

Policies for Prevention and Control of Violence

Author: Desislav Traikov

Abstract: The sociological framework of the study combines structural, critical and institutional analysis with empirical data from Bulgaria (Ministry of Justice, Helsinki Committee, NGO "Bulgarian Prison Reforms"). The restrictive conditions are in the object of the study - places of deprivation of liberty. The conditions in prisons are analysed, as well as the prevention and control of violence. Visual Model "Cycle of Institutional Violence shows that violence does not end with prison – it is exported back into society, which creates recidivism, marginalization. Bulgaria has taken a number of steps to reduce violence in prisons: Reforms in prison administration; Introduction of an independent control mechanism; Cooperation with non-governmental organizations; Training and education of personnel.

Keywords: power, violence, prison, prevention

JEL: A14, K14

Introduction

Violence in places of deprivation of liberty is a serious problem both from the point of view of the protection of human rights and the effectiveness of the penal system. Bulgaria, as a member state of the European Union and a party to the European Convention on Human Rights, is obliged to guarantee humane treatment of those deprived of liberty and to take measures to prevent ill-treatment, humiliation and violence. Despite the efforts of the institutions, practice shows that cases of physical, psychological and institutional violence continue to be a challenge for the Bulgarian penitentiary system.

1. Sociological theories of violence

It is important to consider violence as a social and structural regularity - a product of inequalities, power relations and institutional practices. Sociological and structural theories of violence we will consider functionalism, conflict theories, the theory of structural violence (Galtung, 1969), feminist and critical approaches, with examples from Bulgaria (poverty, gender violence, institutional discrimination. Sociological approaches consider it as a product of social structures, institutions and inequalities. Violence is perceived not as a deviation, but as an integral element of the social order. Sociological theories appear as the central part of the dissertation chapter. Here the focus will be on macro-sociological explanations of violence: structural, institutional, cultural and symbolic, as well as on the power and economic mechanisms that support it. I will include examples and empirical data from Bulgaria. As Pierre Bourdieu (1998) emphasizes, violence is often "symbolic" – hidden behind the language, norms and institutions that legitimize subordination. Thus,

sociological theories go beyond visible acts of aggression to analyze invisible forms of structural coercion embedded in society.

Table 1. Types of violence according to the conflict perspective

Type of violence	Source	Purpose	Example in Bulgarian context
Economic	Unequal distribution of resources	Subordination of the working classes	Working poor, low wages, insecure employment contracts
Political	Monopoly on coercion	Control over opposition and protest	Police violence, media restrictions
Ideological	Dominant culture	Legitimization of inequalities	Media educational stereotypes

Johan Galtung introduced the concept of structural violence, describing the systemic social and institutional mechanisms that lead to inequalities and suffering, without an overt act of aggression. “Structural violence exists when human needs are blocked by social structures.” (Galtung, 1969, p. 171)

In Bulgarian conditions, examples of structural violence include:

- poverty and social isolation (especially among the Roma population);
- inaccessible healthcare – according to NSI (2023) over 30% of people with chronic diseases do not receive adequate treatment due to financial reasons;
- unequal access to education – 17% of children drop out of school before the age of 16;
- gender inequality and femicide, often tolerated by institutions.

These forms of “invisible” violence are systematically reproduced through economic and political mechanisms, rather than through individual acts.

In an empirical context, structural violence in Bulgaria is expressed in:

Economic vulnerability

- 21% of Bulgarians live below the poverty line (NSI, 2023).
- This leads to increased exposure to violence – in the family, at work and in institutions.

Institutional violence

- Reports by the Bulgarian Humanitarian Centre (2022) reveal systemic abuses in social homes, including physical and psychological violence against children and adults.
- The Ombudsman (2023) reports over 1,500 complaints related to police violence and violations of rights in detention.

Educational and cultural violence

- Research by CID (2021) shows that Roma students are victims of discrimination and symbolic violence through exclusion and segregation.
- This reproduces social marginalization across generations.

After the analysis, I put the types of violence in a Summary table, as follows:

Table 2. Levels of social violence (according to Galtung and Bourdieu, adapted for the Bulgarian context)

Level	Type of violence	Manifestations in Bulgaria
Micro	Physical / psychological	Domestic violence, school aggression
Meso	Institutional / administrative	Police force, social policies
Macro	Structural / cultural	Inequalities, discrimination, patriarchal models

Sociological theories reveal that violence is embedded in social structures

Sociological theories reveal that violence is embedded in social structures and power relations. It functions as a mechanism of social control, sustained by institutions, culture, and economic dependencies. The Bulgarian context clearly demonstrates this through the interplay between poverty, patriarchy, and institutional inefficiency.

Critical and postmodern theories of violence reject the idea that it can be understood only by observing its overt manifestations.

Instead, they examine the discursive, cultural, and media forms of power through which violence is normalized and reproduced. “Violence is not only in what happens, but also in what remains invisible.” — Žižek (2008, p. 9). These theories propose a radical expansion of the concept of violence—from physical action to structural discourse and symbolic domination, woven into everyday life and communication.

Foucault (1975) introduced the understanding that power and violence are not concentrated only in the state, but are distributed in a “microphysical” way throughout the social fabric — schools, hospitals, prisons, families. He analyzed how disciplinary institutions produce obedience through surveillance, norms, and self-control — the so-called panopticism. “The most effective form of violence is that in which the subject himself exercises over himself the control that power has demanded.” — (Foucault, 1975, p. 201). Applications can also be made to how panoptic mechanisms manifest themselves in contemporary Bulgaria through:

- bureaucratic control over citizens (social institutions, National Revenue Agency, Ministry of Interior);
- self-censorship in the media under political and economic pressure;
- educational and labor regimes that encourage obedience rather than criticism.

Thus, violence becomes a disciplinary norm, not an exception — in agreement with Foucault.

Judith Butler proposes a concept of embodied and performative violence—the violence that arises from social expectations about which bodies are “worthy of life,” “normal,” or “visible.” She argues that certain groups of bodies (women, LGBTI+, migrants, the poor) become objects of permissible violence because the social order does not fully recognize them as subjects. “To be recognized is to be protected from violence; the refusal of recognition is a form of violence in itself.” — (Butler, 2004, p. 26)

In the Bulgarian context, this means:

- Hate speech against Roma and LGBTI+ people in public space (Media Coalition, 2023) is a form of symbolic violence that creates legitimacy for discrimination.
- Political figures often use nationalist and sexist discourses that “normalize” aggression against minorities.
- Social networks are becoming an arena for “performative violence” — public humiliation, online harassment, and digital hate culture.

Slavoj Žižek makes an important distinction between subjective violence (the acts we see—crimes, beatings, wars) and objective violence, which is embedded in the very social structure—inequalities, bureaucracy, economic exploitation. “Real violence is not in what violates the norm, but in the norm itself.” — (Žižek, 2008, p. 15)

For the Bulgarian reality, this is:

- Corruption and clientelism function as forms of systemic violence, as they deprive citizens of access to justice and resources.
- Media manipulations and the language of “fear” regarding refugees or poor groups create a constant atmosphere of control and anxiety.
- According to a Gallup International Survey (2022), 68% of Bulgarians believe that “violence is an inevitable part of politics” – which demonstrates the normalization of systemic violence.

Ulrich Beck (1992) introduced the concept of a “risk society”, in which new forms of violence are linked to globalization, technology and environmental threats.

Violence is no longer only manifested locally, but through abstract risks – pollution, disasters, digital manipulation, economic crises.

In Bulgaria, the risks of globalized violence are expressed in:

- Energy and environmental insecurity (air pollution, industrial accidents) create forms of environmental violence against communities.
- Digital surveillance and abuse of personal data (e.g. personal information leaks in 2019) constitute technological violence – a form of control over citizens’ behavior.
- Fake news and disinformation are becoming a tool for psychological manipulation and social division.

The summary table contains both groups of concepts: critical and postmodern concepts:

Table 3. Critical and postmodern concepts of violence.

Author / theory	Type of violence	Mechanism	Application to Bulgaria
M. Foucault	Disciplinary / institutional	Control through surveillance and norms	Institutional bureaucracy, self-censorship
J. Butler	Symbolic/ performative	Exclusion of “unrecognized bodies	Hate speech discrimination against LGBTI+
S. Žižek	Systemic / ideological	Violence inscribed in the norm	Political aggression, corruption, media violence
W. Beck	Technological / ecological	Global risks and	Ecological crises, digital control

2.Synthetic model and empirical analysis of violence in Bulgaria

A synthetic model of violence will be developed further.

2.1. Synthetic model of violence as a social process

Modern sociological theories are united around the understanding that violence is a multidimensional social process in which interconnected levels operate:

Table 4. Levels and mechanisms of violence

Level of analysis	Type of violence	Main mechanism	Examples from Bulgaria
Micro	Interpersonal	Physical and emotional aggression	Domestic violence, violence among students
Meso	Institutional	Discipline, control, hierarchy	Police violence, prisons, schools
Macro	Structural	Inequality, poverty, discrimination	Economic exploitation, social marginalization
Meta	Cultural and symbolic	Language, media, digital technologies	Online hatred, media aggression, hate speech

(adapted from Galtung, 1969; Walby, 2013).

This integrative model shows that violence is not an isolated phenomenon, but a reproducible social mechanism that permeates all spheres of social life – from family dynamics to state power.

2.2. Violence in prisons as a concentrated social microcosm

. The prison as a “total institution”

Erving Goffman defines the prison as a “total institution” – a social system that isolates the individual from the outside world and exercises complete control over his daily life. In this context, violence is not a deviation, but a structural element of maintaining order. “The total institution produces obedience through systematic deprivation of autonomy – a process that is itself a form of violence.”— (Goffman, 1961, p. 48)

The Bulgarian prison: a social diagnosis

Bulgarian prisons have been a problematic indicator of institutional violence for decades. The reports of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC, 2023) and the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT, 2022) indicate:

Table 5. Indicators of violence in Bulgarian prisons

Indicator	Value (2023)	Source
Prison overcrowding	115–130% of capacity	CPT, 2022
Incidents of physical violence between prisoners	~47%	BHC, 2023
Reported cases of violence by guards	21% of respondents	BHC, 2023
Self-harm and suicide attempts	68 cases per year	MP, 2023
Access to psychological help	Below 30%	MP, 2023

(summary data, 2022–2023).

These data reveal that institutional and interpersonal violence in prisons are intertwined: lack of human resources, poor conditions, corruption and informal hierarchies

lead to a “parallel order” in which prisoners themselves exercise power through fear and coercion.

Prison is an emblematic example of Foucault’s concept of disciplinary power – a space where surveillance, rules and sanctions shape a “subordinate body”. In Bulgarian conditions, this manifests itself through:

- Constant control and surveillance, without guarantees for human rights;
- Hierarchical dependence between staff and prisoners, often overflowing into abuse;
- Deprivation of autonomy, leading to psychological degradation.

Orundzhua and Patterson (Patterson, 1982) introduced the concept of “social death” – a process in which the individual is deprived of social recognition and identity.

In prison, this manifests itself through institutionalized depersonalization:

the prisoner becomes a “number”, loses his social roles and becomes the subject of systematic violence, both physical and symbolic.

Power microsystems in Bulgarian prisons

According to field research by the NGO “Bulgarian Prison Reforms” (2021):

- over 60% of prisoners describe “informal power structures” (prison hierarchy, informal punishments, “internal order”);
- there is a “territorial distribution”, which replicates the social logic of criminal groups;
- physical violence is socially regulated, not chaotic – it serves to maintain order and status.

2.3. Main forms of violence in places of deprivation of liberty

In Bulgarian prisons and detention centers, violence can manifest itself in several main forms:

- Physical violence – beatings, unlawful use of force by employees or fellow prisoners;
- Psychological violence – threats, humiliation, isolation, harassment;
- Sexual violence – less frequently reported due to stigma and fear of retaliation;
- Institutional violence – manifestations of inhumane living conditions, overcrowding, lack of access to medical care, which can be considered a form of systemic violence.

2.4. Empirical analysis: violence as a social system in prison

Model of violence in prison

The schematic description of the mechanism of reproduction of violence in prison includes the following elements:

1. Institutional deficits → poor conditions, overcrowding
2. Social isolation → psychological tension, alienation
3. Internal hierarchy → legitimization of violence as “order”
4. Normalization of aggression → violence is perceived as a tool for survival
5. Recidivism and social disintegration → reproduction of violence outside prison

Thus, the prison becomes a “social laboratory of violence”, where the state exercises power, but at the same time gives rise to mechanisms that continue to produce violence in society.

3. Regulatory framework

Bulgarian legislation regulates the rights and obligations of those deprived of their liberty through several key acts:

- Law on the Execution of Sentences and Detention in Custody (LEPD) – a basic document that regulates the conditions for serving sentences and measures to prevent violence;
- Regulations for the implementation of the LEPD – defines the specific mechanisms for control, monitoring and sanctions in cases of violence;
- European Convention for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (ECPT) – an international standard that obliges states to prevent all forms of violence in prisons;
- Code of Ethics for Prison Staff – regulates the conduct of supervisory and security staff in order to prevent abuse of power.

The Bulgarian state, according to analyses by the Institute for Legal Studies (2022), suffers from a legitimacy deficit, in which power is often exercised through coercion, rather than trust. This leads to:

- abuse of positions of power (corruption, pressure, clientelism);
- police violence – especially during protests (BHC, 2021);
- legal uncertainty, which generates fear and a sense of helplessness.

“Institutions that should limit violence often become its source.” — (Helsinki Committee, 2022)

Media power and discursive violence

The media function as a modern apparatus of power that structures perceptions of violence. Sensationalism, hate speech, and manipulation create symbolic aggression that maintains public apathy. This is “power through fear” – a form of control through emotions, not arguments.

Power and Violence in Prison

As the analysis in the previous section shows, prisons are a miniature of state power – a concentrated form of discipline and exclusion. There the paradox of power manifests itself: the state seeks to “repair” through violence, but reproduces violence through its own organization. This confirms Foucault’s thesis that control does not eliminate violence, but institutionalizes it.

Empirical Correlations: Power, Violence, and Trust

Data from Eurobarometer (2023) and Gallup International (2024) show a clear correlation between the perception of power and violence in Bulgaria:

Table 6. Perception of power and violence in Bulgaria

Indicator	Percentage	Interpretation
Citizens who believe that “the state does not protect them from violence”	63%	Low trust in institutional authority
Citizens who justify a “strong hand” in government	58%	Seeking authoritarian power in the face of social fear
Citizens who have experienced institutional humiliation (police, administration)	41%	Symbolic violence through bureaucracy and inequality

(based on Eurobarometer data, 2023)

These data confirm that distrust in authority is a function of experienced violence – real or symbolic. The more power is exercised through fear, the less its legitimacy.

Dialectics of power and violence

The sociological synthesis can be summarized in the following logical scheme:

The dialectic of power and violence can be described as follows:

- Power creates order → order requires control → control generates violence → violence undermines legitimacy → need for a new order.

This is a self-reinforcing cycle, visible in the Bulgarian political and institutional reality, in which violence becomes a substitute for the social contract.

Violence as a mirror of power

1. Power and violence are inseparable, but their relationship varies from direct coercion to invisible cultural pressure.

2. Bulgarian society is an example of a “structural tension” between authority and violence – the lack of trust in power leads to a cyclical need for violent mechanisms of order.

3. Prisons, the police, the bureaucracy and the media are institutional arenas where this dynamic manifests itself most clearly.

4. To break this cycle, democratization of power is necessary – through transparency, participation and education, which replace fear with trust.

The author’s thesis from the sociological synthesis can be formulated as follows: “To understand violence means to understand the way in which society constructs its power.”

4. Policies and measures for the prevention of violence

4.1. Legislative and institutional initiatives

Bulgaria has taken a number of steps to reduce violence in prisons:

- Reforms in prison administration – training of employees on topics such as human rights, conflict management and non-violent communication;
- Introduction of an independent control mechanism – through the Ombudsman of the Republic of Bulgaria, which functions as a National Preventive Mechanism (NPM) under Art. 3 of the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention against Torture;
- Cooperation with non-governmental organizations – for example, the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC) carries out

4.2. Training and education of personnel

One of the key elements of prevention is the qualification of supervisory and administrative personnel. Programs of the Ministry of Justice include

4.3.. Reforms and international pressure

After a series of criticisms from the Council of Europe and the CPT, Bulgaria is undertaking partial reforms:

- improving housing conditions (pilot project in the prison in Stara Zagora, 2021);
- introducing mediation programs and group therapy (Ministry of Justice, 2022);
- increasing the number of social workers and psychologists.

Limitations and failures

Regardless of the reforms, the lack of sustainable funding, low staff pay and a culture of mistrust lead to the reproduction of violence. Even reform programs often face cynical institutional resistance - some staff perceive the "human attitude" as a weakness.

Conclusion

Violence in Bulgarian prisons is a concentrated form of social pathology, in which:

- state violence (through control and isolation) and
- internal prison violence (through hierarchy and fear) are intertwined in a self-reproducing system.

This phenomenon confirms the main theses of Foucault and Goffman:

Power and violence are not simply instruments of punishment, but mechanisms of social organization.

A Visual Model can be made: "Cycle of Institutional Violence", which would include: State Coercion → Isolation → Identity Degradation → Informal Hierarchy → Reproduction of Violence → Social Disintegration after Release → State Coercion again.

This closed cycle and social distrust shows that violence does not end with prison – it is exported back into society, which creates recidivism, marginalization.

Empirical data and sociological analysis show that the Bulgarian prison does not simply punish, but reproduces violence as a social norm. This requires a paradigm shift –

from a repressive institution to a restorative social environment, where the goal is not control but reintegration. Otherwise, prisons will remain a mirror of the darkest mechanisms of power described by Foucault and Žižek, and a symbol of our social inequality.

References

1. Veber, M. (2004). Politika kak prizvanie i profesiya (v chastnost monopoliya na nasilie).
2. Galüp Interneshünül. (2024). Sotsialni naglasi i vüzpriyatie za nasilie v Bülğariya.
3. Georgieva, S. (2021). Sotsialno-psihologicheski aspekti v analizite na vlastta. UE Varna (godishnik).
4. Gofman, Ū. (2002). Azüt v ezhednevniya zhivot. Sofiya: Iztok-Zapad
5. Žižek, S. (2008). *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*. Picador.
6. Fuko, M. (1996). Nadziravane i nakazvane. Sofiya: Kritika i khumanizüm.
7. Bülğarski Khelzinski komitet. (2022). Doklad za nasiliето v institutsiite i zatvorite
8. Helsinki Committee – Bulgaria. (2023). Annual Human Rights Report.
9. Ombudsman na Republika Bülğariya, (2023). Doklad za domashното i institutsionalното nasilie.
10. Ministerstvo na pravosuđieto. (2023). Natsionalen doklad za süstoyaniето na mestata za lishavane ot svoboda.
11. Beck, U. (1992). *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. Sage.
12. Bourdieu, P. (1998). *Practical reason: On the theory of action*. Stanford University Press.
13. Butler, J. (2004). *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. Verso.
14. Butler, J. (2015). *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Harvard University Press.
15. CPT. (2022). *Report to the Bulgarian Government on the Visit to Bulgaria*. Council of Europe.
16. Foucault, M. (1975). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Gallimard
17. Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Vintage Books. (Original work published 1975)
18. Galtung, J. (1969). Violence, Peace, and Peace Research. *Journal of Peace Research*, 6(3), 167–191.
19. Gaventa, J. (1980). *Power and powerlessness: Quiescence and rebellion in an Appalachian valley*. University of Illinois Press.
20. Gaventa, J. (2006). Finding the spaces for change: A power analysis. *IDS Bulletin*, 37(6), 23–33.
21. Goffman, E. (1961). *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. Anchor
22. Patterson, O. (1982). *Slavery and Social Death*. Harvard University Press.
23. Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and society: An outline of interpretive sociology* (G. Roth & C. Wittich, Eds.). University of California Press
24. Ombudsman of the Republic of Bulgaria. Walby, S. (2013). *Violence and Society: Towards a New Sociology*. Sage