North Macedonia, informal authority within prison settings — the ability to shape group behaviour or mediate communication — is treated as a strong signal of continued risk, even when outward conduct is calm. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, similar concerns are recognised, but their incorporation into formal assessment varies, reflecting differences in documentation practices and institutional priorities. In Kosovo, where many cases unfold in community settings, influence is more difficult to observe directly and is often inferred through family dynamics or network connections.

Additional indicators further highlight interpretive variation. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, practitioners place particular emphasis on future orientation, assessing whether individuals can articulate realistic post-release plans. The ability to imagine and plan for life beyond custody is treated as a proxy for agency and readiness, while avoidance of such planning is interpreted as a limitation even when other indicators appear positive. Expressions of personal narrative are assessed not only for content but for structure, with attention to whether individuals integrate past actions into coherent accounts that support non-violent trajectories.

Across all four systems, and consistent with the Albanian material discussed in Chapter 5, indicators do not operate in isolation. Their meaning is shaped by context, timing, and accumulated experience. The same behaviour — cooperation or withdrawal — may be interpreted as stability, strategy, mistrust, or vulnerability, depending on the institutional setting and the expectations of the observer.

Scepticism toward indicators is not static but learned. Practitioners across Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia describe a shift in interpretation over time, driven by repeated encounters with adaptive or strategic behaviour. This institutional memory reshapes assessment practices, leading to more cautious and selective use of indicators. Identical behaviour may therefore be interpreted differently depending on the experience of the practitioner and the history of the institution.

Indicators do not possess inherent meaning. They acquire significance through interpretation, which is shaped by institutional context, professional experience, and perceived risk. Disengagement is therefore not derived directly from observable behaviour but constructed through the interpretive frameworks applied to that behaviour.

9.4. Structural Constraints Shaping Assessment

A further comparative finding is that disengagement assessment is shaped as much by structural conditions as by professional interpretation. Across all four countries, practitioners operate under constraints that narrow what can be observed, how long it can be observed, and how confidently it can be translated into assessment. These conditions do not simply complicate evaluation; they actively structure it.

One of the most consistent constraints is sentence length. In Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia in particular, relatively short custodial sentences compress the period available for observation, en-

gement, and interpretation. Practitioners repeatedly describe limited opportunities to distinguish between temporary adaptation and more sustained change. Assessment is often based on short behavioural windows, increasing reliance on partial indicators and weakening confidence in conclusions.

A second structural constraint concerns staff continuity and institutional memory. In Albania and North Macedonia, turnover of psychologists and limited specialist capacity reduce continuity across the custodial trajectory. Late-stage judgements are frequently made by staff who did not observe earlier phases of imprisonment or lack access to the full history of interaction. This weakens longitudinal understanding and reinforces cautious interpretation, particularly where subtle behavioural or psychological changes depend on sustained observation over time.

Programme availability and depth vary across the four systems, but a common pattern emerges. Kosovo provides comparatively more structured vocational, educational, and supervision-linked support in some settings, while Bosnia and Herzegovina has more formalised documentation and review procedures. Albania and North Macedonia, by contrast, show clearer gaps between formal policy design and actual delivery, often due to staffing shortages and lack of trained personnel. Across all systems, even where programmes exist, practitioners emphasise that limited depth and uneven implementation constrain the range of change that can be meaningfully observed. Programme participation may be documented, but its significance remains uncertain.

Information sharing is another structural barrier that cuts across all four countries. Practitioners describe incomplete files, delayed court decisions, missing intelligence, and weak transfer of prior assessments between prison, probation, police, and welfare actors. This affects both prison-based evaluation and community supervision. Institutions are often required to assess disengagement with only partial knowledge of past behaviour, network position, or prior concerns. Assessment becomes not only interpretive but informationally unequal, depending on who has access to what.

The Albanian case adds a particularly important dimension by showing that the credibility of assessment is tied to the sustainability of support. Practitioners repeatedly stress that apparent progress may erode not because individuals necessarily regress, but because institutional support is short-lived, fragmented, or externally funded. Assessment is shaped not only by perceptions of individual readiness but by doubts about whether the surrounding system can absorb and support that readiness over time. This blurs the distinction between evaluating the person and evaluating the capacity of the environment into which the person is released.

A further structural pressure is accountability. Across all four systems, practitioners describe the period near release as one in which any future incident may be retrospectively attached to their judgement. This creates strong incentives for conservative interpretation. Ambiguous positive signs are discounted, uncertainty is documented rather than resolved, and confidence is rarely asserted where it cannot be fully justified. Assessment is shaped not only by what practitioners know but by what they may later be held responsible for failing to foresee.

This pressure is especially visible in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia, where practitioners describe the final phase of custody as evidentially distorted. The moment of highest institutional scrutiny coincides with the moment of lowest interpretive confidence, because behaviour becomes saturated with

strategic calculation tied to release expectations. Bosnia and Herzegovina adds an additional layer to this pattern: not only performative improvement, but also observable regression. Practitioners describe inmates who had previously complied beginning to withdraw from work, reduce communication, and reassert rigid identities as release approaches, particularly when it becomes clear that no further benefits will follow. The final phase is not simply ambiguous but structurally unstable as a basis for judgement.

These structural conditions show that disengagement assessment is not simply weakened by individual uncertainty but organised by systemic limits. Sentence length, staff turnover, programme depth, information flow, sustainability of support, and accountability pressures all shape what practitioners can plausibly infer and what they are willing to conclude. Assessment is not only a professional act of interpretation but a structurally conditioned response to incomplete time, incomplete knowledge, and incomplete control. Structural constraints do not sit outside assessment as external obstacles; they define its horizon.

9.5. Gender, Pathways, and Assessment Environments

Gender and pathway differences introduce a further layer of variation into disengagement assessment across the four systems. The comparison shows that practitioners are not assessing a single type of perpetrator in a single type of environment. They assess different populations under different legal, institutional, and social conditions, and these differences shape both the meaning of disengagement and the forms of evidence available to support it.

Kosovo provides the clearest example of this variation. A large share of relevant cases, especially among women returnees, was managed through alternative measures and community supervision rather than imprisonment. In these cases, assessment took place primarily in domestic and community settings, where practitioners focused on trust-building, cooperation with probation, household stability, child welfare, and sustained engagement with counselling and support services. Disengagement was inferred less through prison-based observation and more through everyday functioning under supervised reintegration. This produced a different assessment environment centred on social stabilisation rather than custodial control.

These gendered pathways also reshaped supervision itself. In Kosovo, women's refusal to engage with male officers altered not only the practical organisation of supervision but the distribution of information within institutions. Knowledge about a case depended in part on who could access the client directly. Assessment was therefore not simply gender-sensitive in a broad sense but structurally gendered in the most practical way, as gender determined access, visibility, and the depth of institutional knowledge.

The custodial situations described in this study differ across the three countries. Women appear less frequently in the Albanian custodial material. In Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia, the custodial cases discussed did not include female returnees. These differences limit what the prison material can establish about women's disengagement and reinforce the importance of distinguishing custodial evidence from evidence generated in community settings.

Pathway differences matter just as much as gender. Individuals released from prison are assessed within environments oriented toward order, discipline, and risk containment. Those under alternative measures are assessed through compliance with supervision, willingness to engage, and ability to function

within family and community settings. These are not merely different stages of the same process; they are different environments of visibility, producing different forms of evidence and different standards of judgement. The same term, disengagement, refers to different practical realities depending on whether the person is observed in prison, in probation, or in social-welfare contexts.

Pathway differences also shape expectations of change. In prison-based systems, practitioners tend to emphasise risk containment, influence over others, and the interpretive ambiguity of compliance. In community-based pathways, especially in Kosovo, practitioners place greater weight on social functioning, caregiving, participation in support services, and the maintenance of stable routines. Each system is working with a different institutional logic and a different set of observable behaviours.

The gender dimension further clarifies how adaptation can be misread as change. In North Macedonia and Albania, practitioners describe initial refusal to communicate with female staff, followed later by interaction once practical necessity made communication unavoidable. In both contexts, this shift was interpreted cautiously, not as evidence of value change but as institutional adaptation. In Kosovo, by contrast, gendered boundaries do not function as indicators of disengagement at all; instead, they structure the terms under which supervision can take place. Across cases, gender shapes assessment less through fixed substantive differences than through the conditions of access, interaction, and interpretive possibility.

The empirical material also shows that pathway heterogeneity affects how practitioners interpret malleability. Kosovan practitioners distinguish between individuals who travelled in the context of family dynamics and those convicted for attempted attacks or more entrenched violence-related roles. Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia similarly differentiate between those whose engagement appears situational and those whose narratives remain rigid and grievance-driven. These distinctions do not create a uniform typology, but they show that practitioners routinely assess not only what individuals do, but what sort of trajectory they seem to represent.

Gender and pathway do not merely add descriptive detail to disengagement assessment. They shape the assessment environment itself. They determine who can observe, what can be observed, which indicators become relevant, and how much confidence practitioners place in what they see. Disengagement is therefore not only institutionally constructed but environmentally conditioned. It looks different because it is being assessed in different relational, legal, and organisational worlds.

The comparative material cautions against any assumption that disengagement can be assessed through uniform indicators across offender groups or institutional settings. What counts as meaningful change depends in part on the pathway through which the person is managed and the environment in which that management takes place. Gender and pathway differences do not sit at the margins of assessment; they are part of the structure that makes assessment possible, partial, and uneven.

9.6. Disengagement as an Institutional Construction

The comparative analysis demonstrates that disengagement is not a stable trait that institutions identify, but a category that institutions actively construct. Across Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, practitioners do not encounter disengagement as something directly observable. They

assemble it through interpretation, inference, and documentation under conditions of limited access to internal processes.

This construction is not uniform. It varies across institutional settings, professional roles, and stages of the custodial and post-release process. In prison environments, disengagement is tied to order, compliance, and the management of influence over others. In probation, it is tied to reporting, cooperation, and adherence to legal conditions. In social-welfare contexts, it is linked to stability, care, and the ability to function within family and community life. These are not different measures of the same underlying phenomenon. They are different institutional versions of disengagement, each shaped by the mandate and constraints of the observing system.

The Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia material makes this particularly clear. Practitioners continue to produce assessments of disengagement while openly questioning whether the phenomenon can be reliably identified at all. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, conflicting internal standards coexist, with some practitioners requiring ideological rejection and others rejecting that requirement as unrealistic. In North Macedonia, disengagement is reduced to observable compliance, while belief change is explicitly set aside as unattainable. In both cases, assessment proceeds despite acknowledged uncertainty, not because that uncertainty is resolved but because institutional decision-making requires it.

Kosovo extends this pattern by showing how disengagement is shaped through intervention. In community-based supervision, particularly among women returnees, disengagement is inferred through compliance, participation, and social stabilisation. Disengagement is not only interpreted but partially produced through institutional engagement. Even in this context, practitioners recognise that what is observed reflects interaction with the system as much as it reflects individual transformation.

The Albanian material further demonstrates that disengagement is contingent not only on individual behaviour but on institutional capacity to sustain engagement. Apparent progress may weaken or disappear when support structures are fragmented or short-lived. Assessment is therefore not only about the individual but about whether the surrounding system can maintain the conditions under which disengagement appears possible.

Across all four systems, practitioners acknowledge that they cannot access internal motivation directly. What they observe are behaviours, relationships, and situational adjustments. From these they construct interpretations shaped by prior experience, institutional culture, and perceived risk. Disengagement therefore exists not as a discovered fact but as an interpretive outcome produced within the limits of institutional knowledge.

This construction is not arbitrary. It follows recognisable patterns. Practitioners combine observable indicators, assess consistency over time, compare behaviour across contexts, and situate individuals within broader trajectories. These practices do not eliminate uncertainty; they organise it. They produce assessments that are credible enough to support decisions but not definitive enough to resolve doubt.

Within the institutions examined, disengagement becomes an assessment category through interpretation, documentation and decisions made under constraint. This concerns how institutions recognise change, not whether individual withdrawal from violence can occur independently of assessment.

This construction is deeply influenced by institutional purpose. Systems do not ask the same questions. Prison systems ask whether individuals can be managed safely within custody. Probation asks whether they can comply under supervision. Social-welfare systems ask whether they can function within community life. Each question generates its own version of disengagement, and none can fully capture the others.

The institutional recognition of disengagement depends on the context of assessment. Conduct interpreted as disengagement in one setting may be interpreted as adaptation, compliance or uncertainty in another. The study therefore concerns variation in assessment, rather than the absence of an individual process outside institutions.

The strongest implication of this finding is that the limits of disengagement assessment are not failures of method but features of the phenomenon itself. Institutions are not failing to detect disengagement more precisely; they are operating at the boundary of what can be known. The persistence of uncertainty, disagreement, and cautious interpretation across all four systems is not accidental — it is the predictable outcome of trying to assess internal processes through external observation.

Disengagement functions as an institutional compromise. It allows systems to translate incomplete knowledge into actionable judgements. It enables decisions about release, supervision, and reintegration to be made without requiring certainty about internal change. It does so by accepting that such certainty is not attainable.

9.7. Implications for Assessment at Release

The comparative analysis shows that assessment at the point of release is the moment where all limitations identified across systems converge. It is the stage at which incomplete observation, fragmented information, institutional constraint, and interpretive uncertainty must be translated into a concrete decision. Across Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, practitioners are required to determine readiness for release without access to definitive evidence of internal change.

Release-stage assessment is therefore not a process of confirmation but of judgement under constraint. Decisions are based on behavioural stability, consistency of conduct, and the absence of immediate indicators of concern. These elements provide a necessary basis for evaluation yet remain insufficient for establishing whether change is durable, transferable beyond institutional settings, or resistant to future pressure.

A key implication is that assessment at release cannot be understood as a final verification of disengagement. Across all four systems, practitioners treat it as a provisional conclusion shaped by available evidence and bounded by uncertainty. Even where behaviour appears stable and cooperation is sustained, there is consistent recognition that these indicators may reflect adaptation to institutional conditions rather than transformation that will persist after release.

The timing of assessment further complicates this process. The period immediately prior to release is described across multiple contexts as particularly unstable. Behavioural improvement may be influenced by anticipated benefits, while withdrawal or regression may reflect the removal of incentives or anxiety

about reintegration. In both cases, the evidential value of observed behaviour is weakened at precisely the moment when decisions carry the greatest consequence.

Information limitations reinforce this uncertainty. Incomplete documentation, restricted intelligence sharing, and weak feedback from post-release supervision mean that assessment is conducted without full knowledge of past trajectories or future conditions. Practitioners therefore rely on partial records and indirect inference, accepting that their conclusions cannot be validated at the point of decision.

Differences across systems do not eliminate this pattern. More formalised environments, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, produce more extensive documentation but do not reduce interpretive ambiguity. Community-based systems, such as Kosovo, allow observation in more natural settings but face limitations of visibility and control. Resource-constrained systems, such as Albania and North Macedonia, rely more heavily on behavioural indicators due to limited capacity for deeper engagement. Across all configurations, the same underlying condition persists: decisions must be made without certainty.

This produces a consistent institutional response. Practitioners adopt cautious assessment strategies, avoid over-interpretation of positive signals, and emphasise what can be defensibly justified rather than what might be optimistically inferred. Assessment at release becomes oriented toward risk containment rather than validation of change. It is shaped not only by what practitioners believe but by what they can reasonably support within institutional accountability frameworks.

Responsibility for disengagement is effectively redistributed at the point of release. Once individuals leave custody, assessment shifts from a closed environment of observation to an open and less controlled context. Institutions transition from attempting to interpret internal change to managing external conditions, including supervision, support, and monitoring. Disengagement is no longer something to be confirmed but something to be managed over time through partial and evolving information.

Release-stage assessment functions as a threshold rather than a conclusion. It marks the transition from institutional control to conditional autonomy, from direct observation to indirect monitoring, and from structured evaluation to ongoing uncertainty.

Chapter 10. Conclusion: Disengagement, Assessment, and Institutional Uncertainty at Release

This study began with a simple but demanding question: how do institutions decide that someone has disengaged from violent extremism at the point of release? It did not ask whether individuals have truly changed or whether they will reoffend. It asked something more immediate, and arguably more difficult: how do practitioners make decisions about change when they cannot directly observe belief, cannot verify intention, and cannot predict what comes next? The following sections address that question through four thematic strands: what the study found, what those findings mean for assessment, what they imply for policy and practice, and what they suggest for future research.

10.1. What We Found

Across Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, the answer is remarkably consistent. Disengagement is not something institutions discover. It is something they construct. Assessment is grounded in observable behaviour, relational dynamics, and indicators of stability within institutional settings. From these elements, practitioners produce judgements that are explicitly provisional and bounded by the limits of available evidence.

This produces a consistent operational logic. Disengagement is defined negatively, through the absence of indicators associated with continued risk, rather than positively, through evidence of transformation. Indicators such as attempts to influence others, destabilising conduct, or persistent grievance framed as justification for harm carry greater interpretive weight than cooperation, programme participation, or expressions of remorse. Assessment at release therefore concerns how observed conduct and remaining uncertainty are interpreted in preparing the transition to the community.

The country chapters revealed important variation within this shared logic. Albania assesses disengagement primarily through clinical and behavioural observation, in the absence of specialised tools and within fragmented post-release coordination. Bosnia and Herzegovina operates with the region's most developed documentation framework, yet practitioners express the deepest reflexive doubt about whether observed change reflects genuine transformation or situational adjustment. Kosovo manages

a substantial share of cases through community supervision, where disengagement is shaped through intervention as much as observed through evaluation. North Macedonia operates within an aspirational policy framework constrained by significant operational limitations, particularly the absence of specialist clinical staff.

These differences are not deviations from a common standard but distinct institutional configurations producing distinct forms of disengagement. The comparative analysis demonstrates that the four systems converge in their epistemological position — disengagement cannot be directly verified — while diverging in how this position is operationalised. The convergence is significant: it suggests that the limits of disengagement assessment are not specific to any one country's institutional weaknesses but structural features of the assessment problem itself.

10.2. What This Means for Assessment

Release-stage assessment makes the operational logic of disengagement explicit. It is the point at which accumulated observation, partial documentation, and professional interpretation must be translated into a decision with legal and public consequences. This decision is forward-looking, yet it is made without reliable means of prediction and without direct access to internal change. Assessment at release cannot establish the full truth of internal change. It establishes what can be justified on the basis of available information.

Documentation plays a central role in this process, but not as a predictive instrument. Records function as evidence of procedural diligence. They demonstrate that relevant indicators were identified, considered, and weighed. Their primary function is to support accountability rather than to produce certainty about future behaviour. Assessment is oriented toward defensibility, not verification.

Within this context, practitioner scepticism emerges as a rational and necessary feature of professional judgement. It reflects the structure of terrorism-related risk, where low-frequency events are associated with high perceived consequences. Under such conditions, unwarranted confidence carries significant professional and institutional risk. Practitioners respond by limiting the claims they are willing to make, distinguishing between observable stability and unobservable transformation, and interpreting positive indicators cautiously. Scepticism, in this sense, is not a barrier to assessment; it is the condition under which assessment remains credible.

The persistence of uncertainty is not explained by individual caution alone. It is structurally produced. Short custodial sentences limit the duration of observation. Fragmented institutional responsibilities disrupt continuity of knowledge. Information flows between prison, probation, and social services are incomplete. Specialist expertise and tailored programming are unevenly distributed. These constraints define what can be observed, how it can be interpreted, and what can be defensibly concluded. They cannot be resolved through the refinement of tools alone.

Disengagement is assessed across different institutional environments — custodial settings, probation supervision, and community-based contexts. These environments generate different forms of visibility and different standards of interpretation. What is observable in prison differs from what is accessible in the community. Gender and pathway differences further shape these conditions, affecting both access

to individuals and the meaning attributed to their behaviour. Disengagement has no single operational form; it is produced through context-specific practices of observation and interpretation.

Within the settings examined, assessments of disengagement remain provisional and dependent on context. They are judgements based on available evidence, not confirmation of internal transformation. At release, these assessments inform preparation for the transition into the community and any supervision or support provided under the applicable legal framework.

10.3. Implications for Policy and Practice

Three implications follow directly from these findings.

First, expectations that custodial institutions can certify disengagement are not aligned with their epistemic capacity. Policy frameworks and public discourse frequently treat disengagement as a measurable state that institutions should be able to determine through systematic evaluation. The evidence presented in this volume suggests that such expectations ask institutions to do more than assessment can reasonably support: disengagement is not a state that can be measured but a judgement that institutions construct under uncertainty. Requiring definitive judgements at the point of release risks encouraging overinterpretation of weak indicators, reliance on symbolic markers of change, or defensive documentation that obscures rather than communicates the limits of professional knowledge. A more realistic policy framing would recognise release-stage assessment as a judgement about acceptable risk rather than as confirmation of transformation, and would design institutional accountability accordingly.

Second, improving assessment is less dependent on the development of new tools than on strengthening continuity across institutional contexts. The cross-country evidence demonstrates that even where formal frameworks are well developed — most clearly in Bosnia and Herzegovina — interpretive confidence does not increase in proportion to documentation. The bottlenecks lie elsewhere: in the limited transfer of information between custody and probation; in the absence of specialist clinical staff who can sustain longitudinal engagement; in fragmented post-release coordination; and in the structural separation between those who observe and those who decide. Investments in inter-institutional information transfer, in retaining and developing specialist prison psychologists, and in sustained post-release case management are likely to produce greater improvements in assessment quality than the introduction of additional structured instruments.

Third, post-release supervision should be designed on the premise that uncertainty persists and that disengagement at release represents a conditional judgement rather than a stable outcome. This implies that supervision frameworks should be calibrated to enable revision of earlier assessments rather than treating release-phase documentation as a final determination. Practical measures include feedback loops from probation back to custodial assessment teams, longitudinal case-tracking arrangements that extend across the custody–community boundary, and clearer protocols for re-assessment when post-release behaviour generates new information. Sustainability of community-level support — psychosocial services, employment assistance, family-level interventions — emerges from the Albanian and Kosovan evidence as a critical condition for stabilising disengagement after release, and warrants direct investment as part of the assessment infrastructure rather than as a separate reintegration agenda.

Several cross-cutting practical recommendations also emerge from the country chapters. Training in religious literacy for prison staff who interact with terrorism-related cases is recurrent across all four jurisdictions and could be addressed through regional cooperation. Harmonisation of pre-release documentation across the Western Balkans would improve information transfer in cases of transnational mobility. Gender-sensitive assessment frameworks — particularly important in Kosovo but underdeveloped in the other three cases — should draw on the operational experience already accumulated within Kosovan probation services. Finally, the post-release support gap identified in all four countries indicates that reintegration is not adequately treated as an extension of the assessment process; it remains poorly resourced and weakly connected to custodial decision-making.

10.4. Implications for Research

The findings indicate the need for a substantial shift in how disengagement is researched. The dominant scholarly tradition has framed disengagement as an individual psychological or behavioural outcome to be measured, predicted, and evaluated. The evidence from this study suggests that this framing captures only part of the phenomenon. Disengagement is also — and arguably primarily, within criminal justice systems — an institutional construction. Understanding how institutions manage uncertainty is therefore central to understanding disengagement itself.

Four research priorities follow from this reframing.

The first is comparative ethnographic work on assessment practice. The present study has drawn extensively on practitioner interviews and institutional documentation, but it has been bounded by the methodological choice of cross-sectional design. Longitudinal ethnographic engagement with assessment teams over the duration of multiple cases would substantially deepen understanding of how interpretive judgements are formed, contested, and revised in practice. Such work would also illuminate how institutional memory accumulates and how earlier cases shape interpretive frameworks applied to later ones.

The second is longitudinal study of post-release trajectories. The most significant gap in the existing evidence base is the limited follow-up between custodial assessment and post-release outcomes. Practitioners across all four cases identified this gap as a source of professional discouragement and a structural limit on the ability to refine assessment over time. Research designs that track cases across the custody–community boundary, with the cooperation of probation services and reintegration support providers, would address both the empirical gap and the institutional one.

The third is the systematic comparative study of structured judgement frameworks in extremism-related cases. The international literature on instruments such as the VERA-2R and the ERG22+ has focused primarily on validation studies and design considerations. Less attention has been paid to how these instruments are actually used within institutional environments, including how their outputs are interpreted, contested, and translated into decisions. The present study suggests that the interpretive layer of structured-judgement frameworks deserves the same analytical attention as their technical design.

The fourth is the comparative analysis of how policy frameworks construct expectations of disengagement. The gap between policy ambition and operational reality identified in North Macedonia is not unique to that case; it is, in different forms, a feature of all four jurisdictions and of broader European

policy frameworks. Research that examines how disengagement is articulated in legal instruments, strategic documents, and inter-institutional protocols — and how those articulations interact with the realities of assessment practice — would contribute both to the scholarly understanding of disengagement as an institutional category and to more realistic policy design.

Beyond these specific priorities, the study points to a broader conceptual question: how do criminal justice systems make decisions under conditions of structural uncertainty? Terrorism-related cases are an extreme instance of a more general problem. The mechanisms documented here — negative inference, defensible documentation, cautious interpretation, redistributed responsibility — are likely to have analogues in other domains where institutional decisions must be made without verifiable evidence of internal change. The disengagement literature has much to learn from, and to contribute to, broader scholarship on risk assessment, criminal justice decision-making, and the sociology of institutional knowledge.

Disengagement functions as a mechanism for organising uncertainty within systems that are required to act without complete knowledge. It allows institutions to translate partial evidence into decisions that are legally defensible and operationally necessary. It does not eliminate uncertainty, nor does it resolve it. It renders it manageable. Disengagement at release is therefore not a statement about who an individual has become. It is a judgement about what can be reasonably concluded, and what level of uncertainty can be accepted, at a given institutional moment. This is not a limitation of practice that can be fully overcome; it is the condition under which assessment operates.

Taken together, these findings point to a broader conclusion. Institutions cannot be expected to certify inner transformation. They can, however, be supported to make more careful, better documented, and more transparent assessments of change, risk, and release readiness. Disengagement assessment should therefore be understood not as a claim of certainty, but as a structured and accountable judgement based on partial evidence, professional interpretation, and continuing reassessment after release.

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Primary Sources: Interview Material

Interview material is cited by professional role and institution or facility. Group interviews are identified separately. The fieldwork year is stated in the country lists below.

Albania (Fieldwork: 2025)

Senior official, General Prisons Directorate, Tirana.
Policy-level practitioner, National CVE Centre, Tirana.
Psychosocial staff, Korça Prison.
Psychosocial staff, Peqin High Security Prison.
Prison psychiatrist, Korça High Security Prison.
Prison psychologist, Korça High Security Prison.
Prison psychologist, Burrel High Security Prison.
Prison educator, Peqin High Security Prison.
Prison educator, Korça Prison.
Probation Service representative, Tirana.
Community psychologist, Tirana.
Municipal child protection officer, Tirana.

Bosnia and Herzegovina (Fieldwork: 2025)

State Prison staff.
State Prison psychologist.
KPZ Tuzla staff (multiple interviews).
KPZ Tuzla psychologist.
KPZ Tuzla educator.
KPZ Zenica staff (multiple interviews).
KPZ Zenica psychologist.
KPZ Zenica educator.
Prison staff, Bihać.
Prison security staff.

Kosovo (Fieldwork: 2025)

Probation Service representatives, including officers based in Pristina.
Social Welfare Centre, Fushë Kosovë.
Group interview, Kosovo Correctional Service, Dyz.
Ministry of Internal Affairs, Division for Prevention and Reintegration.

North Macedonia (Fieldwork: 2025)

Prison practitioner (facility anonymised at request of participants).

Prison social worker.

NGO psychosocial practitioner.

Legal Instruments and Official Documents

Council of Ministers of Albania. (2015). Decision No. 930 on the Approval of the National Strategy Countering Violent Extremism and the Action Plan (dated 18.11.2015).

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