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Belgian Research Action through Interdisciplinary Networks

POLICY BRIEF

Policy Brief n°4

REGUIDE – A Holistic, Restorative, and Gendered Approach to Guide Returnees to their Home Country: Political debates Report

- *This brief presents findings of a critical discourse and thematic analysis of Belgian political debates on (potential) returnee men (2013–2022) in two arenas: the media and federal parliament.*
- *Political discourse shaped how the returnee issue was felt and understood, moving from ambivalence in the early years of the Syrian conflict, to punitive consensus.*
- *Political discourse normalised exclusionary and securitised policies and redefined belonging.*
- *For Belgian society to move forward requires: responsible political communication, evidence-based policymaking, and fostering inclusive democratic debate in public spaces.*

Context and question(s) of research

Since 2013, returnees have become a central political issue, widely framed as a security threat. Scholarship demonstrates that both policy responses and media narratives have been dominated by a language of fear and danger. Yet, an important research gap remains: we still know too little about how politicians—across parties and arenas—actively shaped these public and policy narratives.

Earlier studies paid attention to policy responses, legal frameworks, and comparing (European) approaches. However, far less attention has been paid to political discourses. Little is known about how political actors construct narratives, mobilise emotions, and legitimise particular policies through public and parliamentary interventions on the returnee issue. This report therefore examines political discourses on the returnee question, with a particular focus on male (potential) returnees. It aims to answer four main questions:

1. How have Belgian politicians discursively constructed male (potential) returnees in the media and in parliament between 2013 and 2022?
2. What role have securitisation, emotions, racialisation, and gender played in these constructions?
3. How do discourses differ across arenas (media versus parliament), and what does this reveal about issue ownership, political performance and strategy?
4. In what ways do these discourses contribute to the legitimisation of particular policy responses?

Main findings

The report shows that Belgian political discourses on male (potential) returnees between 2013 and 2022 were heavily shaped by securitisation, emotionalisation, and racialised/gendered representations. Across both media and parliamentary arenas, political actors predominantly constructed returnee men as dangerous, hypermasculine, and irredeemable threats, legitimising exceptional security measures and narrowing the space for reintegration-oriented approaches.

In the media, political visibility was highly uneven. The nationalist Flemish party N-VA dominated the debate, far outpacing all other parties, despite not always being in government. This reflects strong issue ownership on security and migration. Liberal (MR) and Christian democratic (CD&V) actors were also widely present due to their ministerial portfolios. Conversely, major governing parties such as PS and Open VLD were significantly underrepresented. Local politicians—especially mayors from cities linked to departee cases—also played an outsized role. Women remained largely absent from the debate.

Media attention peaked around moments of crisis (2015–2016 attacks, 2019 repatriation pressures) and declined sharply afterward. During these peaks, political interventions tended to rely on fear, indignation, and symbolic language, amplifying hostile public attitudes and supporting restrictive policies such as citizenship stripping, refusal of repatriation, and punitive framing.

Parliamentary debates reproduced similar dynamics. Two dominant thematic clusters emerged:

1. Discourses of fear, centred on threat construction, us-versus-them narratives, and efforts to prevent repatriation.
2. Discourses of state action, focused on legal procedures, surveillance, trials abroad, and national security management.

While certain political actors—particularly on the left and among Greens—did articulate rights-based or humanitarian counter-frames, these remained marginal and often strategically ambiguous. Ambiguity itself functioned as a political tool, allowing parties to avoid electoral risk.

Across both arenas, the report finds that racialisation, Othering, and gendered tropes shaped how returnee men were represented: as barbaric, disposable, and permanently outside the national moral community. These narratives contributed to normalising exceptional measures and shrinking the political imagination regarding reintegration. Ultimately, the study shows that Belgian political discourse did not simply respond to security concerns—it actively produced the threat, structured public opinion, and legitimised a narrow policy agenda focused on exclusion rather than responsibility or long-term security.

Conclusion and recommendations

- Reducing fear, restoring nuance, and ensuring accountability are essential to rebuild democratic trust
- Political, media, and institutional actors share responsibility for ensuring that the returnee issue is treated as a matter of justice and governance, not political performance

For politicians

1. **Avoid securitised and exclusionary discourses**

Politicians should refrain from homogenising returnees as “terrorist threats” in public discourses, and instead follow leading academics and security experts in their differentiation of profiles, including combatant and non-combatant men. Policy as well public communication should take into consideration the diverse profiles of departees and not be guided by fear-driven narratives or resentment.

2. Communicate transparently

Strategic ambiguity and polarising language may offer short-term electoral gains, but in the long-term both undermine trust and democratic debate. Politicians should therefore articulate clear and evidence-based positions, both in their media interventions as well in parliament.

3 Avoid extreme rhetoric

Research shows that adopting punitive and exclusionary discourses initially promoted by the far right normalises Islamophobia and narrows policy alternatives. Politicians should avoid amplifying this process.

4 Strengthen gender-sensitive perspectives.

Women's voices remain marginalised in security debates. Political leaders should ensure gender-balanced participation and adopt perspectives that move beyond hegemonic masculinity.

For journalists and media

1. Diversify political sources.

Broaden coverage beyond dominant right wing, male, and Flemish voices, by providing equal space for other perspectives from centre and left-wing, female, and Francophone politicians. Media should double the effort to also cover the perspectives of these groups as they were largely absent.

2. Avoid reproducing fear and stereotypes

Headlines and frames that equate “returnees” with “terrorists” reinforce stigmatization. Journalists should contextualize and nuance political statements and one-liners.

3. Highlight alternative discourses.

Coverage often amplified securitising claims while marginalizing humanitarian or legal critiques. Giving more space to counter-discourses can broaden public debate.

For policy makers

1. Prioritize evidence-based policies.

Policy should not be dictated by sensationalized discourse but guided by empirical assessments of risk and reintegration outcomes.

2. Ensure compliance with human rights

Exceptional measures such as citizenship stripping or indefinite detention risk undermining international law and democratic principles.

3. Invest in reintegration and prevention

Long-term safety is better served by rehabilitation, deradicalisation, and reintegration programs rather than exclusionary measures.

4. Build resilience against polarisation

Policies should actively counteract the “us-versus-them” dynamic by investing in inclusive narratives and social cohesion

Other important actors

1 Academics & Experts should continue to provide independent, evidence-based analysis and challenge the politicisation of the returnee issue.

2 Educators and schools are important actors in preventing polarisation and teaching critical media literacy, which can help younger generations resist fear-driven political discourse.

3 International Institutions (EU, UN bodies) should provide oversight, set standards on repatriation and human rights, and counteract exceptionalism at the national level

Read more

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