

Implementing an Integrated Sentence Management Approach in Albanian Prisons: A Case Study of Drenova Penitentiary Institution

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Abstract: *This paper examines the implementation of an integrated sentence management system at Drenova Prison in Albania, following a 2023 Council of Europe assessment that recommended moving away from security-only models toward a risk-based, behavior-driven framework. The study draws on document analysis of DPB Order No. 109, interviews with security, psychosocial, and legal staff, and data from a pilot classification of 71 prisoners. Results showed 59 prisoners assigned to basic level, six to standard, and six to extended. While the prison has foundational strengths, i.e. legal infrastructure and skilled psychosocial staff, significant weaknesses persist: untrained officers, rehabilitation programs lacking success indicators, and no professional supervision for psychosocial teams. The paper offers a ten-step action plan including differentiated privileges, formalized personal officer and case manager roles, and an appeal mechanism. This case study provides a replicable framework for other Albanian prisons such as Fier, Peqin, and Rec/Shkodër.*

Keywords: Prison reform, integrated sentence management, internal classification, Albania, Drenova Prison

INTRODUCTION

For a long time, Albanian prisons ran on a simple idea: prisoners went into high, ordinary, or low security sections, and that was the end of it. The General Directorate of Prisons (DPB) had the legal categories in place, but no one really connected security with rehabilitation. That changed in 2023, when the Council of Europe Office in Tirana brought in a consultant named John McGuckin to take a hard look at the system. His main finding was blunt: security and case management have to work together, not separately.

McGuckin suggested a new way of sorting prisoners—not just by the crime they committed, but by actual risk level, behavior inside the walls, and whether the prisoner took part in

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constructive programs. He proposed three levels: basic (high risk), standard (ordinary risk), and extended (low risk). This approach is not new in Europe; it follows the "incentives and earned privileges" model that many countries already use. The DPB agreed and issued Order No. 109 in March 2023. Drenova Prison was chosen to try it first.

This paper examines what happened next. The author spent time at Drenova, talked to staff, read the files, and watched the pilot run on 71 prisoners. The findings are mixed. Some things worked. A lot did not. The goal here is to walk through the process step by step, show where the gaps are, and offer realistic recommendations—not just for Drenova, but for other Albanian prisons that might try the same thing.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Shift from Retribution to Risk-Needs-Responsivity (RNR)

Modern penology has largely moved away from pure punishment toward the Risk-Needs-Responsivity (RNR) model. This framework argues that correctional interventions work best when they match the prisoner's risk level, address the specific needs that drive criminal behavior, and adapt to how the individual learns (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). Albania's old system—high, ordinary, and low security—mostly ignored responsivity and rarely considered dynamic risk factors that can change over time.

Council of Europe Guidelines

The Council of Europe's Recommendation Rec(2006)2 on the European Prison Rules makes a clear point: prison management should be safe and orderly, but it must also offer activities and programs that address prisoners' needs (Council of Europe, 2006). The "incentives and earned privileges" model flows directly from this thinking. Prisoners earn better conditions by behaving well and participating in programs. That is exactly what Drenova's new classification system tries to do.

Integrated Sentence Management

Integrated sentence management combines security classification with case management. Unlike static security levels that rarely change, dynamic classification allows prisoners to move up—or down—based on their behavior and program participation. A critical piece of this model is the personal officer system: a designated security officer who builds a trusting relationship with a specific prisoner (McGuckin, 2023). Without that relationship, the author argues, classification becomes just paperwork.

Gaps in the Albanian Context

Before 2023, Albania lacked several key elements: a formal personal officer system, quantitative indicators for rehabilitation program success, an appeal mechanism for prisoners who disagreed with their classification, and any form of professional supervision for psychosocial staff. This study identifies those gaps and offers concrete ways to fill them.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A single-case study design (Yin, 2018) was used for Drenova Prison, a high-security facility in Korçë County with a stated capacity of 380 prisoners—though at the time of the pilot, it held 471. The case study included three components:

- Document analysis of DPB Order No. 109, draft recategorization orders, and McGuckin's original 2023 report.
- Semi-structured interviews conducted in July 2024 with security staff (n=12), psychosocial workers (n=8), legal sector employees (n=2), and institutional leadership (n=3).
- An in-depth interview with the Deputy General Director of Prisons in December 2024.
- Pilot classification data from 71 convicts.

Participants and Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to capture key stakeholders directly involved in the classification process. Staff were included if they had worked in security, psychosocial, or legal sectors at Drenova for more than six months. All 71 prisoners in the pilot were assessed, but the paper focuses primarily on staff experiences and procedural issues.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data from interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The author read through interview notes multiple times, identified recurring themes—lack of training, confusion about roles, meaningless programs—and organized findings around those problems. Quantitative indicators from the pilot are reported descriptively.

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

Context and Pilot Classification Results

Drenova Prison began applying integrated classification in March 2024 based on Order No. 109. At the start of the pilot, the prison held 471 prisoners, well over its capacity of 380. Of those, 71 were selected for initial assessment. Table 1 shows how they were classified.

Table 1: Pilot Classification Results (March 2024)

Classification Level	Number of Prisoners	Action Taken
Basic Level (High Risk)	59	Remained at Drenova Prison
Standard Level (Ordinary Risk)	6	5 transferred to Rec Prison (Shkodër); 1 did not consent
Extended/Advanced Level (Low Risk)	6	Not transferred (no semi-open or open section available)

Source: DPB internal data, March 2024

The process worked like this: the legal sector studied each prisoner's file and applied the criteria. Then the psychosocial sector assessed behavior, communication, and any disciplinary violations. Finally, the institution director signed a proposal, and the DPB made the final transfer decisions.

Staffing Capacities

The psychosocial sector had nine positions: seven social workers and two psychologists. One position was unfilled. The legal sector had two employees—one lawyer and one cartel officer—and even those had vacancies. The security sector had 136 employees working the internal regime, but they were stretched thin. The author was told repeatedly that filling vacancies should be a priority for the entire prison system.

Strengths Identified

Several strengths stood out. First, the pilot had actually been done—71 prisoners went through the full process. Second, staff at both managerial and implementation levels understood what the classification system was trying to do. Third, the prison had enough space and infrastructure to run at least two levels (basic and standard) separately. Fourth, the psychosocial team included real professionals—social workers and psychologists with the right competencies to act as case managers and assessors.

Weaknesses Identified

But the weaknesses were just as clear. Staff had not been trained for daily management of classification levels. No one knew how to integrate classification into a sentence plan or link it to case management. The prison claimed to offer 22 rehabilitation programs, but apart from nine-year basic education, none had quantitative or qualitative success indicators. A number of programs could easily be grouped together—sports programs, for example—but instead they were listed separately. On top of that, no specialist can reasonably lead more than two rehabilitation programs. Time does not allow it, and the specialization required is too deep.

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Finally, there was no professional supervision for psychosocial staff. They were doing the work, but no one was watching over their shoulder to help them do it better.

DISCUSSION

The Gap Between Policy and Practice

The DPB has the legal infrastructure in place. Order No. 109 exists. Draft recategorization orders have been written. But at Drenova, implementation has been fragmented. The legal sector starts the process. Psychosocial assesses. Security is supposed to manage daily. Yet no one meets regularly to coordinate. No unified case file exists. The author heard the same complaint from multiple staff members: "We don't know what the other sector is doing."

Table 2: Roles and Duties of Security Officers by Level (as proposed)

Role / Duty	Basic Level	Standard Level
Primary Objective	Security, safety, patrols, daily routine	Security plus supervision of constructive activities
Key Tasks	Accompany prisoners; check rooms/common areas; monitor calls/mail; manage discipline	Same as basic, plus more autonomy (e.g., room doors open 2 hours)
Personal Officer Duties	Build trust; listen to complaints; know sentence plan (dangerousness, needs)	Same as basic, plus more frequent positive reinforcement

Rehabilitation Program Overload and Quality Concerns

Twenty-two programs sound impressive on paper. But in practice, most of them are not real programs. They are activities. A true rehabilitation program has structure, a clear curriculum, and measurable outcomes. The author found that only the nine-year education program met that standard. The rest had no way to tell if anyone was actually improving. One social worker put it bluntly during an interview: "We count how many show up. That's it."

Table 3 below shows what program success indicators could look like if Drenova took this seriously.

Table 3: Proposed Program Success Indicators

Program Type	Quantitative Indicator	Time Frame
Anger Management	40% reduction in violent incidents among participants	6 months
Vocational Training (e.g., carpentry)	80% pass rate on certification exam	1 year
Basic Education (9-year)	Completion of grade level with 75% test score	Per semester

Differentiated Regimes as Incentives

For prisoners to care about moving from basic to standard level, the privileges have to be real and visible. Table 4 shows what the author recommends, based on Annex 1 of the original document and McGuckin's 2023 report.

Table 4: Proposed Differentiated Regimes – Basic vs. Standard Level

Privilege / Access	Basic Level	Standard Level
Daily ventilation hours	At least 2 hours	3 hours
Access to common areas	2 hours, accompanied	2 hours, door open (escorted movement)
Phone calls per month	At least 8 calls	8 calls
Visits per month	4 visits (1 hour each)	4 visits (1.5 hours each)
Library access	At least twice/week, 1 hour	At least twice/week, 1.5 hours
External employment	No	No (reserved for extended level)
Rewarding leave	No	Placed on waiting list
Early parole consideration	Not recommended	Placed on waiting list

Note: Extended/advanced level would include external employment and rewarding leave. Not implemented at Drenova due to lack of semi-open facilities.

The Missing Appeal Mechanism

A prisoner who disagrees with a classification decision currently has no formal way to challenge it. The draft DPB order on recategorization of high-security prisoners—still not approved as of December 2024—does include a complaints form. But that form is not being used. The author recommends attaching a standardized appeal form to the final DPB order and requiring a response within five days.

Recommendations

Capacity Development

The author offers the following recommendations based on identified needs:

Train prison police on personal officer roles, expectations, and boundary management. Organize workshops on integrating classification levels into sentence plans using real cases. Cut the program list from 22 to eight or nine. Require every program to have quantitative and qualitative success indicators. No specialist should lead more than two programs per year. Bring in external professional supervision for psychosocial staff. Train a small group of internal classification supervisors.

Procedural Changes

Revise Order No. 109. Add three things: the prisoner's right to appeal, clear duties for personal officers, and clear duties for case managers.

Changes at DPB and Drenova Level

Revise the General Prison Regulations and the Prison Police Regulations to formalize the personal officer role. Finalize and approve the draft order "On the internal recategorisation of high-security prisoners." That order must include differentiated regimes (see Table 4), review forms, and an appeal form. Make sure the order spells out specific criteria for each level: dangerousness, program participation, behavior, and attitude toward family and victims.

Extension to Other Institutions

Assessments done by John McGuckin at Fier, Peqin, and Ali Demi prisons—plus the author's work at Drenova—suggest no objective reason why other Albanian prisons cannot adopt integrated classification. But the challenges are not physical. They are about mindset. Prison staff need to see rehabilitation as their job, not just security. Sentence plans need SMART objectives: specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound. And risk assessment needs to cover more than just the original crime. Table 5 lists the risk categories that should matter for classification.

Table 5: Types of Risk to Be Managed in Classification

Risk Category	Examples
Danger to public/society	Violent crime, sexual crime, other crime
Danger within prison	Other prisoners, staff
Security risks	Escape or attempt, control problems
Vulnerability risks	Mental/physical disability, LGBTI, marginalized minorities
Self-harm	Suicide attempts, self-harm
Specific groups	Children, women, elderly

Source: Adapted from McGuckin (2023)

The DPB plans to extend the system to Rec Prison in Shkodër. At the time of writing, no implementation data were available from that site.

CONCLUSION

The integrated sentence management approach at Drenova Prison is a real step forward for Albania. The pilot showed it can be done. The infrastructure exists. Some of the staff are ready. But without systematic training, without real program indicators, without supervision, and without an appeal process, the system will not work the way it should. The DPB needs to finalize the recategorization order, attach the forms, and start monitoring. If that happens, Drenova can become a model for Fier, Peqin, and Rec/Shkodër. If not, it will be just another good idea that never quite landed.

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