POST-PRISON REINTEGRATION AND DERADICALIZATION: CRIMINOLOGICAL INSIGHTS FROM INTERNATIONAL AND BULGARIAN PERSPECTIVES

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Summary: The reintegration of individuals convicted of violent or extremism-related offenses represents one of the most complex challenges at the intersection of criminology, social policy, and security governance. This paper examines post-prison reintegration and deradicalization through a comparative criminological lens, drawing on both international best practices and the Bulgarian context. Using theoretical frameworks from social disorganization, labeling, and desistance theories, the study argues that successful reintegration requires a shift from punitive and surveillance-oriented models toward socially grounded and preventive approaches. Comparative analysis of the Aarhus Model (Denmark), EXIT-Germany, and the Dutch Comprehensive Approach reveals that cross-disciplinary, individualized support, and community engagement are the strongest predictors of long-term success. Conversely, overly securitized and ideologically driven interventions tend to reinforce stigmatization and social exclusion. The Bulgarian case, though lacking systemic prison radicalization, exhibits structural vulnerabilities: limited inter-agency coordination, insufficiently trained social workers, and weak post-release support mechanisms. The paper concludes that integrating social work into correctional and post-correctional practice can bridge the gap between security and social inclusion. It recommends the establishment of multi-agency case management teams, professional training in deradicalization, and community-based reintegration networks. Ultimately, the study positions social work as both a criminological and preventive resource – an instrument of social resilience that transforms reintegration from a technical task into a shared societal responsibility.

Keywords: post-prison reintegration; deradicalization; social work; rehabilitation, criminology

INTRODUCTION

The issue of post-prison reintegration for individuals convicted of violent or extremism-related crimes has become one of the defining challenges of contemporary criminology and social policy. The transition from incarceration to community life represents not merely a logistical process but a complex social transformation involving identity reconstruction, the renegotiation of belonging, and the management of

perceived risk. Within the broader discourse on radicalization, post-release contexts have increasingly been recognized as critical junctures – moments where the absence of adequate support mechanisms can perpetuate cycles of marginalization and recidivism.

In many European countries, deradicalization efforts have shifted from ideologically oriented "re-education" models toward socially grounded approaches emphasizing rehabilitation, community engagement, and individualized casework. The Scandinavian and Dutch systems have demonstrated that effective reintegration requires an integrated framework connecting correctional institutions, social services, and local communities. Conversely, purely security-driven approaches, characterized by surveillance and stigmatization, often exacerbate alienation and hinder desistance.

For Bulgaria, this topic is particularly relevant. While the country has not experienced systemic radicalization within its prisons, the conditions for social disorganization – poverty, low institutional trust, marginalization, and limited inter-agency coordination - remain significant. The lack of specialized programs targeting violent or extremist offenders, combined with the limited role of social work within penitentiary and post-penitentiary settings, increases the vulnerability of released prisoners to reoffending or re-engagement with extremist networks.

This paper therefore seeks to bridge two interrelated domains: security studies and social reintegration. It aims to examine how criminological perspectives and social work interventions can jointly inform deradicalization strategies after imprisonment. The analysis relies on a comparative framework that juxtaposes international best practices – such as the Aarhus Model (Denmark), EXIT-Germany, and the Dutch Comprehensive Approach – with the emerging challenges and opportunities in Bulgaria. The central research questions we are going to provide an answer can be summarized as:

1. What criminological and social mechanisms facilitate successful reintegration of former extremist offenders?

2. What lessons can Bulgaria learn from international experiences in balancing security and rehabilitation?

3. How can social work be institutionalized as a key actor in post-prison deradicalization efforts?

By addressing these questions, our study contributes to an evolving understanding of reintegration not only as a social policy domain but as a cornerstone of sustainable security.

1. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical foundation of post-prison reintegration and deradicalization rests on several criminological paradigms that elucidate the

interplay between social environment, individual behavior, and institutional responses. These include the theories of **social disorganization** (Shaw & McKay, 1942), **social control** (Hirschi, 1969), **labeling and stigma** (Becker, 1963), and **desistance** (Maruna, 2001). Collectively, they highlight that criminal or extremist behavior cannot be understood solely through individual pathology but must be situated within networks of social relations, opportunity structures, and identity formation processes.

According to Shaw and McKay's (1942) classic theory of social disorganization, crime proliferates in contexts where community structures are fragmented, and informal social controls are weak. Applied in contemporary "total institutions" (as argued by Erving Goffman (1961) in his canonical study "Asylums"), prisons themselves can function as "disorganized communities" – spaces of disrupted social ties, limited prosocial models, and concentrated deviance (cf. Silke, 2014). Radicalization, when it occurs, often mirrors these dynamics: it fills a vacuum of belonging and identity through group solidarity and ideological narratives. In post-prison contexts, reintegration therefore demands not only behavioral change but also the reconstruction of social capital and prosocial networks. In addition, Travis Hirschi's (1969) theory of social control and social bonds emphasizes attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief as the cornerstones of conformity. For individuals exiting the prison system, these bonds are often fractured. The effectiveness of social reintegration thus depends on restoring trust – both in interpersonal relationships and in institutions. Where the state fails to provide support, informal or extremist networks can reoccupy this space, offering belonging where the legitimate system does not.

Howard Becker's labeling theory (1963) provides another lens for understanding post-release trajectories. Once labeled as "extremists" or "dangerous", individuals face social exclusion that may perpetuate deviant identities. Overly punitive or surveillant approaches can unintentionally reinforce this stigmatization, thereby obstructing reintegration. Social work, when embedded in a rights-based and restorative framework, can counteract this by validating the person's agency and creating avenues for redefinition. Finally, over the last two decades the theory of desistance, as articulated by Shadd Maruna (2001) and subsequent scholars, has framed rehabilitation as a process of narrative reconstruction. Former offenders desist when they can build new, coherent life stories that integrate past wrongdoing without allowing it to define their future. Deradicalization, viewed through this lens, is less about ideological transformation and more about the social processes of reattachment and recognition. The development of prosocial identities through work, education, and civic engagement becomes crucial.

From a criminological standpoint, social work functions as an applied mechanism of social control, not in a coercive sense but as a facilitator of

reintegration and social cohesion. Social workers act as mediators between individuals and institutions, helping to translate policy frameworks into individualized interventions. In deradicalization, they can operationalize risk assessment, coordinate multi-agency collaboration, and provide emotional and practical support. Their role is both preventative and reconstructive, thus restoring the social bonds that underlie security itself.

2. INTERNATIONAL APPROACHES TO CVE AND LESSONS LEARNED

Across the European Union and beyond, efforts to counter violent extremism (CVE) and facilitate post-prison reintegration have evolved considerably since the early 2000s. Traditional counterterrorism approaches – rooted in surveillance, prosecution, and ideological re-education – have gradually given way to comprehensive models that blend criminological, psychological, and social perspectives. The new consensus emphasizes *multi-agency cooperation*, *individualized rehabilitation*, and *community engagement* as the key determinants of success.

This shift reflects a recognition that radicalization is not merely an ideological deviation, but a complex social process tied to identity, exclusion, and belonging. Accordingly, deradicalization and reintegration policies have been re-conceptualized as **preventive social practices** rather than strict security measures. The most innovative models – developed in countries such as Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, and Canada – have placed social work and community collaboration at the core of their design.

The **Aarhus Model**, often cited as a benchmark in preventive and reintegrative strategies, emerged in Denmark in the early 2010s as a response to concerns about youth radicalization and foreign fighter returnees. Developed jointly by local police, social services, schools, and mental health professionals, the model reflects a profoundly *community-oriented logic*. It seeks not to punish or isolate, but to rebuild trust between individuals and institutions. Key features include the **early identification** of risk through social workers, educators, and local networks; **individual intervention plans** combining psychological counseling, mentorship, vocational training, and family support; **cross-sector coordination** between police and municipal authorities under a shared ethical code focused on prevention, not prosecution. Evaluations carried out by Bertelsen (2015) indicate that the Aarhus Model's success lies in its holistic design: rather than forcing ideological change, it creates conditions for individuals to re-embed themselves in normal social life. The program's participants display lower recidivism and stronger community ties than those subjected to punitive reintegration frameworks. However, challenges remain regarding resource sustainability and scaling beyond local contexts.

Germany's **EXIT-Deutschland** program represents another landmark approach, focusing primarily on individuals disengaging from neo-Nazi and far-right extremist networks. Founded in 2000, the initiative pioneered a *psychosocial model of disengagement* combining counseling, security support, and identity reconstruction. The emphasis is placed on the long-term **trust-based relationships** between social workers and participants; support for safe relocation and personal safety from former extremist peers; psychological assistance in coping with guilt, trauma, and social reintegration.

Unlike short-term deradicalization schemes, EXIT views desistance as a gradual process of *identity re-narration* – a concept resonant with Maruna's (2001) desistance theory. This approach has since been adapted internationally, influencing similar programs in Norway, Sweden, and Canada. Yet, as Koehler (2017) notes, EXIT's model requires significant institutional capacity, highly trained staff, and consistent funding – factors that are often absent in transitional or resource-constrained settings.

In the Netherlands, the **Comprehensive Approach to Radicalisation (CAR)** developed after 2004 integrates social welfare agencies, probation services, municipalities, and security institutions. Its main innovation lies in the establishment of **multi-disciplinary case teams**, responsible for developing individual reintegration plans for high-risk individuals. These teams draw insights from criminological risk assessment and social work practice, balancing surveillance with supportive reintegration. The approach recognizes that post-release success depends less on ideological deconstruction than on socio-economic stability – employment, housing, education, and social inclusion. Empirical studies (Schuurman and Bakker, 2016; van der Heide, 2018) suggest that CAR has reduced recidivism and increased community trust, though some critiques point to bureaucratic rigidity and inconsistent communication between agencies. Nevertheless, the Dutch case underscores the importance of treating reintegration as a *shared social responsibility* rather than an isolated security concern.

The **Channel Programme**, introduced in the United Kingdom under the *Prevent* strategy, was one of the earliest national attempts to systematize deradicalization through multi-agency cooperation. It operates through local panels that assess individuals at risk and offer voluntary support, ranging from mentoring and psychological counseling to employment assistance.

While the initiative demonstrated early promise, it has faced sustained criticism. Scholars and civil society actors (Romaniuk, 2015; Fadil, Ragazzi and de Koning, 2019) have highlighted the program's *securitized framing*, which often stigmatized Muslim communities and blurred the line between social care and intelligence gathering. This resulted in declining trust and limited participation – an instructive lesson on the dangers of excessive surveillance in reintegration contexts. The Channel experience thus provides

a cautionary counterpoint to models like Aarhus and EXIT: **even well-designed interventions can fail if they lack community legitimacy**.

Beyond the EU, Canada's *Correctional Service Reintegration Framework* and Norway's community-based follow-up models (as described by Ugelvik, 2014) provide further evidence of the benefits of post-release support grounded in restorative justice principles. Canadian practice emphasizes *graduated reintegration*, involving step-down transitions from institutional custody to community supervision, supported by social workers and probation officers. Norway, often cited for its humane correctional philosophy, applies a principle of *"normalization"*: the prison environment should resemble everyday society as closely as possible. This facilitates smoother reentry and reduces stigma. Reintegration programs include joint education, family engagement, and employment partnerships, framed not as 'counter-extremism' per se but as general social inclusion measures.

Such models illustrate that successful reintegration requires not only technical coordination but also a **cultural shift** within institutions – from punishment toward relational trust and social investment.

While many international initiatives have achieved measurable success, several have struggled or failed due to design flaws or contextual limitations. Common pitfalls include:

- **Over-securitization**: framing reintegration primarily as risk management undermines the rehabilitative purpose.
- **Short-termism**: programs often operate as pilot projects without long-term funding or evaluation.
- **Ideological focus**: forcing ideological renunciation rather than fostering social belonging can entrench resentment.
- **Poor coordination**: fragmentation between agencies results in duplication and service gaps.

Romaniuk (2015) and Neumann (2010) both emphasize that sustainability depends on embedding reintegration within broader social policy, not as a temporary security response. Likewise, research by the Council of Europe (2016) and the Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN, 2021) highlights that *multi-agency cooperation must include the community level* – schools, employers, families – not merely police and correctional institutions.

For countries like Bulgaria, which are not currently facing acute terrorism threats but exhibit structural vulnerabilities - weak institutional coordination, limited social services, and marginalization of at-risk groups – the most relevant lessons include:

- The **integration of social work** into correctional and probation systems as proactive rather than reactive measures.
- The need for **localized reintegration networks**, modeled on the Aarhus experience but adapted to municipal realities.

• The importance of **capacity building and training** for social workers in deradicalization and post-penitentiary care.

• The adoption of **evaluation mechanisms** to monitor long-term outcomes beyond recidivism – such as employment, civic participation, and community trust.

Ultimately, international experience confirms that deradicalization and reintegration succeed when they are treated as part of *social reconstruction*, not merely as risk containment. The process requires not only policy design but also a deep institutional commitment to human dignity, social justice, and shared responsibility.

3. THE BULGARIAN CONTEXT AND INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES

Bulgaria's penitentiary system reflects the broader post-socialist challenges of institutional transformation, underfunding, and fragmentation between punitive and rehabilitative functions. Despite ongoing reforms, the system continues to face chronic problems: overcrowding, outdated infrastructure, low staffing levels, and insufficient professional training for both prison officers and social workers.

Reports from the *General Directorate for the Execution of Sentences* (2020), *the Ombudsman of Republic of Bulgaria* (2022, pp. 343-344), *The European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment* (CPT, 2022) highlight persistent deficiencies in individualized work with inmates, including overcrowding in some penitentiary institutions, the prison in Plovdiv being a notable example (cf. Kanev, 2022, p. 4). The dominant orientation remains custodial and disciplinary, while social work activities are often reduced to formal administrative assessments rather than dynamic reintegration plans. This institutional culture – focused on control rather than rehabilitation – creates structural barriers to effective reintegration, particularly for individuals associated with violent or extremist behavior, with people with ethnic minority backgrounds being over-represented in state penitentiary institutions (cf. Kanev, 2022, p. 4).

Unlike Western European countries, Bulgaria has not developed a national strategy specifically targeting the deradicalization or reintegration of extremist offenders. The National Security Strategy (2018) and the National Plan for Countering Radicalization and Terrorism (2015-2020) make only general references to "rehabilitation measures" within the penitentiary system, without specifying responsible institutions, methodologies, or funding mechanisms.

Furthermore, the **probation service**, which could serve as a bridge between imprisonment and community reintegration, remains under-resourced and lacks specialization in cases involving ideological extremism

or violent radicalization. Coordination between the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Interior, and social welfare structures is sporadic and often dependent on individual initiatives rather than institutionalized mechanisms. This absence of a structured national framework results in a fragmented landscape: while NGOs occasionally implement reintegration projects with external funding, these efforts lack sustainability and continuity.

4. THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK IN THE POST-PENITENTIARY SPHERE

Social work in Bulgaria's correctional and post-correctional systems occupies a marginal position. The function of 'social worker' within prisons is frequently conflated with administrative case management, while the broader ethos of empowerment, advocacy, and individualized intervention is underdeveloped. A 2020 report by the **Center for the Study of Democracy** entitled "Integrated Approach to Counter Radicalization in Community, Probation and Prison Services" (Dzhekova, 2020) notes that, although radicalization phenomena are limited, the institutional environment is characterized by *low trust, insufficient communication between inmates and staff, and lack of preventive frameworks*. Social workers themselves often face role ambiguity – oscillating between agents of control and potential mediators of social change. To develop a sustainable model of deradicalization, social work must move beyond bureaucratic gatekeeping toward a model of *restorative engagement*: providing emotional support, facilitating access to employment and housing, and mediating between former inmates, their families, and communities. This transition would require both structural reform and a change in institutional culture.

One of the most significant barriers to successful reintegration in Bulgaria remains the pervasive stigma surrounding ex-offenders. Recent studies conducted show that public attitudes toward former prisoners are predominantly punitive (Kılıç and Tuysuz, 2024). Reintegration initiatives often encounter local resistance, especially in smaller communities – where ex-inmates are perceived as security threats rather than citizens in need of support.

This stigma has direct implications for employment, housing, and community belonging. Employers are reluctant to hire individuals with criminal records, and municipalities rarely offer transitional housing or social support beyond basic welfare assistance. For individuals associated with extremism-related crimes, these barriers are even greater, as the "extremist" label amplifies social exclusion and internalized marginalization.

Overcoming these barriers requires a strategic effort and public education campaigns aimed at reframing reintegration as a **collective responsibility**. As comparative experience demonstrates, desistance and

deradicalization flourish not in isolation but within inclusive communities that offer genuine opportunities for social participation.

5. INSTITUTIONAL COORDINATION AND BUILDING PROFESSIONAL CAPACITY

Institutional coordination in Bulgaria remains a key weakness. While the **General Directorate for the Execution of Sentences**, **probation offices**, and **local social services** operate under separate administrative hierarchies, there are no formal mechanisms for continuous cooperation or data sharing. The absence of multidisciplinary case management teams – like those used in the Dutch or Danish models – means that each institution addresses reintegration from its own narrow mandate.

Moreover, professional capacity remains limited. Social workers and probation officers receive little to no training in the specifics of radicalization dynamics, risk assessment, or trauma-informed care. The existing university curricula in social work and criminology rarely include modules on countering violent extremism or post-penitentiary rehabilitation. This educational gap translates into inconsistent practice on the ground, where social workers often feel ill-equipped to address complex cases involving ideological components. And whilst in 2019 the Bulgarian government adopted a *"Strategy for Development of the Penitentiary System in the Republic of Bulgaria for the period until 2025"* and an action plan for its implementation (Strategy 2019-2025), these have been criticized for the lack of transparent evaluation mechanisms: there are no indicators for measuring reintegration outcomes beyond recidivism rates, nor systematic procedures for assessing the effectiveness of interventions (cf. Kanev, 2022). Without such data, policy learning and adaptation remain impossible.

Despite these structural challenges, Bulgaria possesses several latent opportunities for developing a sustainable reintegration and deradicalization framework.

• **European integration and funding mechanisms** (e.g., through the EU's Internal Security Fund[1]) create openings for pilot projects in multi-agency cooperation and training.

• **Academic engagement** in the fields of sociology and criminology is growing, providing a foundation for evidence-based policymaking.

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[1] For more information see: Migration and Home Affairs. (2025, October 20). *Internal Security Fund (2021-2027).* European Commission. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/funding/internal-security-funds/internal-security-fund-2021-2027_en

• **Local-level partnerships** between municipalities, NGOs, and universities (such as initiatives have been undertaken by the CSD[2] and IGA[3] over the past decade) have demonstrated that community-centered approaches are possible, though underutilized.

To capitalize on these opportunities, Bulgaria must adopt a **whole-of-society model**, where reintegration is not confined to the correctional system but becomes part of broader social inclusion and crime prevention strategies. This implies recognizing social work as both a *security resource* and a *social justice tool* – capable of bridging the gap between institutional mandates and human needs.

6. FROM SECURITY TO SOCIAL INTEGRATION: REFRAMING THE REINTEGRATION PARADIGM

The comparative review of reintegration and deradicalization practices reveals a significant paradigm shift: the move from security-dominated frameworks toward **socially grounded approaches**. Internationally, the most effective models – such as Denmark's *Aarhus Model*, Germany's *EXIT Program*, and the Dutch *Comprehensive Approach* – share a defining characteristic: they situate security within the broader context of *social inclusion*.

These models do not perceive former extremists or violent offenders solely as security risks but as individuals embedded within disrupted social systems. Their interventions are therefore multidimensional – addressing employment, education, mental health, and family dynamics alongside ideological or behavioral change.

In contrast, traditional security-oriented approaches, typified by the early stages of the UK's *Channel* programme, have often proven counterproductive. By framing reintegration as surveillance and by institutionalizing suspicion, they risk deepening distrust and reproducing the same alienation that feeds radicalization in the first place (Romaniuk, 2015; Fadil, Ragazzi, and de Koning, M., 2018).

For Bulgaria, this shift in paradigm is essential. The current system remains largely reactive, shaped by punitive legacies rather than preventive strategies. Reintegration is conceptualized primarily through the lens of control – probation, supervision, or risk mitigation – rather than

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[2] For more information see: Center for the Study of Democracy [CSD]. (2013, February 01). *A New Initiative to Support Re-socialization of Offenders*. CSD. https://csd.eu/bg/events/event/nova-iniciativa-v-podkrepa-na-resocializacijata-na-izvrshitelite-na-prestplenija/

[3] For more information see: Crime Prevention Fund – IGA [Фонд за превенция на престъпността – ИГА]. (2024, February 26). *R2COM – Preventing Radicalization and Violent Extremism in the Community* [R2COM – Превенция на радикализацията и насилствения екстремизъм в общността]. IGA. http://iga-bg.org/bg/r2com-%d0%bf%d1%80%d0%b5%d0%b2%d0%b5%d0%bd%d1%86%d0%b8%d1%8f-%d0%bd%d0%b0-%d1%80%d0%b0%d0%b4%d0%b8%d0%ba%d0%b0%d0%bb%d0%b8%d0%b7%d0%b0%d1%86%d0%b8%d1%8f%d1%82%d0%b0-%d0%b8-%d0%bd%d0%b0%d1%81%d0%b8/

empowerment and social participation. Such an orientation limits the capacity of the system to foster genuine desistance and civic reintegration.

The success of the Aarhus, EXIT, and CAR models stems not from isolated innovations but from **institutional coherence** and **multidisciplinary coordination**. Each model integrates criminal justice agencies, social services, mental health professionals, and local communities into a shared operational framework.

In Bulgaria, the institutional ecosystem remains fragmented: the **General Directorate for the Execution of Sentences (GDIN)**, **probation offices**, and **social welfare directorates** operate independently, with minimal communication. This separation leads to duplication of efforts, conflicting mandates, and gaps in service continuity during the transition from incarceration to community reintegration.

Introducing **multi-agency case management teams**, modeled on the Dutch or Danish experience, could address this deficiency. Such teams would include social workers, psychologists, probation officers, and community representatives who collaboratively design and monitor individualized reintegration plans. Beyond operational efficiency, this structure fosters shared responsibility and collective ownership of outcomes – a critical precondition for sustainable change.

7. THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK: BETWEEN CARE AND CONTROL

One of the central debates in criminology concerns the dual role of social work within correctional settings: balancing care with control. While social workers are often positioned as intermediaries between punitive institutions and vulnerable individuals, their potential remains underdeveloped in many post-socialist societies.

In the Bulgarian context, social workers in prisons and probation offices frequently operate under administrative constraints that limit their professional autonomy. Their daily activities are dominated by documentation, compliance checks, and formal reporting rather than therapeutic or developmental work. This bureaucratic culture undermines the transformative potential of social work and reduces it to an auxiliary function within the security apparatus.

Yet, as international evidence suggests, social workers can play a **strategic criminological role**: facilitating desistance through trust-building, advocacy, and capacity enhancement. Their position allows them to navigate between institutional mandates and individual needs – providing not only psychological and practical support but also serving as agents of social integration.

The Danish and German experiences show that social work contributes most effectively when embedded within a restorative and rights-based

framework. This approach views the offender not as a perpetual risk but as a citizen capable of reintegration, thus reframing security as a shared societal goal.

8. WHAT WORKS AND WHAT FAILS IN REINTEGRATION POLICIES

Empirical and comparative data across Europe point to several *success factors* that consistently correlate effective reintegration and deradicalization outcomes:

- **Individual support plans** that combine psychological counseling, vocational training, and family engagement.
- **Multi-agency collaboration** with clear communication protocols and shared ethical standards.
- **Community involvement**, ensuring legitimacy and reducing stigmatization.
- **Long-term follow-up mechanisms**, including mentoring and social support beyond the formal supervision period.

Conversely, programs tend to fail when they exhibit:

- **Over-securitization**, treating individuals as permanent risks rather than dynamic social actors.
- **Short-term project cycles** without continuity or institutional integration.
- **Ideological overemphasis**, focusing on cognitive change rather than practical reintegration.
- **Inadequate professional training**, particularly for front-line practitioners.

These lessons have direct relevance for Bulgaria. The lack of sustained funding and professional specialization, coupled with the absence of an evaluative culture, prevents local initiatives from evolving beyond pilot status. Moreover, the persistent conflation of deradicalization with national security undermines community trust – precisely the social capital needed for reintegration to succeed.

When viewed through a comparative criminological lens, Bulgaria represents a **transitional case** – a system with relatively low exposure to extremist radicalization but high structural vulnerability. The country's institutional design mirrors pre-2000 Western European conditions, where social work was marginal and correctional policy remained custodial.

However, this position offers an opportunity for proactive development. Bulgaria can avoid repeating the mistakes of securitized models by adopting preventive frameworks from the outset, such as:

- Embedding social workers in probation and prison teams as *case coordinators*.

- Developing municipal-level reintegration partnerships modeled on the *Aarhus* logic.
- Creating inter-ministerial working groups under the **National Plan for Countering Radicalization and Terrorism**, tasked with designing training curricula and risk assessment tools.
- Leveraging EU funding for pilot projects that test community-based reintegration mechanisms.

The comparative evidence we have collected suggests that while resource constraints are significant, the decisive factor is **political and institutional will**. The redefinition of reintegration as both a social and a security imperative can serve as a catalyst for long-term systemic reform. A key insight emerging from our comparative analysis is the need for **context-sensitive adaptation**. Imported models cannot be transplanted wholesale; they must be reconfigured to reflect local realities, legal frameworks, institutional capacities, and cultural attitudes. For Bulgaria, this means aligning international good practices with domestic priorities, such as reducing prison overcrowding, strengthening probation services, and professionalizing social work. Evidence-based policymaking – grounded in data collection, program evaluation, and academic collaboration – should replace ad hoc experimentation. Universities, NGOs, and research institutes can play a critical role in this process, ensuring that practice and theory evolve in dialogue rather than isolation. Such a shift would not only modernize correctional policy but also elevate Bulgaria's contribution to the European discourse on deradicalization and social rehabilitation.

The broader criminological implication of this analysis is that reintegration and deradicalization should be conceptualized not as discrete policy interventions but as part of a *continuum of social regulation*. From this perspective, social work becomes a form of *preventive criminology* practice that maintains social order by rebuilding trust, mitigating marginalization, and fostering prosocial identities. In Bulgaria, integrating this criminological understanding into institutional practice would mean shifting the focus from punishment to participation, from exclusion to inclusion. The success of such a transformation depends on cultivating a professional ethos among social workers that combines empathy with analytical rigor, and on developing policy environments that reward collaboration rather than compliance.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the intersection of criminology, social work, and security policy in the post-prison reintegration of individuals convicted of violent or extremism-related offenses. Drawing on both international and Bulgarian perspectives, several overarching conclusions can be drawn. First, **reintegration is inseparable from social inclusion**. The analysis

demonstrates that the most effective deradicalization and rehabilitation strategies are those that treat former offenders not merely as risks to be managed, but as citizens to be reintegrated. Successful models - such as the Aarhus Model in Denmark and the EXIT program in Germany – achieve this by combining individualized support, community participation, and institutional coordination. Second, **social work is a critical but underutilized criminological tool**. Across international contexts, social workers act as bridges between security institutions and communities, enabling trust-building and sustainable behavioral change. In Bulgaria, their potential remains constrained by bureaucratic mandates, insufficient training, and lack of professional autonomy. Strengthening their role is essential for shifting from a punitive to a preventive paradigm. Third, **institutional fragmentation and weak coordination** undermine reintegration efforts. Bulgaria's penitentiary and probation systems remain siloed, with minimal information exchange and no multidisciplinary case management structures. Without integrated frameworks that combine justice, social policy, and community engagement, reintegration will remain inconsistent and reactive. Finally, **the Bulgarian case illustrates both vulnerability and opportunity**. While the country does not currently face systemic radicalization within prisons, structural weaknesses – underfunding, stigmatization, and lack of coherent policy – pose significant risks. At the same time, Bulgaria's relatively low threat environment allows it to develop preventive, socially oriented models without the urgency-driven distortions observed elsewhere.

The findings of this study suggest that Bulgaria can enhance its capacity for effective post-prison reintegration and deradicalization through targeted, evidence-based policy measures. These recommendations align with the broader European framework for countering violent extremism and promoting social cohesion and for better clarity can be summarized in **5 key recommendations** we have outlined below:

(1) Institutionalizing Multi-Agency Cooperation – Part of this being the recommendation to establish permanent **local and regional case management teams** bringing together prison administrations, probation services, social welfare agencies, municipalities, and NGOs. Furthermore, we have defined a need for clear communication protocols and shared ethical guidelines based on confidentiality, human rights, and restorative principles. Part of the multi-agency cooperation is the need to develop coherent inter-ministerial coordination mechanisms under the **National Plan for Countering Radicalization and Terrorism**, thus ensuring sustained cross-sectoral engagement.

(2) Professional Development and Capacity Building – here we recommend the introduction of **specialized training modules** on radicalization, trauma-informed care, and desistance for social workers,

probation officers, and correctional staff. Next, more efforts should be placed on the collaboration with universities to integrate criminological and deradicalization studies into social work and public administration curricula. Finally, we cannot stress enough the need to encourage **exchange programs** and partnerships with EU institutions and international NGOs experienced in reintegration practice.

(3) Integrating Social Work into Correctional Reform – our recommendation here is to redefine the role of social workers within prisons and probation systems from administrative clerks to case managers and mediators. This can be facilitated through the introduction of structured supervision frameworks that emphasize empowerment, goal-setting, and personal development rather than mere compliance monitoring.

(4) Enhancing Community Involvement – based on the review of rehabilitation and reintegration programmes and models we have conducted, we would recommend the establishment of **municipal reintegration networks** modeled on the Aarhus model, engaging local institutions, employers, educational organizations, and religious communities. Also, we would argue about the need to implement pilot **public awareness campaigns** to reduce stigma and reframe reintegration as a shared societal goal. In addition, encouraging civil society participation through small grants and partnerships in mentorship, job placement, and psychosocial support can strengthen social resilience even further.

(5) Building a Culture of Evaluation and Evidence-Based Practice – Our review has identified the need to develop **national indicators** for measuring reintegration success beyond recidivism, including employment rates, housing stability, and community participation. In line with this, we place forward the argument for periodic independent evaluations of reintegration and prevention programs to ensure accountability and learning. Finally, we encourage the creation of a **national research observatory** on crime, radicalization, and social reintegration, linking academic expertise with policy implementation. To date, most of the academic research around these topics has been conducted by non-governmental organizations (predominantly the Centre for the Study of Democracy or the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee) and it lacks public visibility, recognition and support.

The broader theoretical implication of this study is that deradicalization and reintegration cannot be sustainably achieved through coercive or ideologically rigid frameworks. They must be grounded in *social trust, inclusion, and legitimacy*. From a criminological standpoint, this requires rethinking security as an inherently social construct - one that depends on the restoration of social bonds rather than their severance.

For Bulgaria, this means embedding social work and community engagement at the heart of security governance. As a profession, social work possesses the unique capacity to translate abstract policy into lived practice,

mediating between state institutions and the social realities of vulnerable individuals. Empowering this field is therefore not only a matter of professional development but also of **national resilience and democratic consolidation**.

The reintegration of former offenders, especially those associated with extremism, represents a test of any society's capacity for justice, empathy, and collective responsibility. Bulgaria's challenge is to move beyond symbolic compliance with European standards toward building a coherent, humane, and contextually grounded model of reintegration.

By learning from international experience while acknowledging domestic realities, Bulgaria can develop an approach that not only prevents recidivism but also strengthens social cohesion. Reintegration, when understood as both a *criminological strategy* and a *moral commitment*, becomes a cornerstone of genuine security-anchored not in fear, but in the conviction that inclusion is the most durable form of prevention.

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