

MEDIA-CONSTRUCTED MORALITY: COMPARING KAZAKHSTAN AND FRANCE IN REPATRIATION DEBATES

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ABSTRACT. *The territorial defeat of ISIS created pressure on states to repatriate citizens from areas of conflict, but the national approaches were quite heterogeneous. The study explores which frames were produced in the contemporary media in Kazakhstan and France on the issue of the repatriation of citizens affiliated with ISIS in 2019-2025 and how these frames were reflected in public discourse. Drawing on strategic culture and media framing theory, the research employs a comparative qualitative design combining framing analysis of 100 media texts (50 per country) and thematic analysis of 1,000 YouTube comments (500 per country). The results indicate that there are different media framing patterns: compassion was the most prevalent frame in Kazakhstan, while in the French media sample, the dominant frame was security. In Kazakhstan, security framing coexisted with humanitarian and rehabilitative concerns which were rooted in state responsibility and a sense of national reintegration. In France, the issues of accountability, citizenship and justice dominated more moral debate, which coexisted with security framing. The differences in public responses were reflected in the discussions: in the Kazakhstani comments, the issues were distributed across several themes, but the discussions were mostly approving of state policy, with French comments being marked by demands for sanctions and personal responsibility. The article introduces framing theory to the strategic culture literature by demonstrating that, in the face of overlapping transnational threats, there can be divergent national narratives of responsibility, legitimacy and belonging which shape public perceptions of counterterrorism and reintegration.*

KEYWORDS: repatriation, media framing, strategic culture, Operation Zhulan, foreign terrorist fighters.

1. INTRODUCTION

The territorial defeat of ISIS brought a fresh set of challenges to governments regarding the return of citizens affiliated with the group. The threat of peers helping ISIS did not end with the death of the “caliphate,” though, and countries had to face the possibility of their own citizens returning. Thousands of foreign members of ISIS were arrested in Iraq and Syria, where many remained in insecure detention camps under poor humanitarian conditions (Cook & Vale, 2019). The concerns that returning foreign fighters could pose risks to national security intensified (Hoffman & Furlan, 2020). As such, it became inevitable that states would have to deal with issues that arose in

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relation to citizens who had travelled to conflict zones to join the group. Comparative media coverage of repatriation in countries with similar security problems has not been sufficiently analyzed, nor have investigations centered on how the public engages with such media framing.

The state responses have varied considerably in response to the challenges of the return of foreign fighters and their family members, including women and children (Hoffman & Furlan, 2020). While the United Nations has urged states to repatriate their citizens from Iraq and Syria, relatively few countries undertook comprehensive repatriation efforts. Although the number of people who travelled to Iraq and Syria from Central Asia and Western Europe was broadly comparable, Central Asian governments organized substantially more returns (Farrell et al., 2021). The National Defense Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan (KNB) reports that as part of Operation *Zhusan* and other Kazakhstan return operations, 735 people have been recovered (Akylzhanova, 2025). In contrast, Western European governments tended to be less willing to return foreign fighters, particularly adults, mainly due to security concerns and domestic political opposition. As noted by Hassan (2021), France initially limited returns to children on a case-by-case basis, with a total of 35 children returned, following the return of 10 orphans in June 2020. The priority of many Western countries was to avoid increasing terrorist threats and national tensions due to insufficient preparation for repatriation and limited capacity to manage returning combatants (Khan & Parsons, 2021).

Kazakh authorities were concerned that citizens who had travelled to Iraq and Syria might return and engage in extremist activities or terrorist acts, particularly given the use of Kazakh citizens in ISIS propaganda (Farrell et al., 2021). In both countries, numerous problems arose during the repatriation process, including serious security concerns, but differing strategies were carried out in each country. There has been an increasing body of scholarship that has studied the effects of media framing on the public understanding of terrorism and security (Tulga, 2020; Kyriakou, 2017). The media not only report on the process of repatriation, but also position the returnees in moral terms. Security framing focuses on concepts of danger, risk, and threat in the context of repatriation, while humanitarian framing focuses on vulnerability, rehabilitation, and reintegration, especially in the context of women and children (Snowden, 2019; Stenger, 2023).

The main research question is: *How do Kazakhstani and French media frame the repatriation of citizens from conflict zones, and how do public reactions to these frames reveal differences in national narratives of security, morality, and compassion?*

Stenger (2023) notes that foreign combatants supported by states pursuing repatriation are seen as victims, whereas those not supported by their states are seen as radicalized villains. However, few comparative studies have examined how repatriation debates are framed and how these debates are responded to by the public, particularly between Central Asia and Western Europe. This study therefore investigates the differences between Kazakhstani and French approaches to framing the concept of repatriation and the perceptions of the public about Operation *Zhusan* and the repatriation of families involved in ISIS.

The study is grounded in strategic culture and media framing theory. These theories are essential for understanding the dynamics of repatriation debates and describing how historically acquired national meanings are constructed and contested in media discourse and public reactions.

The study contributes to the literature on media framing, strategic culture, and terrorism. It extends the definition of strategic culture to incorporate, in addition to the voices of elites and official documents, public or public media reactions to a set of prescribed events. It also highlights the way the media narratives around repatriation contribute to a wider securitization and responsibility discourse. Using framing theory, the study analyses the link between the moral positioning of returnees as threats or victims and the perceived legitimacy of different policy choices. In this, it stresses the role of morality, an often-forgotten element of framing security. The study presents a comparative analysis of Kazakhstan and France, articulating the differences in the media discourse and the reactions of the public to the repatriation process. It allows for dialogue between the post-Soviet space and the Global North as a way to move beyond regional analysis in the field of comparative studies in security and the media.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Repatriation from conflict areas is not only a legal or humanitarian mechanism, but a contested political and discursive process. Governments' strategies around return, risk evaluations of returnees, and the rationale for policies adopted are shaped by broader conceptions of security, citizenship, and national responsibility. Rather than just government policy, political discourse and media portrayal also influence public understandings of repatriation. In order to further describe these interrelated processes, the study integrates strategic culture, securitization theory, and media systems theory as analytical approaches, and framing theory in studies of how repatriation is framed in news texts. These perspectives are engaged at various analytical levels: strategic culture is applied to the general context of historically-specific understandings of security and responsibility, securitization theory adds context to the ways in which security concerns are articulated in discourse, media systems theory contributes to the context of the differences in institutional and ownership environments, while the media texts are analyzed primarily using framing theory.

Strategic culture is the macro-level basis of the framework, as it helps to elucidate how states create enduring understandings of threats, identities, and legitimate responses to them. Based on Gray's conceptualization (1999), strategic culture is the sum of ideas, traditions, values, and mental habits embedded in history that shape the views of political communities on security problems. It does not set policy in the sense of dictating what is to be done, but sets the conceptual framework where threats are noted and responses deemed appropriate. Within the framework of repatriation, these decisions are part of broader political assumptions of citizenship and the state concerning concepts of sovereignty, state responsibility, and permissible strategies of risk management. In some countries, humanitarian reintegration may be emphasized, in others, public security and counterterrorism may be the starting point. Such disparities may also reflect underlying historical forces that shape concepts and practices of security.

However, strategic culture is not enough to account for the emergence of public concrete security discourses. In this respect, the study is based on the securitization theory, widely used among the Copenhagen School, in particular on works by Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde (1998). According to securitization theory, threats are not just objective events, but they are "securitized" when powerful actors represent a problem as an existential threat to which unusual methods of response are called for. From this perspective, we see how security understandings are cultural and then manifested in

narratives of the public, which are important for comprehending repatriation. During this process, reintegration will be presented as a humanizing duty toward citizens, or as a threat perceived in the form of surveillance, limitation, or exclusion. Hence, strategic culture may shape which understandings of the issue are perceived as plausible and legitimate, whereas securitization accounts for the manner in which these interpretations surface in the language and how they become authoritative political stories.

The institutional environment also contributes to the circulation of these kinds of stories in the media. This study follows a comparison of media systems approach by Hallin and Mancini (2004) to acknowledge the variances in how security issues are communicated across different countries. The framework indicates that there is a variance in media systems based on their relations with political power, journalistic autonomy, and their institutional and cultural contexts in general. Such differences may shape the extent to which official narratives are reproduced; the space for contestation; and the public's framing of security-related issues. This may be particularly true when Kazakhstan and France are contrasted, as they possess different media system structures, and state and press relations differ markedly. Based on media systems theory, one can then understand the phenomenon of similar securitized stories being activated, diminished or challenged within distinct national contexts. In these institutional environments, framing theory enables the analysis of the translation of these narratives into specific text representations.

At the level of textual analysis, framing theory serves as the tool for identifying how repatriation is represented in media coverage. Building on Entman (1993), a frame is defined as a selection and salience of aspects of reality in the process of defining a problem, assigning causality, evaluating actors, and proposing solutions. The framing theory is the basic empirical tool for this research, whereas the strategic culture, securitization theory, and media systems theory serve to link the frames found in the mass media texts and to give meaning to the resulting frames. The framing analysis enables the evaluation of the representation of returnees as vulnerable citizens, subjects of humanitarian interventions, as potential actors in the security apparatus, or even as suspects or threats, as well as its justification and legitimation in media discourses. These perspectives stand together as a basis to analyze the content of media in the context of shifting perceptions of security, responsibility, and political belonging. The empirical analysis stresses the patterns of framing, while the strategic culture, securitization theory, and media systems theory offer the context and interpretative tools to understand contrasts between Kazakhstan and France.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Building on existing scholarship, there tends to be a strong connection between media framing and public perceptions of women involved in political violence. Gentry and Sjöberg (2007) found the major gendered frames in this case to be the mother frame, the monster frame, and the whore frame, with later research adding the victimization frame. Comparative research also reveals that the emphasis on similar frames is different across national contexts. For instance, there is a greater focus in Dutch media on matters of law and security, while Belgian media focus more on morality and humanitarian responsibility (Bossen & Badran, 2025). These dynamics play out also in Kazakhstan, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and

Indonesia, where media discourse either labels returnees as a threat to security or a victim in need of rehabilitation (Bekitova, 2025; Arslan, 2024; Snowden, 2019; Rahayu, 2025). However, current research is limited to looking at media frames within a single-country setting and mainly concentrating on the identification of the media frames and not looking at how audiences interpret and challenge them.

Beyond constructing representations of returnees, media framing also influences public opinion and policy debates surrounding repatriation. There is existing research that confirms that media narratives have an impact on the perceptions of returnees by the citizens, but also on government justifications for its actions in regard to them. In that regard, Lee (2021) suggested that only a partial correlation exists between newspaper coverage and the “CNN effect” in the context of the Rohingya genocide, which demonstrates that the media's influence on politics is dynamic and not determinative. Similarly, Zharkynbekova et al. (2024) demonstrate that in Kazakhstan, policy changes influenced media discourse more than media framing shaped policy outcomes. The replacement of the term “oralman” with “qandas” contributed to increasingly positive media portrayals and greater public acceptance of returnees. Farrell et al. (2021) reveal that Operation Zhusan was presented as a humanitarian and security mission, making it easier for the government to frame the repatriation as a legitimate move while pushing the idea of rehabilitation in line with counterterrorism operations. The authors report, however, that the general social stigma remains a challenge to successful reintegration. Overall, the literature offers only partial comparative evidence for the impact of media narratives, public opinion, and policy on each other in different national contexts.

However, media narratives do not operate independently from broader political and strategic contexts. Conventional scholarship regarding state actions shows that return is not decided solely on security grounds, but also on domestic political, institutional, and “socially constructed understandings of responsibility”. According to Stenger (2023), states that promote repatriation often purposefully design returnees in terms of victimisation; restrictive states, on the other hand, tend to create returnees based on representations of threat. Similarly, Ingram et al. (2022) demonstrate that national security discourse is frequently employed to justify limitations on repatriation, while domestic political pressures and public opposition influence governmental choices. In the European context, Dworkin (2019) shows that Western governments, including France, have often avoided repatriating ISIS-affiliated citizens due to concerns about security risks and political backlash. By contrast, Central Asian countries like Kazakhstan have taken more proactive steps, taking responsibility for citizens in conflict zones. While there are studies that account for the drivers of state decisions, little research has focused on how these decisions are created and accepted as such in media discourses.

In sum, the existing scholarship available offers valuable insights into media framing, public perceptions, and state strategies for repatriation. Several gaps, however, do exist. Most studies are conducted on a national or regional basis, and comparative insight into differences in how these political and cultural contexts inform repatriation discussions is limited. Moreover, the focus of research has been on the content of the media and not on how audiences receive and challenge these narratives. Filling these gaps, this study examines a comparison between Kazakhstan and France on how perception of security, understanding of moral responsibility, and public reactions manifest in different frames of media coverage.

4. RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts two complementary research methods – framing analysis and thematic analysis – within a comparative qualitative research design to examine media framing and public reactions to the repatriation of citizens from ISIS-controlled conflict zones in Kazakhstan and France. The study adopts strategic culture as a discursive phenomenon, which is reflected in the media representation and public responses, and thus disassociates it as an independently measurable variable. As such, strategic culture, securitization, and media systems are employed for the purpose of contextualizing and interpreting the frames observed but not used as independently measured variables.

The timeframe of the study spans from 2019 to 2025, featuring illustrative but mirroring media debates on the repatriation of citizens in Kazakhstan and France, especially women and children. In Kazakhstan, the 2019–2022 period witnessed sustained media coverage of the state-led Operation Zhusan and calls for a coordinated and comprehensive approach to repatriation. This period involved the first individual cases of return of children in France and significant and successive collective repatriation operations from 2022 onwards. Extending the timeframe to 2025 allows for an examination of how these different approaches developed over time and how media discourse evolved in both countries. The selection of 50 Kazakhstani and 50 French media texts ($n = 100$) was performed with the aim of framing analysis. Purposive keyword sampling was used to retrieve 34 online news articles and 16 social media posts from Kazakhstan, and 33 online news articles and 17 social media posts from France. Research was carried out in Russian, Kazakh, English, and French via Google and mainstream search engines, not dedicated academic databases. The following keywords were used to ensure relevant media articles are obtained: “ISIS”, “Islamic State”, “Zhusan”, “repatriation”, “returnees”, “foreign fighters”, “Syria”, “Iraq”, “rehabilitation”, “deradicalization”, “terrorism”, “national security”, “humanitarian”, “women and children”, “camps”, “Al-Hol”, “Kazakhstan repatriation”, “France repatriation”, “jihad”, and “radicalization”. Media sources were classified as state-owned, state-affiliated, and independent (see Table 1) to investigate institutional affiliation and its effects on media framing. Media sources were divided depending on the extent of editorial autonomy, the source of funding, institutional and political affiliations, and the nature of ownership. Media that are directly owned or controlled by the state are described as state-owned media. State-affiliated media is defined as private or formally independent media organizations that have strong political or economic ties to state institutions and/or political elites, through funding, ownership, or using state advertising. Independent media are those that are not directly owned by the state or under its formal control, but substantive independence is not necessarily guaranteed because of economic, political, or professional circumstances. The analysis of state-affiliated French media is presented with caution as the sample of these media is relatively limited ($n = 4$), and is only meant to offer patterns that appear within the examined texts, and not to draw general conclusions about all state-affiliated French media at large.

Table 1. Distribution of Media Sources by Type and Institutional Affiliation

Country	Media type	State-owned	State-affiliated	Independent	Total
Kazakhstan	Online news articles	14	15	5	50
	Social media posts	8	4	4	
France	Online news articles	8	2	23	50
	Social media posts	4	2	11	

Source: Author's own elaboration based on the data.

The framing analysis employed a predominantly deductive method rooted in the general theoretical perspective and used the three analytical frames of security, morality, and compassion as an operationalization. Media texts were examined and coded according to these frames. The study approached the notion of framing as a patterned interpretation and meaning-giving schema that connects diagnosis, evaluation, and recommended response. Each text was reviewed for the presence of one or more frames, while the frame that most prominently structured the overall portrayal of repatriation was coded as the primary frame. Where multiple frames were present, the primary frame was determined based on the dominant emphasis of the text, including the framing of the main problem, evaluation, and proposed or implied response. The operationalization of the framing categories is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Operationalization of framing categories

Frame	Analytical function	Coding indicators
Security	Repatriation as a threat-management and governance problem.	Prosecution, monitoring, legal accountability, counterterrorism, language of containment, international cooperation, emphasis on public safety and state stability, preventive control,
Morality	Repatriation as a question of responsibility and ethical judgement.	Guilt, responsibility, critique, evaluative tone, emphasis on accountability, moral breach.
Compassion	Repatriation as a humanitarian and rehabilitative issue.	Vulnerability, victimhood, distress, injury, sympathetic tone, recovery, reunification.

Source: author's own elaboration based on the data

To ensure consistency in the application of the coding scheme, the codebook was pilot-tested before the full coding process. Two coders then independently coded the material, after which their coding decisions were compared. Differences where they occurred were discussed and resolved using the operational definitions outlined in the codebook. Furthermore, with the objective of capturing audience reactions, 500 comments from

each country were purposely sampled from one YouTube video per country, resulting in a total of 1,000 comments. The analysis was conducted in April 2026, and one video per country was selected based on its level of engagement, considering the number of views, likes, and comments. From the one selected video for each country, the most popular comments, primarily identified by the number of likes, were selected for analysis. Comments were reviewed individually to identify and remove duplicate entries. Comments that were not substantively engaged, such as emoji-only responses, very brief comments like “oh,” and any comments that were not a position or meaning related to the topic were coded as not applicable. This was an interpretative thematic analysis because the coding required researcher judgment in interpreting how each comment’s meaning and stance aligned with the conceptual frames. All comments have been assigned to one of eight mutually exclusive themes with one thematic code per comment. The eight themes were:

1. *Security threat* – remarks portraying returnees as a threat to society featuring violence and radicalization.
2. *Victimization* – remarks including portrayal of people (particularly children and occasionally females as wives due to actions of their husbands) who had no say in the situation, highlighting their vulnerability and suffering.
3. *Moral responsibility* – statements that attribute moral accountability to people with emphasis on personal responsibility and judgement.
4. *Compassion* – comments indicating empathy, forgiveness, or support to rehabilitate and assist returnees.
5. *Punishment/no return* – remarks advocating exclusion, imprisonment, only selective repatriation of children, or denial of repatriation in the first place as the proper treatment for returnees.
6. *Blame the state* – critical comments of governmental policies, including disapproval of existing ones and structural failures.
7. *Support the state* – remarks made in support or defense of governmental policies, decisions, and actions concerning repatriation.
8. *Not applicable* – off-topic statements, consisting of exclusive usage of emojis, humor, or unrelated reactions irrelevant or not aligned with the topic.

The same coding procedure was applied to the French-language YouTube comments, with particular attention to the linguistic and contextual meaning of comments. Despite the strengths of the methodological approach, several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, although French comments were interpreted in their original language, the analysis was conducted by a non-native speaker, which may have affected the interpretation of culturally specific humor, sarcasm, or idiomatic expressions. Secondly, the study fails to address how the media framing changed in the period from 2019 to 2025, thus restricting the analysis of change in discourse over time. Lastly, the results of online comments should not be taken as an indicator of national public opinion; they are the opinions of people who actively selected to attend the online discussion, but not those of the entire nation. The YouTube comments analyzed in this study were publicly available and were used solely for research purposes. Usernames, profile information, and other potentially identifying information were not reported or mentioned in the article. This study does not aim to identify or assess specific users, but rather the patterns of public discourse.

5. RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the media framing and public discourse analysis on repatriation in Kazakhstan and France. It begins by presenting the distribution of morality, security, and compassion frames by media ownership type in each country. It then compares thematic patterns in user comments under selected YouTube videos related to repatriation. Together, these results illustrate both institutional (media) and grassroots (public) dimensions of the debate.

5.1. Media framing in Kazakhstan

Table 3. Media Framing of Repatriation in Kazakhstan: Allocation by the Media type

Country	n	%	Media frames		
			Morality	Security	Compassion
Kazakhstan	50	total	2	46	52
% of media frames by media type	22	state-owned	0	63.6	36.4
	19	state-affiliated	5.3	26.3	68.4
	9	independent	0	44.4	55.6

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on the data

Table 3 shows the distribution of media frames in 50 Kazakhstani media texts depending on the type of media ownership. Overall, compassion was the most prevalent frame (52%), followed by security (46%) and morality (2%).

Security framing manifested itself more strongly in state-owned media, where its portion in all identified frames was 63.6%. The outlets mostly discussed repatriation from national security, counter-terrorism, monitoring, and state control angles. In contrast, compassion framing accounted for 36.4% of the coverage, while morality framing was absent.

The frame distribution of state-affiliated media differed. Compassion represented the largest percentage, 68.4%, while security accounted for 26.3%, and morality just 5.3%. Compared with state-owned outlets, these media placed greater emphasis on humanitarian aspects of repatriation, particularly the experiences of women and children.

Subsequently, high rates of compassion framing (55.6%) and security (44.4%) were also observed in independent media. Similar to state-owned outlets, morality framing was not identified in the independent sample.

Overall, the findings indicate that security and compassion dominated media coverage of repatriation in Kazakhstan, although their relative emphasis differed across ownership categories. State-affiliated and independent media paid more attention to the humanitarian side, while state-owned media was more focused on security aspects of the conflict. Throughout all the media types, the position of morality was the lowest occupied frame.

5.2. Media framing in France

Table 4. Media Framing of Repatriation in France: Allocation by the Media type

Country	n	%	Media frames		
			Morality	Security	Compassion
France	50	total	14	50	36
% of media frames by media type	12	state-owned	16.67	50	33.3
	4	state-affiliated	0	25	75
	34	independent	14.7	52.9	32.4

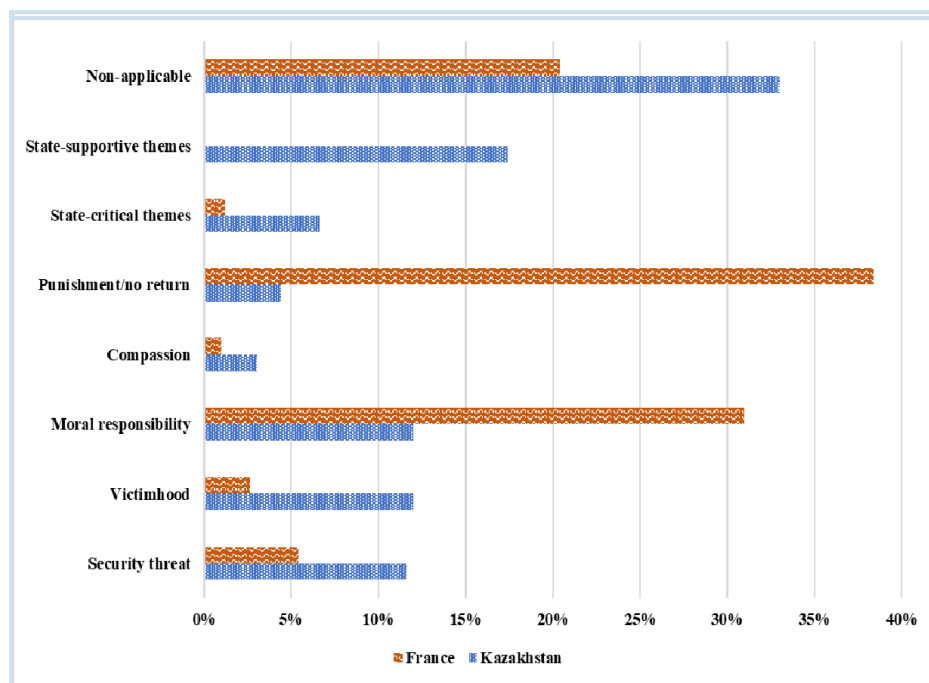
Source: author's own elaboration based on the data

Table 4 presents the distribution of media frames across French media sources. Similar to Kazakhstan, the security frame was the most prevalent, accounting for 50% of all identified frames. Security issues were widespread in both independent (52.9%) and state (50%) media, with discussions on repatriation being concentrated on counterterrorism, public safety, legal responsibility, and the security of the state. French coverage was, however, quite different, and more attention was also paid to depicting morality (14%) and compassion (36%), with an overall more diverse framing of the issue.

Compassion framing was especially common in the media under state influence, making up 75% of all frames identified, whereas security represented just 25% of the media framing. These outlets frequently emphasized the humanitarian conditions of women and children, psychological trauma, family separation, and the vulnerability of minors. Independent media, by contrast, more fully tackled ethical issues of state responsibility and the rights of returnees while concurrently reporting on security matters.

Another notable finding is the greater presence of morality framing in France compared with Kazakhstan. Morality was not a dominant frame overall, but it showed up in 14.7% of independent media and 16.7% of state-owned media, with no appearance in state-affiliated media. The repatriation was presented in the media as a security issue, but it also sparked a debate about justice, responsibilities, citizenship, and the social and state duties of the French. Ethical questions surrounding whether France should repatriate its citizens and how returnees should be treated appeared more frequently than in the Kazakhstani case.

Overall, the results indicated that though security was the most prevalent interpretation category, there was a higher degree of diversity in the discourses of French media regarding repatriation than is found for Kazakhstan. The coexistence of frames for security, compassion, and morality suggests a more intersectional, or competing, framing of the media debate, in which humanitarian issues and ethical considerations usually walked alongside concerns about terrorism and national security.

Figure 1. Comparison of public discourse themes: Kazakhstan vs. France

Source: author's own elaboration based on the data

Figure 1 compares the distribution of thematic patterns identified in public comments on repatriation in Kazakhstan and France. The results indicate notable variations in the perceptions of people returning from conflict areas in both countries.

The distribution of themes in the comments under the examined YouTube videos in Kazakhstan is relatively balanced, with several themes represented. The greatest amount is in state-supportive comments (17.4%), indicating a relatively prominent level of approval for the government's repatriation policy within the sample. With close to equal frequency, themes on victim (12%), moral responsibility (12%), and security threat (11.6%) are present, which indicates a simultaneous consideration of national security and the acknowledgment of humanitarian problems. Only 4.4% of the discourse is punishment/no return, whereas state-critical comments make up 6.6% of the discourse. The compassion theme is relatively scarce (3%), while the non-applicable type is rather prevalent (33%), corresponding to humor and non-applicable or uncategorized responses.

The picture is very different in France. Public discourse is dominated by punishment/no return (38.4%) and moral responsibility (31%), together accounting for more than two-thirds of all coded comments. Compared with these, the presence of security threat in comments is still in small numbers, at 5.4%, as are victimhood (2.6%), compassion (1%), and state-critical comments (1.2%). The French sample lacks comments that highlight state support. About 20% of the data is non-applicable comments.

In general, the results indicate marked differences in the themes expressed in the public comments in the two countries. Public debates in Kazakhstan are spread over various topics and are focused on humanitarian issues, security problems, and the role of the state, however, public discussions in France narrow down mainly to punishment and personal responsibility. It is clear from these patterns that, in the two national experiences, public narratives about the issue of repatriation were quite distinct.

6. DISCUSSION

The comparison reveals a fundamental divergence in how security and compassion are configured in national media narratives. While discussion of repatriation in both countries occurs through the lens of security, compassion, and morality, the weight given to these lenses and the understanding of what is meant in each discussion, differs. Compassion was slightly more dominant in the Kazakhstani media sample, while security was the strongest media frame in France. In Kazakhstan, this predominance of compassion was expressed through a consistent portrayal of returnees, particularly women and children as vulnerable victims in need of protection, rehabilitation and family reunification. Humanitarian concerns were foregrounded in narratives about suffering in conflict zones, psychological trauma and the moral duty of the state to care for its citizens. Meanwhile, the issue of security framing was not lacking, but it was simultaneously discussed alongside ideas of responsibility of the State and controlled reintegration, not simply as a punitive and exclusionary culture. In France, however, a moral judgement, an emphasis on individual responsibility, and exclusionary responses were combined with security framing. The purpose of these divergent configurations is to demonstrate how the security issue can be incorporated into various national narratives of responsibility, citizenship and belonging, hence, it must be understood beyond a narrow security lens.

The Kazakhstani results demonstrate that media ownership is associated with important differences in the relative prominence and articulation of security and compassion frames. The high percentage of security framing within state-owned media can be interpreted in the context of the state of the media landscape in Kazakhstan, which faces profound dependence on government-related funding, reduced editorial autonomy, and concentrated media ownership by elites linked to the government (Dragomir & Soderstrom, 2022; Dumont et al., 2023). In this context, repatriation can occur in a national security, counterterrorism, monitoring, and state-control manner. By defining these returnees as in need of regulation, the security frame also sets the tone for state intervention as the proper solution. Drawing on this, Operation *Zhusan* is especially important because the state might demonstrate its ability to safeguard citizens and manage security threats at once.

Meanwhile, Kazakhstan's media landscape is not predominantly security-oriented. Compassion was the most prevalent frame overall and was dominant in both state-affiliated and independent media, while security was particularly prominent in state-owned outlets. This separation implies that state-affiliated media outlets can possibly serve other communication functions in the media environment, characterized by institutional alignment and a stronger emphasis on humanitarian stories. Voltmer (2013) emphasizes that media operating between political institutions and audiences may perform such a mediating function. In this instance, the focus on women, children, suffering, and vulnerability brings a humanitarian dimension to the security

narrative. Compassion does not necessarily present a security-oriented interpretation, but can frame action taken by the state as protective and legitimate. Security sets the framework for intervention, compassion shows it is an act of care and responsibility. This corresponds with Bekitova's (2025) finding that Kazakhstani media can portray women and children associated with ISIS simultaneously as vulnerable victims and potential security concerns.

The near absence of morality framing in Kazakhstan is also notable. The central media question seems not to be moral right or wrong, but how the state should address a humanitarian and security issue. The absence of direct moral contestation is in line with the context in which media is limited in scope, with state influence that can constrain the interpretation of competing perspectives. Hallin and Mancini (2004) link greater state influence to less pluralism in the media, whereas Rakhmetov (2026) discusses the synchronization of narratives surrounding the legitimacy of the state in Kazakhstan. Therefore, the absence of a morality frame should not be interpreted as the lack of moral judgment, but as insufficient opportunities for morality to emerge as an explicit part of the media debate.

This setup is further illustrated in the public discourse. Kazakhstani comments are split between state support, victimhood, moral responsibility, security threat, and punishment/no return, the biggest substantive group being state-supportive, and punishment being relatively bounded. This aligns with the official description of Operation Zhusan as combining humanitarian and security goals. Return and protection of women and children, monitoring, prosecution, psychological support, and reintegration were highlighted in government explanations (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2021). Security takes a more preventive meaning than only punitive, in that risks are recognized, though intervention and rehabilitation are offered as options for managing rather than for excluding returnees for good.

Such a state-focused repossessionist reading is also a part of Kazakhstan's overall repossessionist and nationalization journey. Zeveleva (2014) associates return with post-Soviet national identity, while the state-assisted return of ethnic Kazakhs (historically, known as oralman; more recently, qandas) offers another context in which repatriation can be associated with collective identity and state responsibility. The repatriation of citizens from the conflict zone does not necessarily refer to the return of ethnic Kazakhs, but it provides a background to the role of state-led return in relation to national belonging. As a result, adults can be viewed as security and moral issues but also as part of the national community and open to regulation, rehabilitation, and monitoring. Bekitova (2025) similarly identifies a protective and paternalistic representation of female returnees in Kazakhstani media.

The French findings reveal a different security framing–moral contestation linkage. The overall frame of the media is security, which shows that higher pluralism does not mean more non-security representations of ISIS returnees. Ruiz Perez (2023) highlights the securitization of ISIS discourse in Europe as pertinent to the resistance against repatriation. It is precisely the fact that security emerges alongside morality and compassion that differentiates France. Morality is more apparent, especially in independent media, and debates arise regarding responsibilities, citizenship, equity, and the state's obligation to return its citizens. Similarly, Matthes et al. (2025) find that humanization and moral evaluation are context-dependent across media.

The most noteworthy distinction is when media framing is contrasted with the public discourse. Punishment/no return and moral responsibility are the predominant themes

of public comments in France, while there are few explicit references to security threats. This indicates that the audiences are not simply repetitive in reproducing the dominant media frame. Rather, security can be seen as moving into a vocabulary of morality, one that emphasizes individual agency and culpability. Arguments that returnees “chose” their actions shift attention from the abstract question of security toward what individuals deserve because of their perceived choices. The low levels of victimhood and compassion reinforce this interpretation. This may therefore be considered a public discourse that is shifting a security question into a question of deservingness.

This punitive interpretation also fits with the political history and ideas of France regarding its national identity. The aftermath of the Algerian War, with the histories of the *Pieds-noirs* and *harkis*, offers a backdrop to a changing understanding of repatriation, loyalty, citizenship and belonging (Eldridgen et al., 2023). This is not meant as a direct point to contemporary comments, but it serves to show why repatriation is not always simply an administrative matter, and can be expressed in terms of loyalty and responsibility. The republican conception of citizenship and the politicization of terrorism and Muslim identity further complicate the humanization of ISIS-affiliated women. Stenger (2023) illustrates how gendered and racialized notions of threat can create redeemable or dangerous images of returnees.

The comparison thus would highlight a significant shift toward media framing as compared to the public interpretation. In Kazakhstan, compassion and security find their way into public discourse by means of themes of state support, victimhood, preventive security, and limited punishment. Security, compassion, and morality in French media are described by increased focus on punishment and individual responsibility. The public then simply does not react to the same general security issue, but they react to different conceptions of who is responsible. In Kazakhstan, the state is more clearly deemed to be responsible as the actor to protect, regulate, rehabilitate, and reintegrate its citizens. In France, it is more strongly attributed to individual returnees for the choices they are perceived to have made.

The results suggest two different configurations of security discourse. A protective-reintegrative logic is evident in Kazakhstan, where potentially dangerous returnees may not be excluded from the national community but instead continue to be managed and rehabilitated by the state. In France, there is a more punitive-exclusionary conception of security, where individual choice and moral responsibility also influence judgements regarding who is deserving of reintegration. In this way, the same security concern is given various targets of responsibility: the state is largely responsible for management and reintegration of citizens in the Kazakhstani discourse, while individual returnees are clearly more at fault for their perceived actions in the French discourse.

7. CONCLUSION

This study examined how media in Kazakhstan and France framed the repatriation of citizens from conflict zones and how these frames corresponded with public discourse. While security was the predominant media frame in France, compassion was slightly more prevalent than security in Kazakhstan, although security remained a substantial component of the Kazakhstani media discourse. Notions of security are understood in accordance with local understandings of citizenship, responsibility and belonging,

yielding a varied engagement with the same policy question in the media and public sphere.

The comparison indicates that there is a broader political and strategic-cultural context for the framing of media. In Kazakhstan, repatriation was essentially integrated with a state-centered discourse that interwove together security and humanitarian responsibility with national solidarity, thereby lending legitimacy to reintegration. In France, security was not only accompanied by greater moral contestation, but by greater questions of guilt, accountability and of national loyalty which took a much firmer place. These differences indicate that the media reflects not solely the present-day security needs but the prototypical political culture that is historically constructed and which may shape how groups are understood as “deserving” and “legitimate” members of the political community.

By bringing together framing theory and strategic culture, this study contributes to the literature in two ways. Firstly, it shows that it is possible for identical security problems to give rise to manifold different media narratives, contextually dependent. Second, it goes beyond the existing research on the repatriation process by relating media framing to the public sphere, demonstrating that the responses of the public often reproduce the interpretative parameters within the popular media discourse, while also revealing more fundamental notions of citizenship and state responsibility.

There are also practical implications of the findings. Security arguments alone are not likely to make repatriation policies legitimate in the public arena. Setting up a link between security, humanitarian responsibility and national identity depends on how governments and media exchange it with their public. It is therefore essential that policymakers consider these framing dynamics if they intend to enact reintegration policy in politically contentious settings. Finally, the study suggests that repatriation should be considered not only as a counterterrorism policy, but also as an expression of societies' views on citizenship, responsibility and belonging in times of insecurity.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

AT: development of the research concept and original idea, formulation of the theoretical framework, review and analysis of the scientific literature, organization and implementation of the empirical study, data collection and processing, and participation in drafting the manuscript; AZ: contribution to the refinement of the research concept, data collection and processing, analysis and interpretation of the results, joint drafting of the manuscript with AT, preparation of the final version of the manuscript, formatting and submission-related tasks; IS: contribution to the theoretical framework, refinement of the research concept, interpretation of the results, scientific editing of the manuscript, supervision, and final approval of the manuscript.

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