REVIEW

OF A DISSERTATION THESIS TITLED "INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS FOR THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PENITENTIARY SYSTEMS IN BULGARIA AND ALBANIA (CRIMINOLOGICAL AND CRIMINAL LAW ASPECTS)" SUBMITTED FOR THE AWARD OF THE EDUCATIONAL AND SCIENTIFIC DEGREE OF "DOCTOR"

PhD Candidate: Krenar Rexhep Bardi
Form of Study: Independent Preparation
Scientific Supervisors: Prof. Dr. Galina Kovacheva
Prof. Dr. Yuliana Mateeva
Field of Higher Education: "Social, Economic, and Legal Sciences"
Professional Field: "Law"
Doctoral Program: "Criminology"

Reviewer: Prof. Yuliya Doncheva Boyadzhieva, D.Sc. (Law), pursuant to Order No. 635 dated October 1, 2026, issued by the Rector of Varna Free University "Chernorizets Hrabar."

1. Brief Biographical Data on the PhD Candidate

Krenar Bardi was born on September 3, 1984. He holds Master's degrees in "Management and Public Administration" and "Criminal Law" from the Albanian University in Tirana. He also holds a qualification as a "Social Worker" from the Faculty of Pedagogy at the University of Elbasan. Since 2019, he has served as an adjunct lecturer in the subjects of "Family Law," "Juvenile Criminal Justice," and "Criminology and Penology" at the Faculty of Political and Legal Sciences of the "Aleksandër Moisiu" University of Durrës. He has been qualified to practice law since 2016. Between 2007 and 2013, he worked as a specialist and head of the "Social Activities" departments in the prisons of Rrogozhinë, Fushë-Krujë, and Durrës. Currently, he serves as the manager of two companies and as the legal director of a non-governmental organization.

Krenar Bardhi was enrolled as a doctoral candidate (pursuing independent study) in the "Legal Sciences" department at the Faculty of Law of Varna Free University "Chernorizets Hrabar," within the doctoral program in "Criminology," pursuant to Rector's Order No. 148 dated March 1, 2023. He was formally released from the program with the right to defend his dissertation, pursuant to Order No. 230 dated April 7, 2026.

2. Relevance and Significance of the Dissertation Topic

Contemporary penal policy is characterized by a persistent trend toward emphasizing the effectiveness of penitentiary systems—a concept examined and evaluated through several interconnected dimensions. Such systems are no longer assessed primarily on the basis of their capacity to lawfully execute custodial sentences. They are also evaluated based on their capacity to protect human dignity, prevent mistreatment, reduce the likelihood of recidivism, and prepare convicted individuals for a law-abiding life following their release.

Current international standards—reflected in documents adopted within the framework of the United Nations (UN), the Council of Europe, and the European Union (EU)—have been instrumental in advancing a model for the execution of custodial sentences. This model is grounded not only in legality but also in humane treatment, individualization, rehabilitation, and social reintegration. These documents establish minimum standards covering every aspect of

prison life, including accommodation, adaptation, conduct, healthcare, education, employment, contact with the outside world, the filing of complaints, and preparation for release.

Consequently, the effectiveness of a penitentiary system should be assessed comprehensively, taking into account legality, compliance with international human rights standards, and the successful fulfillment of the preventive function of penal execution—aimed at reducing the risk of the commission of new offenses.

This issue is relevant, to varying degrees, to every nation, depending on its form of government and legal system. This topic is particularly relevant to the Republic of Albania, which has been a candidate for European Union membership since 2014. It remains equally relevant to the Republic of Bulgaria—an EU member since 2007—which the doctoral candidate has selected as a basis for comparison. While both nations share a common post-communist legal and institutional legacy, they currently occupy different positions within the European legal order. As the doctoral candidate points out, this renders the comparison scientifically valuable, as it allows for an examination of how similar historical challenges are addressed under varying degrees of European integration.

The research also possesses practical significance. In both countries, the harmonization of legislation has progressed, yet challenges regarding implementation persist. These issues directly influence whether imprisonment serves as a deterrent or, conversely, as a factor that perpetuates criminal behavior.

Collectively, these points underscore the relevance and significance of the issues addressed in the dissertation for the field of criminology, criminal law, the law of penal execution, the sphere of human rights protection, and the practical administration of justice.

3. General Overview of the Dissertation

The dissertation submitted for review, titled "The Impact of International Standards on the Effectiveness of Penitentiary Systems in Bulgaria and Albania (Criminological and Criminal Law Aspects)," comprises an introduction, the main body...

The introduction presents the relevance of the research, its objective, tasks, object, subject, research questions, methodology, research hypothesis, limitations, scientific novelty, and practical significance.

I would like to point out an inaccuracy regarding Section 7, which outlines the methodology of the dissertation research; the section is incorrectly titled "Methodology."

Chapter One, titled "International Standards for Ensuring the Effectiveness of Penitentiary Systems and Protecting the Fundamental Rights of Detained Persons and Those Deprived of Liberty," consists of three sections.

The first section, "Principles of Penitentiary Law and Systems," presents and analyzes the fundamental concepts of penitentiary (correctional) law and its principles/standards concerning the protection of the rights of detained persons and those deprived of liberty, while also reflecting the resocialization function of imprisonment. The second section, "International Sources Governing the Operation of Penitentiary Systems," examines universal instruments adopted within the framework of the United Nations: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners; the Beijing Rules; and the United Nations Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty. The third section, "European Sources Governing the Operation of Penitentiary Systems," addresses the regional European framework. The European Convention on Human Rights is analyzed as a central, binding instrument for the protection of prisoners in Europe. The case law of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) is treated as a dynamic source of penitentiary standards. Also presented

are the European Convention for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, the European Prison Rules, the European Convention on the Supervision of Conditionally Sentenced or Conditionally Released Offenders, and the Convention on the Transfer of Sentenced Persons.

The conclusion reached in Chapter One—that international and European standards, serving as minimum standards, form a coherent framework for the humane and effective execution of custodial sanctions—is sound.

In this regard, both for the sake of the author's comparative analysis and for the benefit of the reader, I believe it would be appropriate to present these standards/rules using a table or a diagram; this would provide a clear visual representation of the extent to which they overlap or complement one another.

Chapter Two, "The Penitentiary System in the Republic of Bulgaria and Albania," consists of two sections. The first section, "The Penitentiary System in the Republic of Bulgaria," presents and analyzes the principles of Bulgarian penitentiary law, the key legal acts governing the execution of sentences, and the institutions that constitute or are relevant to the penitentiary system. The development of this system is shaped by the country's membership in the European Union, obligations under the framework of the Council of Europe, and the case law of the European Court of Human Rights. The doctoral candidate concludes that this context has led to a more robust structure for the execution of sentences and greater pressure to adhere to European standards.

The study examines best practices from Bulgaria that are applicable to Albania. These include: more structured individual treatment planning for incarcerated persons, clearer legislative regulation of rehabilitation programs, more comprehensive pre-release preparation, the use of specialized staff, the development of probation services, and the impact of monitoring mechanisms. It is noted that certain problems persist, among which prison overcrowding is highlighted.

It should be noted that, in recent years, there has generally been no prison overcrowding in Bulgaria; in fact, the country ranks among those in Europe with the lowest overall occupancy rates. However, the issue remains relevant at the local level, primarily concerning prisons and pre-trial detention centers in major cities. The improvement in the situation is a result of the modernization of facilities and a decline in the number of individuals sentenced to imprisonment.

The second section, "The Penitentiary System in the Republic of Albania," examines the legislation governing the Albanian penitentiary system and its underlying principles, the relationship between Albanian law and international instruments, as well as the key authorities involved in the execution of sentences. Albania is analyzed as an EU candidate country undergoing legal and institutional transformation, with a penitentiary system heavily influenced by Council of Europe standards, accession requirements, and the need for internal reforms.

Persistent weaknesses in the Albanian prison system are also noted. These include infrastructural issues, overcrowding in certain facilities, insufficient staff training, limited access to mental health services, weak rehabilitation programs, limited employment opportunities for inmates, a reliance on external projects, and inadequate coordination following release.

From a comparative perspective, the second chapter concludes that while Bulgaria and Albania face similar challenges, they are at different stages of institutional consolidation. Under the pressure of EU membership and European monitoring, Bulgaria has developed more structured mechanisms. Albania has made significant progress in terms of legal and institutional frameworks but continues to face serious gaps in implementation. A key practical contribution of this comparative analysis is the identification of reforms that Albania could adapt—without merely copying the Bulgarian model.

The third chapter, "Examining the Effectiveness of the Penitentiary System in Albania in Crime Prevention," consists of three sections. It focuses on an empirical study regarding the effectiveness of the Albanian penitentiary system in fulfilling its preventive function.

The first section, "General Framework and Research Findings," outlines the objectives and methodology of the empirical study, which was conducted via a survey among penitentiary staff. It was organized and conducted personally by the doctoral candidate in four Albanian prisons—specifically, the prisons in Tirana, Durrës, Peqin, and Krujë. These facilities were selected due to their large inmate populations and because they represent varying security regimes, operational characteristics, and "institutional challenges within the Albanian penitentiary system." The survey was voluntary and anonymous, involving a total of 40 respondents from various staff categories—10 respondents per prison. Data collection was carried out using a questionnaire containing carefully designed questions, structured into six sections: general information about the respondents; working conditions and professional training; rehabilitation and crime prevention (including perceptions of rehabilitation programs and recidivism prevention); the nature of criminal records and types of criminal behavior within the prison; staff and working conditions; and institutional cooperation.

The sample for the survey conducted is a cluster sample. Regarding the sample size, the doctoral candidate has avoided addressing the issue of its representativeness. The dissertation specifies neither the number of prisons in Albania nor the total number of staff employed within them. Regardless, a sample of 40 units cannot be considered representative of the entire population of penitentiary staff.

Generally speaking, research that is representative of an entire country is a task typically suited for teams of researchers. In the context of a doctoral dissertation, it is entirely expected and understandable that the number of units studied will depend on the physical, temporal, and other resources available to the doctoral candidate. My own extensive experience in empirical research suggests that any sample—regardless of its degree of representativeness—can be valuable, provided that the analyst does not present manipulated results or conclusions. In this instance, the conclusions are generalized—albeit implicitly—to the entire prison system. It should be noted, however, that this does not significantly undermine the validity of the conclusions drawn, as they pertain to systemic issues, shortcomings, and positive trends within Albania’s penitentiary system. Furthermore, these are systemic issues—though perhaps varying in intensity—that are also present in Bulgaria and, likely, in all other countries. Therefore, I accept—albeit with certain reservations—the results, findings, and conclusions of the survey as representative of the penitentiary system in Albania.

I note that, towards the end of the section, a distinction between urban and rural prisons/institutions appears, though this division is not explained.

The second section of Chapter Three, titled "Analytical Discussion of the Findings," analyzes the empirical results in light of international standards and criminological theory. The discussion focuses on five "analytical conclusions" (as termed in the abstract) concerning: institutional capacity and professional training; the continuity of rehabilitation and post-release support; overcrowding and the criminogenic prison environment; opportunities for individualizing work with inmates; and the sustainability of rehabilitation initiatives.

From a critical perspective, I note that separating the presentation of the research results from what the doctoral candidate terms an "analytical" discussion has led to the repetition of issues and conclusions, despite efforts to frame them within different contexts.

The third section, "Recommendations for Improving the Effectiveness of the Penitentiary System in Albania," presents recommendations divided into two parts: "Legislative Recommendations" and "Institutional and Policy Recommendations." The recommendations are sound, based on a combination of legal-normative, comparative, and empirical analysis. In my view, they provide appropriate guidance for future legislative and institutional measures

aimed at bringing the Albanian penitentiary system into closer alignment with international standards, and they will serve to strengthen its preventive function.

It should be noted that while some of the recommendations are labeled as *de lege ferenda*, they can hardly be classified as such, given that neither specific legal norms nor concrete legislative provisions are proposed. Rather, these recommendations outline directions for improving penitentiary legislation and enhancing its effectiveness; they stem from a comparative analysis and draw upon Bulgarian practices, which the doctoral candidate has identified as exemplary.

The conclusion of the dissertation—which is quite extensive—presents the findings and recommendations derived from the research. It is a positive aspect that the text provides final answers to the four "research questions" formulated in the introduction. However, I do not find a conclusion regarding whether the research hypothesis—also stated in the introduction—has been confirmed.

4. Methodology and Methods of the Dissertation Research

The title of the dissertation is impressive, yet it implies a complex and challenging study, particularly regarding its objectives, methodology, and research instruments. On one hand, this indicates that the research is multifaceted in nature: it encompasses criminology (with a specific focus on the role of international standards concerning crime prevention, rehabilitation, and social reintegration), human rights (ensuring respect for the rights of individuals deprived of liberty), the execution of criminal sentences, and substantive criminal law. The study thus integrates criminological, human rights, penitentiary, and criminal law perspectives on the issue at hand. On the other hand, the scope is further complicated by the inclusion—already signaled in the title—of an assessment of the effectiveness of two national penitentiary systems, specifically in light of the impact exerted by international standards. Evaluating the effectiveness of any activity necessitates the formulation of empirically measurable indicators to gauge the degree of that effectiveness (in this case, indicators to assess the influence of each specific international standard). This effectively adds a management dimension to the research. However, no such assessment has been carried out here.

Despite this complexity, the concept of a multifaceted approach is consistently maintained throughout the dissertation. This represents an achievement for the doctoral candidate, demonstrating their capabilities in terms of theory and methodology. Throughout the work, the author largely succeeds in maintaining this central idea—demonstrated through the research objectives, the research hypothesis, the overall structure, the content of the survey questions, and the conclusion. Consequently, it can be concluded that the objective of the dissertation research has been achieved.

A crucial methodological component of any scientific study is its conceptual framework. This framework includes, among other elements, four key concepts central to this dissertation within the fields of criminology and penal execution law: crime prevention, the rehabilitation of offenders, the reintegration of incarcerated individuals, and "social reintegration." The doctoral candidate notes that the terminology employed aligns with that found in international legal instruments—such as the UN "Nelson Mandela Rules," the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 10), and the European Prison Rules—which identify the rehabilitation and social reintegration of incarcerated individuals as primary objectives of the execution of custodial sentences. The definitions provided are well-tailored to the subject matter of the dissertation.

Regarding general scientific methods, and in line with the dissertation's topic, the author makes effective use of the comparative method. This approach proves highly valuable for identifying similarities and differences between the Bulgarian and Albanian penitentiary systems—specifically concerning their institutional organization, European integration,

implementation capacity, and reform priorities. This method, in combination with the legal-normative and documentary methods, was also used to identify which legal and institutional mechanisms might be relevant for improving the Albanian system.

A survey using a structured questionnaire was employed to examine the practical work of penitentiary staff—the actors responsible for implementing the requirements of international standards—in a field setting.

The documentary method involved reviewing government documents, reports from monitoring bodies, judgments of the European Court of Human Rights, academic sources, and institutional materials—all cited in the bibliography—that relate to the reform of penitentiary systems.

5. Scientific Contributions of the Dissertation

With a view to enriching scientific knowledge in the fields of criminology and penitentiary studies, I highlight the conclusions drawn from this dissertation regarding the direct impact of international standards—concerning the treatment of incarcerated individuals and the functioning of modern penitentiary systems—on the effectiveness of correctional and rehabilitative work. This impact serves as a crucial prerequisite for the effective prevention of recidivism within the penitentiary system, which constitutes a significant segment of overall criminal recidivism. This represents a specific and substantial contribution that complements the general theory of crime prevention—a core component of the subject matter of criminological science.

Another significant contribution lies in the expansion of the empirical foundation for criminological and penitentiary studies in Albania—as well as for comparative criminology and comparative penitentiary law—through the results of a survey conducted among staff in Albanian prisons, along with the research instrument (questionnaire) employed. This constitutes a unique dataset that can serve as a benchmark for comparison in future research of a similar nature, both in Albania and in other countries. From a scientific-methodological perspective, I consider the research approach—which adopts a comprehensive view of the subject and develops an integrated framework—to be successful. In this framework, the lawful execution of sentences, the protection of human rights, the rehabilitation and reintegration of incarcerated individuals, and crime prevention are treated as interdependent components that influence the effectiveness of penitentiary systems.

I highlight the following key scientific and practical achievements of the doctoral candidate:

- The results and conclusions derived from a comparative analysis of the penitentiary systems of Albania and Bulgaria, clearly presented in a Comparative Matrix (Table 9) based on carefully selected criteria: legislative harmonization; institutional capacity; oversight mechanisms; staff and professional competence; resocialization and rehabilitation programs (it is appropriate to list rehabilitation before resocialization, as the latter is the goal of the former); pre-release preparation; post-release support; and overall effectiveness.
- Conclusions of a foundational and practical nature:
  - The effectiveness of a penitentiary system is inseparable from the protection of human dignity, the rule of law, non-discrimination, rehabilitation, and preparation for reintegration.
  - The primary challenge within the penitentiary sphere lies in transforming formal legal commitments into consistent institutional practice. Legislative harmonization alone is insufficient. Institutional capacity and practical implementation are of critical importance;

- identifying gaps within the Albanian system—specifically regarding staff training, mental health services, overcrowding, the continuity of resocialization programs, and post-release cooperation;
- the direct impact of material and organizational conditions on crime prevention. Overcrowding and the mixing of different categories of prisoners create criminogenic risks;
- identifying reforms that Albania can adapt to its own national context, rather than simply copying the Bulgarian model;
- the "Legislative Recommendations" and "Institutional and Policy Recommendations" formulated by the doctoral candidate, which provide an excellent foundation for developing a program for the further reform of the penitentiary system in the Republic of Albania.

This work will be of interest to researchers and academics in the fields of criminology, penitentiary law, criminal law, and human rights, as well as to prison staff and specialists focused on prison reform in the Balkans.

6. Critical Remarks on the Dissertation

In addition to the observations made regarding specific sections of the dissertation, I would like to highlight the following critical points.

At certain points in the work, in an effort to strengthen the argumentation, the doctoral candidate appears to overemphasize and oversimplify certain concepts. For instance: “Punishment is viewed not as retribution, but rather as an instrument aimed at prevention, rehabilitation, and social reintegration” (p. 163 of the dissertation). Similarly: “[…] it contributes to the development of criminological and criminal law doctrine by treating the penitentiary system as an active mechanism for crime prevention, rather than merely as a structure for the deprivation of liberty” (Abstract, contribution 8, p. 46), among others.

Ever since the time of Cesare Beccaria, great thinkers have championed this idea. For many decades, states have implemented progressive penitentiary systems, in which the legal status and the regime applied to incarcerated individuals evolve based on their behavior, rehabilitation, and attitude toward work. Over time, these systems have continuously evolved in both their essence and content. This process gained momentum following the Second World War—a fact also noted in the dissertation. At the current stage of societal development, the question of “whether or not punishment constitutes retribution” is no longer a subject of debate. The problems and difficulties are of an entirely different nature and exist on a completely different level. The question of the effectiveness of a penitentiary system is not a new one; however, the focus here is on enhancing this effectiveness—a concept that is central to the dissertation research.

There is some repetition throughout the text, with the same issues—such as "good practices"—being addressed in multiple places, including within the findings and conclusions. The conclusion itself also contains repetitions.

In the tables presenting the survey results, it is appropriate to include both absolute figures and their corresponding relative proportions (percentages). In some tables, the reference to the "most frequent responses" is rather vague.

A formal note regarding the cited online sources: bibliographic standards require that, in addition to the website, the specific publication used and cited must be identified—including the author (if applicable), title, date of publication, and the date the source was accessed.

7. Recommendations regarding the doctoral candidate’s future research and

implementation work

I recommend that, in future publications, the doctoral candidate make active use of tables, diagrams, and charts to provide a clear visual representation of research findings. For instance, the analysis presented in the dissertation would benefit from the inclusion of international and European standards in a tabular or schematic format, which would help highlight overlaps, differences, and key areas of focus. The value of such an approach is clearly demonstrated by the "Comparative Matrix of the Penitentiary Systems of Bulgaria and Albania" included in the work.

The dissertation contains valuable management-related information that could assist the leadership of the Albanian Ministry of Justice—specifically the directorate responsible for prisons—in implementing reforms aimed at fulfilling the country's pre-accession commitments. By refining, specifying, and substantiating the research recommendations, the doctoral candidate could develop a structured program for the further reform of the Albanian penitentiary system.

I encourage the doctoral candidate to continue exploring this subject, including an examination of the Bulgarian experience. It would be particularly worthwhile, for example, to study the "Offender Assessment System" (OASys), which was introduced in Bulgarian correctional facilities in 2002. This system is used to assess the risk of recidivism among inmates and serves a multifaceted purpose. It serves as a basis for formulating proposals regarding: changes to the regime under which a prison sentence is served; transfers to a different type of penal institution (with a less or more restrictive regime); and conditional early release. Based on the risk assessment, the following activities are carried out: planning and re-planning the execution of imposed sentences; and enrolling inmates in educational, vocational training, cultural, sports, and specialized correctional programs. This assessment is also utilized in the context of serving a probation sentence, as well as in the exercise of the pardon power by the Head of State.

The critical remarks and recommendations offered do not diminish the quality or the significance of the results and contributions presented in the dissertation.

8. General impressions of the doctoral candidate's work

The doctoral candidate, Krenar Bardi, possesses extensive professional experience as a university lecturer in legal disciplines—including criminology—and as a manager in leadership positions. He has also been active in research, participating in student conferences. The topic chosen for the dissertation stems from his research interests in crime prevention and human rights—specifically the rights of incarcerated individuals—and is grounded in his personal experience and direct observations of the Albanian penitentiary system, gained through his work as a social worker in three of the country's prisons. He has participated in numerous training sessions on various topics, organized under the auspices of the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and the Albanian Helsinki Committee.

The doctoral candidate demonstrates a command of criminological terminology and knowledge. He shows an ability to comprehensively cover the relevant legal framework and academic literature, as well as a capacity for conducting comparative legal and criminological analysis, drawing generalizations, and formulating conclusions. He demonstrates familiarity with the methodology of empirical survey research. The topic of the dissertation did not, however, provide an opportunity to showcase skills in the criminological statistical analysis of crime.

9. Abstract (Summary of the Dissertation)

The abstract spans 47 pages—an excessively large volume. It accurately and, in general, comprehensively reflects the main research results and conclusions. There are some minor

discrepancies compared to the text of the dissertation itself; for instance, the abstract mentions that the empirical research utilized not only questionnaires but also structured interviews.

The official report provided by VFU (Varna Free University) regarding overlaps with texts from cited sources indicates no evidence of plagiarism.

The doctoral candidate, Krenar Bardi, has submitted a declaration attesting to the originality and authenticity of the research results and the submitted dissertation.

10. Publications

Regarding the subject of the dissertation, the candidate has authored three independent publications in English, featured in the *E-Journal VFU*—an electronic journal published by the Faculty of Law at Varna Free University (ISSN 1313-7514) (dated 2024 and 2026).

The scientometric requirements for the award of the educational and scientific degree of "Doctor" (PhD) have been met by the candidate.

11. Conclusion

The topic of the dissertation by **Krenar Rexhep Bardi, titled "The Impact of International Standards on the Effectiveness of Penitentiary Systems in Bulgaria and Albania (Criminological and Criminal Law Aspects)"** is suitable for a doctoral thesis, addressing issues of high significance and contemporary relevance.

The dissertation fulfills the requirements set forth in Article 6, Paragraph 3 of the *Act on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria*. The substantial part of the content and the original contributions of the work lie within the field of criminology. My assessment of the work is positive.

In view of the above, I propose that the esteemed Scientific Jury award Krenar Rexhep Bardi the educational and scientific degree of "Doctor" in the professional field of "Law," specializing in "Criminology".

Member of the Scientific Jury and Reviewer:

(Prof. Yulia Boyadzhieva, Doctor of Juridical Sciences)

Sofia, October 30, 2026