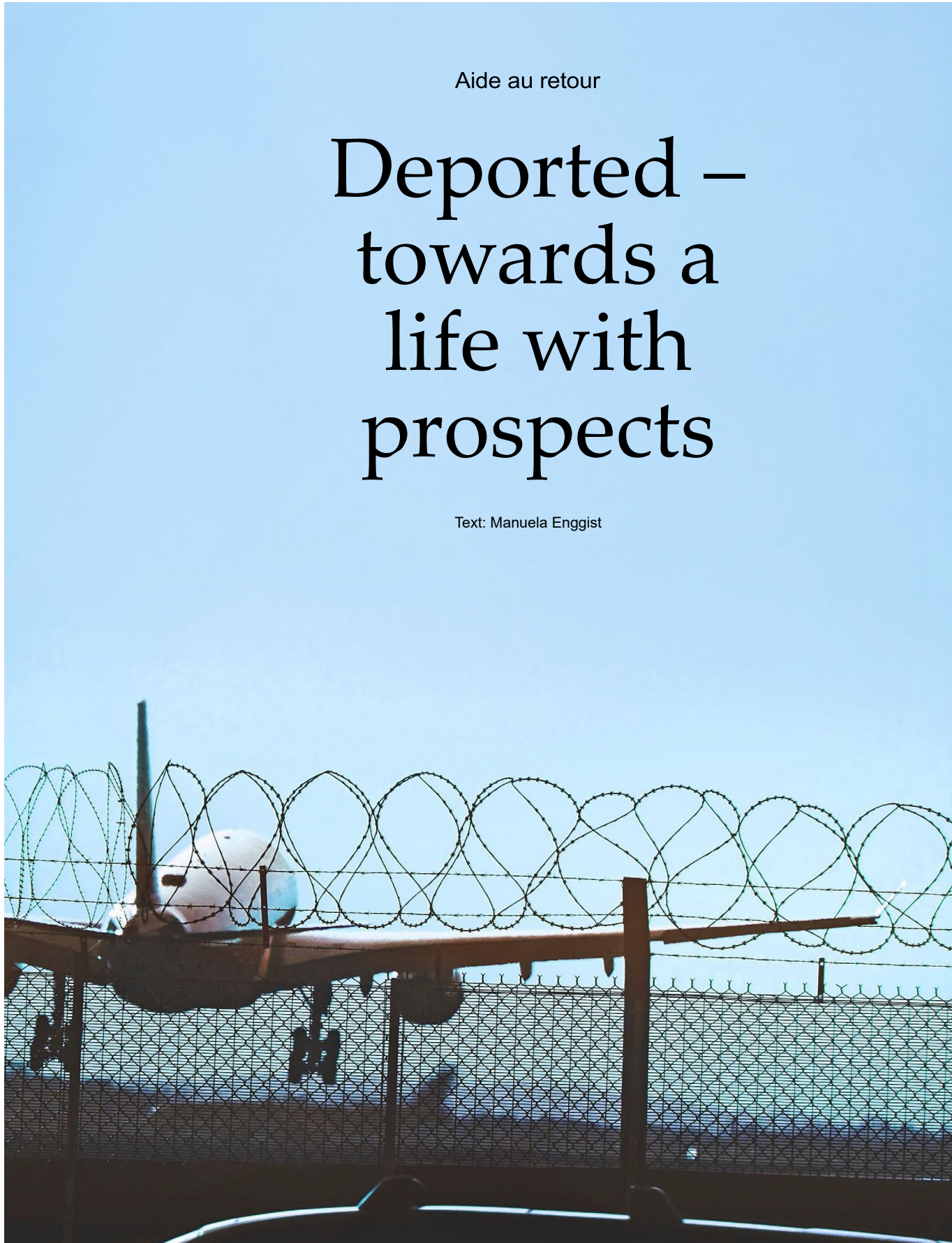




Aide au retour

# Deported – towards a life with prospects

Text: Manuela Enggist

PHOTO: SEBASTIAN/UNSPASH | INFOGRAPHIC: BEOBACHTER/AVK | SOURCE: INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL SERVICE SWITZERLAND (2024)

It's still early in the morning when Zvicer, 22, sits down in a café near a busy street in Tirana. He places his sunglasses on the table and apologises for not having much time. He'll soon need to head to work: at his uncle's garage he repairs tyres and changes the oil. Zvicer has only been back in Albania for nine months; before that he spent 17 months

in Bellechasse prison, in the canton of Fribourg. Zvicer was 18 when he travelled to Switzerland. He thought he'd be able to earn money there—on a building site or in a bar—to support himself and his family back in Albania. "I knew Switzerland was a wealthy country, and that's why I was full of hope." He found work on a building site, but his boss didn't pay him properly. So Zvicer quit. Not long after, he took another job: dealing drugs. And he was arrested. "It was the biggest mistake of my life," he tells Beobachter.

Everyone featured in this report appears only by their first name. Zvicer, who speaks about his time in prison preferred to

remain anonymous; the other people involved agreed to be photographed. Zvicer was deported for ten years of exile. But the reason why "Der beobachter" visited him in Albania is different: Zvicer was accompanied by the programme Reintegration in the country of origin " when he was deported.

The programme is run by Swiss International Social Service (ISS). In 2024, it supported a total of 61 projects designed to help people make a fresh start when returning to their country of origin (see chart on the right). Alongside deported foreign prisoners, support is also available to people whose asylum applications have been refused, people without legal status in Switzerland, and people whose permits have been withdrawn.

The programme has been running since 2004. It is funded entirely through donations. And unlike the federal return assistance, which usually provides a one-off financial contribution, the ISS programme supports returnees over the long term.

The prison social worker drew Zvicer's attention to the programme. She told him he was still young and could start over, even begin an apprenticeship. Zvicer filled in the application and was accepted. "It helped me a lot, and it also gave me something to hold on to in prison." Because conditions in custody had become tough.

Five months on remand, 23 hours a day alone in his cell. "For the first two months, I couldn't speak to anyone in my family. I only sent one letter, but they didn't see it until three months later. It drove me mad."

**All of a sudden, studying law becomes possible . Zvicer is currently in his second semester at the law faculty of the private Marin Barleti University. As a rule, there is a maximum of 3000 francs per "project", plus support in the country of origin. In certain cases, especially for education, project lead Michèle Demierre can also increase the support.**

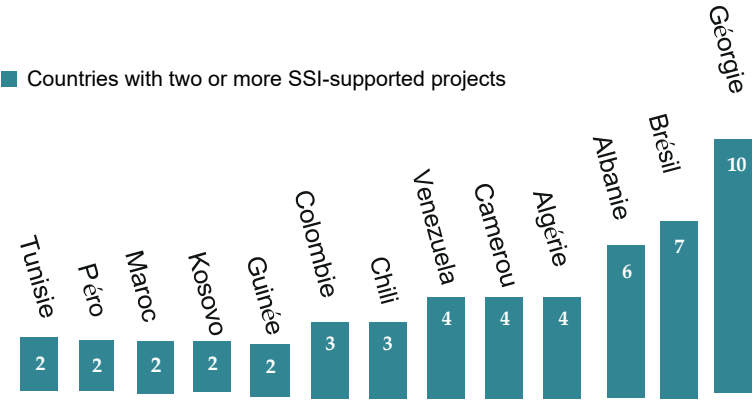
Since returning to Albania, Zvicer has been living with his mother, while his father lives in Greece. His parents would not have been able to pay for his studies. The support helped him find his feet again after coming home. "Because when you get out after 17 months, you know you need a month or two to get your life back in order." Some might think 17 months isn't very long. "But when I got out, everything was different." Without help from Switzerland, he says, he might have given up. "I've no idea where I'd be today."

Morning traffic is very quiet by local standards, explains Fatmir, 52, as he slowly drives his taxi out of the capital, Tirana. Normally, there would already be a chorus of horns by now. He laughs and taps the steering wheel with his right hand. "We've been through worse, haven't we?" →

## International Social Service in Switzerland

Since 1932, International Social Service Switzerland (ISS) has worked with a network of partners in 120 countries to promote the rights of children, families and migrants. ISS is supported by the Confederation, the cantons and municipalities, and is also funded through donations from individuals and foundations.

■ Countries with two or more SSI-supported projects





“I owe everything to the project. That way my family didn’t have to pay for my mistake.”

Fatmir, 52, set up a taxi firm with 4,100 francs from SSI and his own 600 francs.

Fatmir was also in Switzerland – and involved in a drug trafficking operation. From 2018 to 2020, he was therefore held in Bois-Mermet prison in Lausanne. During that time, his family, his wife Mirela and his sons Fabio, Samuel and Erlis, waited at home in Tirana. The children didn’t know he was in custody. “It would have hurt them, and I didn’t want that.”

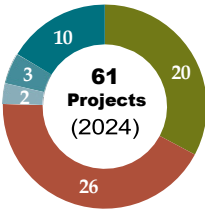
**On the road to success with his own taxi**  
Before leaving Albania to earn money abroad, he worked as a taxi driver for a dodgy company. He was paid off the books because the licences were missing. As he couldn’t provide for his family, he left, first for Greece, then Italy, to look for work. In the end, he became involved in a drug trafficking operation and was arrested on his very first day in Switzerland. “I was stupid and naïve and didn’t think about what I was really doing.” Fatmir had no reserves and no savings.

His wife who works in a shoe factory earns around 400 euros a month.

From prison and back in Albania, he says he would probably have left again to earn money elsewhere. “If there hadn’t been any other option, I wouldn’t have had a choice.” When he heard about the reintegration programme in prison, he signed up straight away. “I wanted to bring some order into my life and build a livelihood that would give my children a good future.” SSI supported Fatmir and his taxi project with 4,100 Swiss francs. With the money, he was able to buy a Mercedes-Benz as well as the necessary licences and permits. He had to contribute 600 francs himself.

“Since then, nothing illegal has happened in my life. Not a single off-the-meter fare,” says Fatmir. He points at the taxi meter. “My faithful companion.” He earns around 800 euros a month. It’s enough to live on. “A kilo of meat costs twelve euros.” Even today, he regularly sends photos of his children to Michèle Demierre, the programme director. “I owe everything to her and to the project.

Beneficiary profiles



- Reason for removal :
- Asylum refused
  - Imprisonment
  - Return voluntary
  - Permit revoked
  - Without -papers

So my family won’t have to pay for my mistake for the rest of their lives. »  
A day later, Michèle Demierre, 53, is there too. Once a year, she visits one of the countries where she oversees projects to see how people have got on. Together with two colleagues from SSI, she stands in front of a small cowshed near the town of Berat, around 100 kilometres south of Tirana. There, Armando, 44, was able to join his father’s farm, using 3,000 francs in start-up support to buy calves. He invested 1,950 francs of his own money. The idea: he fattens the animals so he can sell them to a butcher six months later. Also there: Elsa Rafaeli, one of SSI’s two local partners who, together with Michèle Demierre, review feasibility requests and support returnees on the ground. She’s also the one who accompanied Armando to the market to buy the animals.

“Our experience is that support and monitoring are crucial to people’s success — not just one-off help,” says Michèle Demierre. She asks Armando, who was deported to Albania only two months ago, how his return has gone. Good, he says. “Everything’s fine. My family welcomed me warmly. It helps a lot.”

**2,446 deportations in 2024**  
In 2016, the legal provisions of the deportation initiative came into force. Since then, a court can order deportation from the country in addition to a prison sentence. This means the person must leave Switzerland after serving their sentence. According to the Federal Statistical Office, 2,446 deportations of this kind were ordered in 2024 — almost 40% of those affected were EU citizens. →

“My family welcomed me warmly, and that helps a lot.”

Armando, 44, joined his father’s calf-fattening project with 3,000 francs in support and a personal contribution of 1,950 francs.



PHOTOS: MANUELA ENGIST | INFOGRAPHIC: BEOBACHTER/AN | SOURCE: INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL SERVICE SWITZERLAND (2024)

However, during the implementation of the law, the legal mandate to promote social and psychological stability – and therefore resocialization – remains in place. This objective also applies when reintegration takes place abroad; the primary goal is to prevent reoffending or illegal re-entry into Switzerland.

The success rate is 57%, says Michèle Demierre, head of the program.

## «In Switzerland, I made a mistake; this time I will do everything right »

Endrei, 31, invested the SSI assistance of 3,500 francs and his own contribution of 1,200 francs in the purchase of an automotive GPS system.

Reintegration in the country of origin.” This means that a good half of the SSI’s return assistance is retrospectively considered a success. The corresponding evaluation was carried out in 2016 and 2017. A project was not only deemed successful if it was still ongoing, but also if a returnee had found employment elsewhere.

Surprisingly, she receives little criticism for her work, Demierre explains. “Right-wing parties are pleased that migrants can leave Switzerland in this way and, in their view, relieve our social system. The left appreciates that we enable these people to return with prospects.” In addition, the state saves money: “Forced returns are generally more costly and require more effort.”

Migration researcher Denise Efionayi-Mäder from the University of Neuchâtel considers programs like SSI’s to be an important counterpoint to often technocratic return policies.

“What is special about this program is that it does not simply distribute money, but tries to respond to each individual situation.” A forced return cannot be standardized. “It is crucial that people feel they are taken seriously and that they can contribute their own perspective. This creates trust and motivation.”

At the same time, however, she also points out that return assistance always follows two logics: on the one hand, a humanitarian policy focused on the individual well-being of those concerned, and on the other, a migration policy aimed at facilitating repatriations. “These two objectives are often in tension,” she explains. “But making return processes respectful can make sense for both sides: for individuals building a new perspective, and for Switzerland, which assumes responsibility instead of simply drawing borders.”

Some projects get off to a difficult start. Endrei, 31, sits in a café near the old market in Tirana, his shoulders slumped, looking annoyed. When he had to return to Albania two years ago, SSI supported him with 3,500 francs. His own investment: 1,200 francs. He now sells GPS systems for cars that buyers can locate and monitor

His problem: the customers are there and use the GPS systems, but they do not pay him regularly.

Michèle Demierre listens and tries to understand. Endrei says he doesn’t know what to do.

“ This mistake I made in Switzerland has destroyed my whole life. I want to do everything right this time.”

### 17 success stories in Albania Michèle

Demierre tries to show him possible alternatives and other business solutions.

“The challenge in our position is to find the right balance. Close enough to truly listen to each of them, heart to heart, as I like to say, because that really makes a difference. At the same time, however, not to push too much and not to solve their problems for them.”

At the end of her mission, Michèle Demierre will have visited 17 people. For example, Eminol, who opened a butcher shop. And Zitza, who runs a car wash. Or Genti, who, together with his wife, runs a successful business and tells Michèle Demierre:

“This support was the light in the darkest period of my life.”

Or Aleksander, who was also expelled from Switzerland just two months ago and now repairs hydraulic pumps in his workshop, already attracting customers from across the region. He invested 1,600 francs himself and received 3,000 francs in assistance from SSI. He says he is “infinitely grateful for this second chance.”

For a moment, Michèle Demierre who usually appears composed and focused is so moved that she lets a tear slip.

The interview on return assistance with migration researcher Denise Efionayi-Mäder is available here: [beobachter.ch/ruk](https://beobachter.ch/ruk)



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