ACADEMIC OPINION

by Assoc. Prof. Svetlin Petkov Antonov, PhD – University of Ruse “Angel Kanchev”

appointed as a member of the Scientific Jury by Order No. 365/01.10.2026 of the Rector of Varna Free University “Chernorizets Hrabar” for the public defence of the dissertation submitted by Krenar Rexhep Bardhi for the award of the educational and scientific degree “Doctor” on the topic: “International Standards for the Effectiveness of Penitentiary Systems in Bulgaria and Albania (Criminological and Criminal Law Aspects)”, Professional field: 3.6. Law, Doctoral Programme: Criminology

Academic Supervisors: Prof. Galina Kovacheva, PhD, and Prof. Juliana Mateeva, PhD.

I. Brief Information about the Candidate

Krenar Rexhep Bardhi obtained a Bachelor's degree in Law from the Albanian University in Tirana, followed by a Master's degree in Criminal Law from the same university. He is currently a doctoral student enrolled in an individual doctoral study programme at the Department of Criminal Law Sciences, Faculty of Law, Varna Free University “Chernorizets Hrabar”. The candidate has substantial professional experience. Between 2007 and 2013, he held various positions within the General Directorate of Prisons. Since 2016, he has been practising as a lawyer and has been a member of the Durres Bar Association. In the same year, he became the manager of a commercial company. Since 2019, he has also been a part-time lecturer in Family Law, Juvenile Criminal Justice, and Criminology and Penology at the Faculty of Political and Legal Sciences, Department of Justice, “Aleksandër Moisiu” University in Durres.

II. Analysis of the Dissertation and Its Scientific Contributions

The dissertation comprises 190 pages and is structurally organised into an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography containing 180 sources in Bulgarian, English and Albanian, international legal instruments, case law and electronic resources, as well as one appendix containing the questionnaire used in the empirical research. The research methodology is appropriately selected and combines legal-dogmatic, comparative legal, documentary and sociological methods.

The topic of the dissertation is both relevant and of considerable practical significance for criminal law, the law governing the execution of criminal penalties, and criminology. In contemporary democratic society, the effectiveness

of the penitentiary system should not be assessed solely in terms of security, isolation and the formal enforcement of judicial decisions. The principal criterion of effectiveness is increasingly associated with the system's ability to safeguard human dignity, prevent inhuman and degrading treatment and, through individualised rehabilitative measures and social reintegration, reduce the risk of reoffending.

The comparative legal and criminological analysis of the penitentiary systems of Bulgaria and Albania represents a particularly successful research approach. The two countries share certain similarities in their historical development, although significant differences can currently be observed in the development of their respective legal frameworks and institutional capacities. Both countries are characterised by a pronounced predominance of prison-based structures inherited from the period of totalitarian regimes. The study clearly demonstrates how integration into the European Union (EU), the binding nature of EU law and continuous international monitoring have accelerated the institutional consolidation and development of the Bulgarian penitentiary system, thereby providing valuable comparative experience for the ongoing reform process in Albania.

Chapter One provides a systematic analysis of the standards adopted by the United Nations, the Council of Europe and the European Union for the protection of the rights of persons deprived of their liberty. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention against Torture, the Nelson Mandela Rules, the European Convention on Human Rights, the European Prison Rules and other relevant instruments are examined. The chapter also addresses the case law of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), which translates the general principles enshrined in the Convention into specific substantive and procedural obligations incumbent upon States.

Chapter Two presents a parallel analysis of the penitentiary systems of Bulgaria and Albania. It examines their underlying principles, applicable legislation, governing and supervisory authorities, the role of the prosecution service, the courts, probation services and the Ombudsman, as well as certain specific mechanisms for crime prevention.

Chapter Three presents the empirical research conducted among 40 penitentiary staff members from four prisons in Albania (Tirana, Durres, Peqin and Kruja). The analysis focuses on issues relating to the actual coverage of rehabilitation programmes, the risks of secondary criminalisation and prison subculture, deficiencies in the professional training of prison staff, and weaknesses in post-penitentiary coordination. On the basis of the empirical

findings, certain shortcomings of the Albanian penitentiary system are identified and proposals de lege ferenda are formulated.

The principal scientific contributions of the dissertation can be summarised in the following areas: **1**) A conceptual framework has been developed demonstrating that compliance with international human rights standards and standards concerning conditions of detention is a key factor in the criminological effectiveness of punishment and the reduction of recidivism, rather than an obstacle to security. **2**) A comparative analysis of the penitentiary models of Bulgaria and Albania has been conducted, identifying specific mechanisms through which European integration influences the consolidation of penitentiary law enforcement and institutional practices. **3**) Empirical data have been collected and analysed concerning the institutional climate, staff training needs and various obstacles to the social reintegration of prisoners in Albanian penitentiary institutions. **4**) Specific proposals de lege ferenda have been formulated with regard to Albanian legislation. These include, inter alia, the introduction of a statutory standard guaranteeing a minimum of 4 square metres of living space per prisoner, the provision of an opportunity for prisoners to initiate proceedings for conditional early release, and the introduction of programmes aimed at preparing prisoners for life after release.

The candidate has also submitted evidence of three scientific papers published in the annual research collections of Varna Free University. These papers address significant aspects relating to the evolution of prison labour regulations, the role of work in the rehabilitation of persons deprived of their liberty, and the importance of family contacts and visits for their successful reintegration into society. The publications reflect specific elements of the dissertation research.

III. Critical Remarks, Objections and Recommendations

Certain critical remarks and recommendations may be made with regard to the submitted dissertation. The sample of 40 prison staff members is relatively small for the purpose of formulating definitive quantitative and qualitative assessments of the national penitentiary system. The findings reflect the professional opinions of the staff members, which constitute a valuable source of information and guidance; however, they should not be equated with objective criminological statistics on recidivism, should such data be available. The research would have benefited from additional depth had the empirical study also been conducted among staff members of Bulgarian penitentiary institutions. This would have enabled a more symmetrical comparison at the empirical level. Furthermore, the a priori assumption that certain legal provisions, institutions and specific practices within Bulgarian penitentiary law and practice are positive,

without their explicit scientific examination and validation, is also open to criticism.

It should nevertheless be expressly emphasised that the critical remarks outlined above in no way diminish the considerable scientific and practical value of the dissertation.

IV. Conclusion and Assessment

The dissertation constitutes a comprehensive, in-depth and original scientific study that fulfils all the requirements of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations for its Implementation, and the internal regulations of Varna Free University "Chernorizets Hrabar". The research contains substantial scientific, applied scientific and empirical contributions in the fields of criminology, criminal law and the law governing the execution of criminal penalties. It demonstrates that the candidate possesses profound theoretical knowledge and the capacity to conduct independent scientific research. In view of the foregoing, I hereby express my **POSITIVE ASSESSMENT** of the dissertation and recommend that the Scientific Jury award Krenar Rexhep Bardhi the educational and scientific degree of **"Doctor"** in Professional Field 3.6. Law, Doctoral Programme "Criminology".

Date: 02 November 2026 **Member of the Scientific Jury:** .....

(Assoc. Prof. Svetlin Antonov, PhD)