

The Gender Factor in Bulgarian Populism: Unifying or Dividing

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1. Introduction

Over the past decade, there has been a notable upsurge in the popularity of populist parties and leaders worldwide, including within Member States of the European Union (EU). These parties' and leaders' agendas, approaches, and messages have captured the attention of significant portions of the population, often creating profound ruptures in societies and intensifying social polarization and intergroup hostility. Countries with relatively young or flawed democracies seem to be particularly susceptible to the infiltration of populist narratives. In these cases, populists from both the right and left ends of the political spectrum exploit matters of great public concern to acquire political power and advance their interests.

Largely unexpectedly, in numerous countries, legislative, policy, and advocacy efforts to address malicious phenomena like gender-based violence (GBV) and domestic violence (DV) have become a target for attack by populist actors. Rather than emphasizing the need for preventing violence and protecting victims, their

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spokespersons have diverted the conversation towards preserving traditional family structures and values, framing this as a defense against an allegedly nefarious “gender ideology”.

This paper aims to explore how efforts to counter GBV are presented in discourse produced by right-wing and left-wing political parties in Bulgaria and whether gender concepts intertwine with populist messages within the said discourse¹. We will briefly touch upon the discussions surrounding the failed ratification of the Istanbul Convention (IC) in 2018 before delving into more recent developments, specifically the debates on proposed amendments to the Protection against Domestic Violence Act (PDVA) in late 2022 and early 2023. These debates were marked by the spread of misinformation about the goals of the Convention, as well as aggressive campaigning against initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality and eradicating violence against women (VAW) and DV. Falsehoods, often perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes, were propagated by political and public figures through traditional and social media channels². Victim-support organizations and activists were fervently attacked by opponents of the IC, which “stifled the activity of major actors in the ecosystem for protecting victims”³.

¹ Disclaimer: The quotations from political figures are included in this paper to assist the research effort and answer the research questions by illustrating the discourse surrounding right-wing populism. It is important to note that the inclusion of these quotes does not imply an endorsement of the views expressed by the individuals quoted. The intention is to analyze them within the context of this research. The author condemns all forms of violence, gender-based violence, violence against women, and abuse, both online and offline.

² Mijatović D., Report of the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe following her visit to Bulgaria on 25-29 November 2019, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, <https://rm.coe.int/report-on-the-visit-to-bulgaria-from-25-to-29-november-2019-by-dunja-m/16809cde16>, 4.

³ Ilcheva M., *Bulgaria and the Istanbul Convention – Law, Politics and Propaganda vs. the Rights of Victims of Gender-based Violence*, in *Open Journal for*

Bankov has identified the following themes as widely utilized in anti-IC campaigns and the discourse in social media, televised journalism, journals, magazines, etc.: (1) Religious, (2) Traditionalist/family/patriarchal/nationalist, (3) Immorality, (4) Pseudo-scientific and scientific, (5) “Mercantilist”, (6) Conspiracy, (7) Absurd/ridicule, (8) Juridical paradoxes⁴. He concludes that these themes were cemented in a “new cultural online emotionality”, which became a natural ally to populist storytelling, which sealed the fate of the IC in the country⁵.

Our research is based on the conjecture that right-wing and left-wing populism in Bulgaria tend to converge in terms of the gender-related political discourse they generate.

2. Conceptual framework

Before focusing on Bulgaria, it is crucial to explore the definitions of populism, the characteristics of right-wing and left-wing populism, and examine several key concepts related to gender that are often susceptible to manipulative interpretations by populist actors.

A widely used definition of populism belongs to Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, who define populism as “a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’”⁶. Importantly, they add that “populist actors combine

Legal Studies, 2020, 3, 1, 49-68, 62.

⁴ Bankov K., *Cyberbullying and hate speech in the debate around the ratification of the Istanbul convention in Bulgaria: a semiotic analysis of the communication dynamics*, in *Social Semiotics*, 2020, 30, 3, 344-34, 357.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 361.

⁶ Mudde C., Rovira Kaltwasser C., *Vox populi or vox masculini? Populism and gender in Northern Europe and South America*, in *Patterns of Prejudice*, 2015, 49, 1-2, 16-36, 18.

their populism with other ideologies, such as other thin-centred ideologies like nationalism or thick ideologies like socialism”⁷. An appropriate example would be the coexistence on the French political scene of the right-wing National Front, led by Marine Le Pen, and the relatively new left-wing La France Insoumise, launched by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, both of which skillfully employ populist messages to attract supporters⁸. It is precisely with respect to the National Front that Mudde notes that many populist radical right parties “reject the left-right distinction as obsolete, arguing that they are, in the terms of the French National Front (FN), “neither left, nor right, but French”⁹. This seems to be consistent with the observation that there is an “ongoing realignment of the political scene: a shift from the left-right continuum to a division between cosmopolitan liberals and conservative populists”¹⁰. Characteristic of populists is their appealing to people’s emotions, such as fear or excitement, as well as the use of simple slogans and sensationalistic language¹¹.

In recent times, there has been a growing trend among populist parties in Europe to oppose various aspects related to gender vehemently. This new tactic fortifies their overall political strategy, thus thickening their thin-centered ideology. According to Graff

⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁸ Soyez P., *The two faces of French populism*, in *The Strategist*, April 20, 2017, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/two-faces-french-populism/>.

⁹ Mudde C., *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe Today*, in *Transformations of Populism in Europe and the Americas: History and Recent Tendencies*, ed. by J. Abromeit, Y. Norman, G. Marotta, B. María Chesterton, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2016, 295-307, 296.

¹⁰ Graff A., Korolczuk E., *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment*, London and New York, Routledge, 2022, 167.

¹¹ Caiani M., *Come misurare il populismo*, in *Il Mulino*, aprile 2020, 1, 151-164, 152.

and Korolczuk, “anti-genderism is best seen as a brand of populist discourse”¹², whereby “Western liberal elites are equated with the global political and economic elite; neoliberalism as a source of suffering and injustice is equated with individualism as a value system and ideological project; population and gender equality policies are interpreted as a new phase of global colonialism”¹³. The march against the “gender ideology” has brought together large portions of the populist right and religious fundamentalist movements, thus becoming “the ‘symbolic glue’ (Kováts and Põim, 2015) behind which occur the attacks on the feminist project of equality and social justice (Verloo and Paternotte, 2018)”¹⁴.

Examining the channels and the mechanisms through which anti-gender messages and narratives multiply, especially in today’s world of fast and often anonymous communication, is crucial. Graff observes that these ideas “spread through endless repetition, through traditional media and social media, disguised as common-sense truths and alarmist calls to action”¹⁵. The author importantly notes that a topic frequently exploited in anti-gender campaigns is the child in danger¹⁶, often strongly intertwined with long-contested issues – legal abortion, same-sex marriage, contraception, sex education, and gender-equality education in schools¹⁷. Prominently, in several EU countries, aggressive anti-gender campaigns, sometimes employing false information, have managed to

¹² Graff A., Korolczuk E., *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment*, 56.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹⁴ Donà A., *What’s gender got to do with populism?*, in *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 2020, 27, 3, 285-292, 289.

¹⁵ Graff A., *Anti-gender mobilization and right-wing populism*, in *The Routledge handbook of gender in Central-eastern Europe and Eurasia*, ed. by K. Fábíán, J. E. Johnson, & M. Lazda, London-New York, Routledge, 2022, 266-275, 267.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 267.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 269.

shift the political and public focus to misleading narratives, thus hampering efforts to coin laws and policies for preventing GBV and DV and protecting victims. This is very clear in the case of Bulgaria, as evidenced by the following sections.

Similar topics have made their way to debates in national parliaments in many EU Member States and the European Parliament (EP). Based on in-depth research on strategies of right-wing populists in opposing gender equality in the EP, Kantola and Lombardo conclude that i) gender equality issues are often intertwined with other “traditional” subjects, such as nativism, ii) studying them reveals the illiberal attitudes of these actors; iii) such rhetoric has the political impact of obstructing discussions about important gender policies, including abortion rights and the Istanbul Convention¹⁸. The authors have identified several strategies utilized by right populist parties: direct opposition (rejection of gender equality and references to gender ideology), as well as indirect opposition, manifested in Euroscepticism, bending gender towards other issues such as migration, depoliticization including through recourses to biology, and self-victimization¹⁹.

The next important thing to consider are the possible differences between anti-gender campaigns, often reverberated in populist discourse, in different EU countries. Graff discerns several critical features of such campaigns in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) countries, the first being that sometimes gender is linked to communism and the Soviet past through its association to “cultural Marxism”²⁰. The author rightly attributes the significant effective-

¹⁸ Kantola J., Lombardo E., *Strategies of right populists in opposing gender equality in a polarized European Parliament*, in *International Political Science Review*, 2021, 42, 5, 565-579, 566.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 570.

²⁰ Graff A., *Anti-gender mobilization and right-wing populism*, 271.

ness of anti-gender campaigns to the “relative weakness of women’s and LGBT movements and lack of institutional and cultural entrenchment of gender studies in the region”²¹. Furthermore, in CEE, anti-genderism is often seen as the defense of traditional Christian values and a marker of the East’s superiority over the West, while “only in CEE (and Italy) is anti-gender rhetoric used by ruling parties”²².

The works of both Kantola & Lombardo and Graff have provided valuable observations and built useful frameworks for analysis, which we will refer to during the analytical exercise presented in this paper.

The differences between populist political actors – attributable not only to their country of origin, its history, its political culture, and the robustness of democracy there but also to the demographics of their supporters and the issues of concern that are central to the political and social discourse at any given moment – should be explored as this might cast more light on the question “What does it mean to be a populist?”. Any such analysis might come to support Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser claim that “in practice the gender politics of populist actors are influenced by a combination of the national culture and accompanying ideology rather than by populist ideology itself”²³.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 271.

²² *Ibid.*, 272.

²³ Mudde C., Rovira Kaltwasser C., *Vox populi or vox masculini? Populism and gender in Northern Europe and South America*, 17.

3. The case of Bulgaria

In 2018, the Bulgarian Constitutional Court ruled that articles 3(c) and 4(3) of the IC were inconsistent with Bulgaria's constitution²⁴. In effect, this halted the process of the international document's ratification and it would not be an understatement to say that the decision dealt a blow to women's rights advocates, as the current national legislation cannot match the Convention in terms of proposed protection and prevention measures, while the changes made to the Criminal Code to make up for the failure to ratify have been described as cosmetic²⁵. The chain of events that led to the Constitutional Court's decision has been correctly described as a "perfect storm", an intermix of multiple occurrences – a formidable attack by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, calls for a referendum aimed at stalling ratification, by the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), a vicious disinformation campaign, fueled by foreign sources but well-absorbed by a large portion of the society, deteriorating media freedom and rule of law, as well as the decision by the Prime Minister Boyko Borissov to let the Court have the final word in order to balance between the European People's Party (which supported ratification) and his far-right coalition partners (which opposed it)²⁶. The Constitutional Court's decision renders the ratification of the IC impossible without making constitutional changes – a situation cemented by another Constitutional Court ruling. Decision 15 of 26 October 2021 states that as used (once) in the Constitution, the word "sex" should be understood only in

²⁴ Constitutional Court of Bulgaria, *Pevenue 13* [Decision No. 13], July 27, 2018, <https://www.constcourt.bg/bg/act-6340>.

²⁵ Vassileva R., *A Perfect Storm: The Extraordinary Constitutional Attack against the Istanbul Convention in Bulgaria*, in *Osteuropa Rech*, 2022, 68, 1, 78-96, 78-79.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 81-82.

its biological sense – a conclusion backed by a lengthy discussion of the historical importance ascribed by the Bulgarian nation to traditional values, exemplified by the home and the family, of the important historical role of Eastern Orthodoxy in preserving the national identity, as well as of the demographic crisis in the country prompted by the low number of newborns²⁷.

Equally irresolvable appears to be the purely linguistic problem surrounding the word “gender”. The term is very much known and does appear in political and legal terminology. For instance, the landmark EU Directive 2012/29/EU establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime of October 25, 2012, talks about gender-based violence, gender, gender expression, and gender identity²⁸. In the document’s Bulgarian version, the word is always translated as “пол” (*in Cyrillic*), also used to translate “sex”. The lack of two different terms for “gender” and “sex” is undoubtedly a challenge, exacerbated by a significant negative consequence of the anti-Istanbul Convention campaign – “gender” is now widely used as a parodic and derogatory noun to mean a person with no clear sexual orientation. Kovacheva offers a good account of the range of the word’s misuses – from a reference to someone belonging to the LGBTI+ community to a way to mock a person who opposes patriarchy or adopts a liberal worldview²⁹. In 2019, when a person referred to a policeman as “a

²⁷ Constitutional Court of Bulgaria, *Решение 15* [Decision No. 15], October 26, 2021, <https://www.constcourt.bg/bg/act-91732021>.

²⁸ Eur-Lex, DIRECTIVE 2012/29/EU OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 25 October 2012 establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime, and replacing Council Framework Decision 2001/220/JHA, 2012, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32012L0029>.

²⁹ Kovacheva R., *The Gender Danger: How the EU Became an Enemy of Traditional Values in Bulgaria*, in *The New Communication Revolution*, ed. by M.

gender”, the Plovdiv District Court ruled it a case of petty hooliganism³⁰. It will not be farfetched to conclude that in the Bulgarian context, the term “gender” has never been further from topics and concepts related to GBV, VAW, and DV as it is now.

A 2018 report claimed that one of the successful campaigns of Agenda Europe, a murky ultra-conservative association of individuals and organizations aimed at restoring the natural order in Europe, was against the IC in Bulgaria³¹. Discussing Poland, a more recent report noted that a frequent “companion” of calls for non-ratification or withdrawal from the IC is the opposition to sexuality education at school, motivated by the idea that it is an instrument for corrupting the children by exposing them to the “gender ideology”³². This talking point appears quite often in anti-gender and anti-IC statements of Bulgarian political actors as well and is not limited to national discourse. In 2019, in an EP debate on “Experiencing a backlash in women’s rights and gender equality in the EU,” Angel Dzhambazki³³ declared that “behind the pretext of equal opportunities, we are conducting scandalous propaganda for

Winiarska-Brodowska, Krakow, Uniwersytet Jagielloński – Instytut Dziennikarstwa, Mediów i Komunikacji Społecznej, 2023, 45-65, <https://shorturl.at/oAESZ>, 54-55.

³⁰ Mitov B., *Думата “джендър” еволюира до съдебно призната обида* [The word “gender” evolved into court-recognized offence], Svobodnaevropa.bg, March 13, 2019, <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/29817737.html>.

³¹ Datta N., *Restoring the Natural Order*, Epfweb.org, April 2018, https://www.epfweb.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/rtno__EN_epf_online_2021.pdf, 33.

³² Datta N., *Tip of the iceberg. Religious Extremist Funders against Human Rights for Sexuality and Reproductive Health in Europe 2009-2018*. EPF. June 2021, <https://www.epfweb.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/Tip%20of%20the%20Iceberg%20August%202021%20Final.pdf>, 8.

³³ As of July 2023, Angel Dzhambazki co-chairs the nationalist, conservative party IMRO – Bulgarian National Movement (IMRO – BNM; БМРО – Българско Национално Движение). In the European Parliament, he is a member of European Conservatives and Reformists.

the Istanbul Convention. Once again, the plenary of the European Parliament is used as a stage for these scandalous campaigns for intersex people”³⁴.

Very troubling is the fact that mainly due to insufficient political will, political crisis, and lack of significant social interest in the matter, the adoption of new and much-needed changes to PDVA has been delayed. Only at the end of May 2023, the Bulgarian Parliament adopted at first reading two bills to amend and supplement PDVA – one submitted by BSP and another by the former Prime Minister Borissov’s party GERB (Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria, Граждани за Европейско Развитие на България)³⁵. The contents of the bills, the civil society’s repeated calls for the government to step up the fight against DV, and the increasing cases of femicide in the country led to the resurfacing of anti-gender narratives, some misleading or outright untruthful, which were quickly devoured and processed by populist actors. It is their participation in the relevant discourse that we are to explore. Before that, the adopted research methods will be outlined.

4. Methodology

The study is based on desk research and qualitative content analysis of official party sources (party platforms, speeches during relevant parliamentary debates, public interviews of party leaders, and articles on the parties’ websites and posts on official social media profiles). Qualitative content analysis is described as a “method for describing the meaning of qualitative material in a systematic way” –

³⁴ Kantola J., Lombardo E., *Strategies of right populists in opposing gender equality in a polarized European Parliament*, 572-573.

³⁵ The Act amending and supplementing PDVA was finally adopted by the Parliament on July 21, 2023.

hence, it is systematic, flexible, and reduces data³⁶. When applying this method, “researchers usually illustrate the themes they identify with examples from the documents” they study³⁷.

The coding process was supported by the ATLAS.TI software and employed thematic codes, the majority of which were derived deductively, drawing upon the findings of previous research. Thus, they were formulated based on the primary messages conveyed by populists in the EP, as identified by Kantola and Lombardo, and the distinctive aspects of anti-gender discourse in CEE, as presented by Graff. Additionally, the themes were influenced by the various framing dynamics discussed by Kantola and Lombardo, such as “stretching” or “bending” the meaning of gender equality to pursue other goals, discrediting opponents and competing ideologies, using moral arguments, etc.³⁸. Some codes were generated inductively to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the specific national discourse in Bulgaria.

The sources analyzed for this study are sourced from the one year leading up to the adoption of the two draft bills by the current Bulgarian Parliament, namely from June 2022 to June 2023. We chose to concentrate on two parties, namely the far-right nationalist party Revival (Възраждане) and the left-wing Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP, Българска Социалистическа Партия). Although during the studied period, other political formations were also using populist arguments to denounce the IC and the proposed amendments to PDVA, only Revival and BSP were represented in

³⁶ Schreier M., *Qualitative content analysis in practice*, London-Thousand Oaks-New Delhi-Singapore, SAGE, 2021, 1.

³⁷ Clark T., Foster L., Sloan L., Bryman A., *Bryman’s Social Research Methods*, 6th ed., Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021.

³⁸ Kantola J., Lombardo E., *Strategies of right populists in opposing gender equality in a polarized European Parliament*, 570.

all three Parliaments formed during the said period (XLVII Parliament (03.12.2021 – 01.08.2022), XLVIII Parliament (19.10.2022 – 02.02.2023) and XLIX Parliament (12.04.2023 –)). Another factor that makes them interesting units to study is that in the last several parliamentary elections, Revival welcomed an increasing number of supporters, while BSP has been losing voters.

Revival's populist deviation is widely acknowledged – it has been described as an “anti-European Union (EU), populist, openly pro-Russian and nationalist”³⁹ and “populist Radical Right party”⁴⁰. BSP's play with populism may not be that obvious. Still, it can be detected in what Ruzha Smilova describes as the embedding of illiberal policies of radical right populism into the “policy repertoire of mainstream parties such as the Bulgarian socialist party, whose leader Kornelia Ninova has opportunistically driven BSP to adopt socially conservative stances on important social issues, such as gender equality, migration, etc.”⁴¹. BSP's move to a nationalist and conservative agenda after 2016 has placed the party in opposition to gender equality, refugees, and the progressive but marginal-

³⁹ Spirova M., *Bulgaria: Political Developments and Data in 2021 The Year of the Three Parliaments?*, in *European Journal of Political Research*, 2022, 61, 1, <https://ejpr.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/2047-8852.12373>.

⁴⁰ Zankina E., *Pro-Russia or anti-Russia: political dilemmas and dynamics in Bulgaria in the context of the war in Ukraine*, in *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-Wing Populism in Europe*, ed. by G. Ivaldi, E. Zankina, European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS), 2023, 48-63, <https://sbs.bal.science/bal-shs-04024156/document#page=50>, 50.

⁴¹ Rosulek P., *Interview with Prof. Ruzha Smilova on Depoliticization, Populism, and Bulgaria*, in *West Bohemian Review of Social Sciences & Humanities*, 2022, 14, 1, 68-74. <https://dspace5.zcu.cz/bitstream/11025/49242/1/5-Acta-2022-1-rozhovor.pdf>, 70; Smilova R., *Promoting “Gender Ideology”: Constitutional Court of Bulgaria Declares Istanbul Convention Unconstitutional*, *Oxford Human Rights Hub*, August 22, 2018, <https://ohrh.law.ox.ac.uk/promoting-gender-ideology-constitutional-court-of-bulgaria-declares-istanbul-convention-unconstitutional/>.

ized democratic-socialist fraction of the party⁴². Bankov connects the party's populist stance to its vehement rejection of the IC in 2019: "being the populist opposition to the government, [BSP] stood against IC, shocking the European Socialist Party (PES), of which they were a part"⁴³.

5. Findings and analysis

Although Revival is not currently represented in the EP, briefly mentioning the statements made by Bulgarian MEPs from other parties regarding the IC, gender equality, and sexual education could contribute to the discussion that follows. Throughout the period under study, MEPs from BSP did not express opposition to the IC, nor did they explicitly endorse the document or challenge the anti-Istanbul Convention assertions made by their Bulgarian colleagues from other EP parties. Only Angel Dzhambazki participated in EP debates and delivered remarks on the issue. One notable point made by Dzhambazki was that the IC, under the guise of protecting women's rights, indirectly imposes gender ideology on EU societies (D1, D2, D3)⁴⁴.

In Dzhambazki's statements, two additional strategies, identified by Kantola and Lombardo, are also noticeable – bending gender towards other issues ("in the form of combating domestic

⁴² Medarov G., *The Roots of the Moralization of Politics in Post-1989 Bulgaria and What it Means for the Left*, in *The Political Economy of Eastern Europe 30 years into the 'Transition': New Left Perspectives from the Region*, ed. by A. Gagyi, & O. Slacalek, Switzerland, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, 187-204, 189.

⁴³ Bankov K., *Cyberbullying and hate speech in the debate around the ratification of the Istanbul convention in Bulgaria: a semiotic analysis of the communication dynamics*, in *Social Semiotics*, 2020, 30, 3, 344-364, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2020.1731175>, 345.

⁴⁴ The list of all analyzed documents can be found at the end of the paper.

violence are being pushed [...] status rights for people defined as refugees to prevent them from being sent back to their countries. They will, of course, abuse these rights”, D2) and depoliticization, including through recourses to biology (the IC-promoted ideology would allow men to compete in women’s sports and visit women’s locker rooms, D1, D3). According to Dzhambazki, the latter constitutes violence against women; he then adds an interesting argument against the Convention – VAW still occurs even in those countries that adopted it (D3). At the beginning of one of its remarks, the IMRO MEP states the apparent fact that violence against women and children should be condemned and punished but stresses that the IC is not the right way to do this (D1). Similar statements emerge frequently in the national-level discourse, even when it focuses not on the IC itself but on proposed amendments to existing legislation aimed at addressing DV in the country.

Based on the studied sources, the BSP appears more insistent and active than Revival in denouncing attempts to introduce legal and policy measures that closely align with IC provisions. Our analysis reveals that BSP representatives have addressed this topic twice as frequently as their colleagues from Revival, both in terms of statements during debates at the National Assembly and relevant intra-parliamentary committee discussions, as well as through articles and interviews published on the respective party websites.

The latest BSP Election Platform does not openly mention the IC or gender ideology but lists as a priority “Strengthening the educational function of the school and kindergarten in the spirit of traditional national values for the growth of a patriotic and nationally responsible young generation” (D12). The importance of this statement stems from BSP’s focus on safeguarding the well-being of children and children’s upholding of traditional values, which forms the core of their opposition to the recently proposed anti-domestic violence legislation. Shortly, this will be further illustrated.

The declaration adopted during the 50th BSP congress in February 2023 cements the socialist party's position as "the voice of the vast majority of Bulgarian citizens regarding the unconstitutional Istanbul Convention" (D11).

Revival's party platform is considerably more extensive, spanning 67 pages, and on several occasions, explicitly refers to the risks for Bulgarian society resulting from the advancement of gender ideology. To preserve the Bulgarian ethnicity and nation, hedonism and genderism should be resisted, and traditional family values, love and respect in the family, kinship, and intergenerational ties should be promoted (D 13, p. 30). To overcome the demographic crisis, it is crucial to uphold the image of the "normal" family as one with three or more children and strengthen traditional family values, ethics and morals (D 13, p. 31).

Significantly, neither of the parties' platforms addresses the need to tackle VAW and DV, disregarding the distressing statistics from recent years⁴⁵. Additionally, the documents fail to acknowledge the significance of promoting gender equality.

During National Assembly debates, representatives from both parties frequently recognize VAW as a harmful phenomenon that must be stopped. However, an analysis of the studied transcripts of plenary and committee sessions reveals a tendency to shift the focus toward discussing trauma suffered by children and the importance of protecting them. While the significance of addressing violence against children is *absolute and undisputable*, it (and its sensitive nature) should not be exploited to build arguments against some policies or legislation. It is worth mentioning that femicide is seldom directly addressed, and when it is, the term itself is rarely

⁴⁵ Spasena.org, Media monitoring, 2023, http://spasena.org/bg/media_monitoring.

utilized; instead, the phrase “murders of women” tends to predominate. This omission undermines the urgency of addressing VAW as a distinct issue. While the BSP focuses on certain aspects of legislation that, in their view, expose children to a dangerous “gender ideology” or enable false reporting of children against parents, Revival argues that such laws and policies may allow NGOs to obtain more funding by removing kids from their families.

At the height of the debates surrounding the proposed changes to PDVA in 2023, Revival proposed the creation of a registry for child molesters, mirroring the structure of a registry for DV cases proposed by one of the draft bills. Such initiatives often divert, intentionally or not, public attention away from cases of VAW, thus perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes. Protecting children, a cause that enjoys widespread social support and has long been enshrined in laws, regulations, and policies, becomes the primary focus. However, opponents of the IC rarely express direct compassion for the suffering of children whose mothers were murdered by husbands, intimate partners, or their husbands’ and partners’ relatives.

To illustrate the abovementioned, we will provide concrete examples from the parties under study during their participation in parliamentary sessions. We must first emphasize that the denunciation of the IC, a document whose ratification is currently not subject to debate, often intertwines and overlaps with the criticism of proposed amendments to PDVA (which enjoy a broad consensus as being highly necessary). The argument that the more detailed changes proposed by political opponents of both BSP and Revival were a covert attempt to introduce provisions of the IC has been made 11 times (seven (7) times by BSP and four (4) times by Revival) during four plenary sessions. For instance, Revival’s Tsoncho Ganev opposed working on the *Bill to Amend and Supplement the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence*, equating it to “the

hidden adoption of the Istanbul Convention pushed by the new Euro-Atlantic coalition”⁴⁶ (D4). According to the BSP leader Kornelia Ninova, “behind the beautiful words of the Istanbul Convention against Domestic Violence and the beautiful words of the law, introduced by Democratic Bulgaria are hiding unpleasant things, like in those contracts where at the bottom in small letters is written something that is difficult to read and which misleads people” (D4). She added: “Quietly, the Istanbul Convention and gender ideology are creeping into the world, into Europe, and now into Bulgaria in such favorable laws with such small letters” (D4).

Regarding the markers of populist anti-genderism in CEE, as outlined by Graff, the analyzed discourse prominently displayed the perspective of anti-genderism as a defense of traditional Christian values. It is worth noting that while direct assertions of Eastern superiority over the West were absent, this particular viewpoint remained significant. During one of the National Assembly debates, BSP leader Ninova reasserted that her party was “against the Istanbul Convention because it has been declared unconstitutional because the Bulgarian Church is against it because all religions in Bulgaria are against it, and because we stand for the traditional Christian Bulgarian family because we want our children to be a boy or a girl and not choose a third option among 14 others in a list” (D4). It is important to acknowledge BSP’s devotion to the postulates of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church – a move that seems to embody an effort by the party to distance itself from the legacy of its predecessor, the Bulgarian Communist Party. During the communist regime, systematic efforts were made to isolate the Bul-

⁴⁶ Ganev identifies as part of this coalition the parties Democratic Bulgaria and We Continue the Change, which proposed the bill.

garian people from Christian spiritual traditions and restrict their engagement with the liturgical and prayer life of the Church⁴⁷.

The link established by Revival between gender, on the one hand, and the traditional Bulgarian family and Christianity, on the other, was not as straightforward as the one articulated by BSP. However, Revival's interpretation of this link was more intriguing when we explored messages and themes that carry populist undertones. For instance, the Revival MP Zlatan Zlatanov claimed that the legislation proposed by We Continue the Change and Democratic Bulgaria was intended to introduce in the country the dreaded "Scandinavian" practices, where children are being taken away from their families and refers to the authors of the bill as "modern Bulgarian janissaries" (D4). The existence of Janissaries constitutes a profoundly traumatic event in Bulgarian historical memory. These male children were taken from their families, converted to Islam, and trained to serve in the Janissary Corps of the Ottoman army under a periodic levy imposed on the peoples within the empire, known as the "blood tax"⁴⁸. The symbolism associated with this historical event is powerful – according to this perspective, the IC or any legislation resembling its provisions would reintroduce the harrowing practice of forcibly separating children from their families, coercing them to adopt a different religion and a new set of values. Consequently, this is perceived as threatening Bulgarian national identity and cohesion.

Of the strategies identified by Kantola and Lombardo, the one most commonly employed by MPs from Revival and BSP to criticize ideas similar to those embodied in the IC was direct oppo-

⁴⁷ Nushev K., *Българската православна църква и наследството на комунизма* [*The Bulgarian Orthodox Church and communism's legacy*], Pravoslavie.bg, 2019, July 4, 2019, <https://t.ly/rdGu8>.

⁴⁸ Britannica, Blood Tax, no date, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/blood-tax>.

sition. This approach was closely followed by indirect opposition through self-victimization, indirect opposition through Euroscepticism, indirect opposition through depoliticization, and indirect opposition through bending gender to other issues. BSP outpaced Revival in criticizing the proposed bills and relied heavily on direct opposition. However, Revival holds an advantage in Euroscepticism, one of the party's most distinctive characteristics.

Table 1. Opposition to IC and/or anti-DV legislation, parliamentary debates

	Total	Direct opposition	Indirect opposition: self-victimization	Indirect opposition: Euroscepticism	Indirect opposition: depoliticization	Indirect opposition: bending to other issues
BSP	22	12	5	2	2	1
Revival	10	4	1	3	1	1
Total	32	16	6	5	3	2

Two illustrations of the direct opposition follow. According to Kornelia Ninova, the bill proposed by the other parties would allow NGOs “to draft school curricula, to give seminars and conferences, and the court [European Court of Human Rights] gives them the right to teach the LTBG⁴⁹ ideology in Bulgarian schools to three-, four-, five-, six-year-olds and as many children as you want” (D4). During another parliamentary debate, she claimed that under the veil of the noble cause that is the fight against VAW, “the Istanbul Convention introduces into European legislation a third [gender/sex], the so-called social gender, different from a man or a wom-

⁴⁹ As per the original transcript in Bulgarian.

an as defined by biology” (D6). Addressing the authors of the said bill, Georgi Georgiev from Revival saw in it an attempt to introduce “ideologies, foreign to the Bulgarian family, foreign ideologies that you introduce through foreign NGOs, and we know very well that you fully support the texts of the Istanbul Convention, and we know very well that you want to push gender ideologies into the Bulgarian family through different methods and influences...” (D5).

The socialists’ utilization of the strategy of indirect opposition through self-victimization is well-demonstrated in a couple of statements by the party’s leader. According to Ninova, BSP’s stance against the IC caused the party to be “unfairly accused of hindering the effective fight against domestic and gender-based violence” (D7), as it suffered blows from both “inside and outside” Bulgaria (D7). Ninova went on to explain the loss of voters during the most recent elections with BSP’s fight against the IC – “this battle is part of the BSP’s collapse in the elections because none of you really know what this pressure means – external, strong, with a lot of money, with a lot of media. We know.” (D6).

It has to be noted that the Euroscepticism displayed by Revival when criticizing the IC or the proposed legislative amendments was not as pronounced as it is for other topics, at least in the analyzed transcripts from parliamentary debates. It is embodied in references to the “Euro-Atlantic majority” that pushes for the introduction of harmful laws and policies and to the long-feared and much-exploited narrative about the Scandinavian social services’ practice of removing children from their parents (D4). In 2019, the false information that the adoption of a new National Strategy for the Child would allow “Norwegians” to abduct Bulgarian children to be brought up in same-sex couples not only caused substantial social unrest but also led to the rejection of the said strategy.

Accusations against NGOs that receive project funding from abroad formed a large part of the public outcry during 2019 debates on the IC and the draft Strategy for the Child. During the period studied in this paper, civil society organizations again took center stage in Revival's opposition to the PDVA amendment bill introduced by center-right parties. According to Revival, the participation of NGOs in the National Council for the Prevention of Domestic Violence envisaged in the bill would enable these organizations and especially their foreign donors to influence Bulgarian decision-makers and the policies and practices they coin (D5, D7). Revival's MPs claim that following the abovementioned "Scandinavian model", the Bulgarian NGOs, after being designated social service providers, would benefit from a larger number of children being removed from "abusive" families to have more work and, consequently, receive more funding (D4). It should be highlighted that undermining efforts to promote a particular policy by discrediting NGOs, particularly those funded by US donors or Open Society Foundations, is not recent or limited to Bulgaria alone. Attacks against NGOs can take various forms, such as calling their staff "sorosoids"⁵⁰ (in Bulgaria), launching public defamation campaigns, and proposing anti-NGO legislation, as reported by Terre des Hommes in Romania, Hungary, and Moldova⁵¹.

⁵⁰ "A Sorosoid could be everyone who defends Western values, works for a liberal media or an NGO that may or may not have been funded by grants of the Open Society foundation of the famous American-Jewish financial speculator George Soros (hence the name)". Source: KapitalInsights, The words you need to know this month, April 19, 2017, https://kinsights.capital.bg/analysis/2017/03/15/4143247_what_what_was_that/.

⁵¹ Terres des Hommes, Central and eastern Europe: Children endangered by the chilling effect of anti-NGO laws - A Briefing Package, ReliefWeb, April 7, 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/central-and-eastern-europe-children-endangered-chilling-effect-anti-ngo-laws-briefing>.

During debates at the National Assembly, BSP MPs also expressed suspicion against Bulgarian NGOs, although this was not central to the party's stance against the proposed bill. The socialist party prioritized the well-being of Bulgarian children, which was highlighted numerous times during parliamentary debates. This concern encompassed three key aspects: the overall welfare of children, the development of their sex and gender identities, and the fostering of a positive child-parent relationship. Two of the aspects are clearly expressed in a statement by Kornelia Ninova, where she emphasizes that the BSP itself has introduced a draft bill to amend PDVA: "We will always oppose the abuse of children. Over 18, everyone is free to live their lives as they want, but do not touch Bulgarian children, do not try to take their souls away through these laws, which supposedly are in their favor [...] We will fight to the end for children and therefore for no gender ideology in schools" (D7). Discussing the concept of "domestic violence through inaction", proposed in the political opponents' bill, Kornelia Ninova wondered: "Imagine that your child wants to eat three chocolates and you say: 'No, this is not good for you.' Well, you are an abusive parent by inaction because you will not let your child have a third chocolate." (D4). She continued: "One more thing we disagree with. Any child, from the moment they speak, can complain about their parents. Then an ex-officio lawyer is appointed, the social services take over, and an NGO starts to train the child." (D4) Bringing back the central position of the family in and for Bulgarian society, Kornelia Ninova asked: "Dear colleagues, aren't there already too many dividing lines in Bulgarian society that you want to oppose children to parents in the most sacred human unit – the family? Do you want to put this dividing line too?!" (D4).

The following table shows the number of times the strategies Opposition to NGOs, Children will suffer some kind of harm, and Children will be able to report on their parents were utilized to

criticize the bill to amend PDVA proposed by center-right parties, as well as the IC.

Table 2: Concern for children and NGO participation, parliamentary debates

	Opposition to NGOs	Children will suffer some kind of harm	Children will be able to report on their parents
BSP	2	6	4
Revival	12	5	1
Total	14	11	5

During the most recent plenary debate on the proposed bills, the BSP accused Revival of opportunistically joining the campaign against the concerning insinuations of the IC. This statement by MP Georgi Svilenski can be interpreted as BSP's desire to take control of the debate and assert ownership over the issue at hand: "But, colleagues from Revival, be sincere, read the bill proposed by BSP. I understand that you want to ride this wave that, as BSP is showing you, will wash over you. I understand you want to fight the Istanbul Convention, but when do you do that? Six years after the BSP started fighting this battle, you decided to get on that battle. When did you decide to fight gender ideology? When did you decide to do it?" (D7).

During discussions on the proposed bills within parliamentary committees (the Legal Affairs Committee and the Labor and Social Policy Committee), representatives from Revival and BSP put forward similar talking points as those highlighted in parliamentary debates. However, their statements in committee discussions were typically less emotionally charged and more focused on technical aspects, specifically addressing particular provisions within the two documents. Our analysis of three transcripts (two from the Legal Affairs Committee (D8, D9) and one from the Labor

and Social Policy Committee (D10) revealed a higher level of engagement from BSP MPs compared to their counterparts from Revival. Both parties commonly employed two strategies to counter the opposing bill: “Opposition to NGOs” and “Direct opposition”, frequently involving references to gender ideology and concerns regarding potential risks to children.

When examining articles, interviews, and posts shared through the official channels of both parties, the picture is not much different. Once again, the BSP demonstrated a more active stance than Revival in advocating for combating DV while safeguarding children from gender ideology. Our search yielded only one interview on Revival’s website and one related Facebook post during the studied period, directly addressing the IC and the gender topic. In contrast, BSP’s channels featured numerous articles, interviews, and press releases on the same subject. We analyzed nine pieces (D14-D22), eight from the official website and one from the party-affiliated DUMA Newspaper⁵². Most analyzed texts directly opposed the IC and its underlying principles, emphasizing the significance of combating gender ideology. The DUMA publication (D14) argued that BSP’s leader, Kornelia Ninova, has been facing pressure and discrimination from the Socialist International and the Party of European Socialists (depicted as “overtaken by the gender ideology”) and reminded readers that it was the BSP and Ninova that prevented the ratification of the “gender convention” and the adoption of a “third social sex/gender distinct from a man and a woman”. Consequently, most of the articles centered around the establishment of an Initiative Committee in March 2023, fo-

⁵² These were not the only articles that mentioned the Istanbul Convention or gender ideology on the party websites. However, we selected those that were longer and conveyed more information.

cused on initiating a referendum against the proliferation of gender ideology in schools.

We understand that the question that the Initiative Committee proposed to ask in the referendum (should one take place) was: “Do you endorse the inclusion of education and upbringing of minors within the Bulgarian education system, encompassing gender reassignment and the recognition of genders beyond male and female?” (D19). Additionally, a brief article highlighted Kornelia Ninova’s meeting with a representative of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. The representative supported BSP in their efforts against gender ideology, assured that the Church would steadfastly maintain its stance against the IC, and expressed concern over attempts to introduce the IC through various means (D17).

The analyzed discourse shows that both BSP and Revival employ anti-gender rhetoric, framing their messages utilizing a populist lens by appealing to people’s emotions, in particular, their fear for the well-being of their children and family or the preservation of their identity. The intensity, frequency, and specific contents of these messages slightly differ when we compare the two political formations. The current leadership of the BSP attempts to portray the party as a protector of Bulgarian and Christian life, morals, and culture, as a guardian of the rule of law (by constant references to the decision of the Constitutional Court), and of the will of the Bulgarian people, whose children are put at risk by the Istanbul Convention and related legislation. The party thus relies on direct opposition to the IC/related legislation, repeated warnings about the dangers of gender ideology, and concerns that certain measures aimed at combating DV may alienate children from their parents, thereby challenging the foundations of the traditional Bulgarian family.

Revival’s critique of the IC/proposed legislation aligns with the established pattern of opposition maintained by other ultra-nation-

alist and far-right parties in Bulgaria, including Attack and IMRO. The party's anti-gender rhetoric is intricately intertwined with a Eurosceptic and populist narrative that emphasizes the necessity of safeguarding Bulgarian identity against perceived foreign interference. This connection becomes evident through their persistent focus on the involvement of externally-funded NGOs, which they believe contribute to the erosion of Bulgarian sovereignty and national identity and directly threaten the well-being and safety of Bulgarian children. Thus, both parties frequently evoke the topic, identified by Graff as a frequent element of anti-gender campaigns, namely the child in danger.

Returning to the theoretical foundations of populism outlined earlier in this document, the arguments put forth by both parties portray the majority of Bulgarian society, particularly the most vulnerable (children), as an oppressed group susceptible to the wrongdoings of an evil elite seeking to impose a foreign and detrimental ideology. In pursuit of political advantage, the inherently thin-centered populism becomes fortified with conservative socialism in the case of the BSP and ultra-nationalism in the case of Revival. To a great extent, the analysis sustains the view that the fight against "gender ideology" and, in the Bulgarian case, against the negative influence of foreign actors exerting pressure from abroad is, to a certain degree, bringing closer right-wing and left-wing political parties.

We need to mention that the propagation of such misleading narratives – such as that some measures against DV and VAW will result in more harm than good – would not be necessary, feasible, or politically advantageous if there weren't already a significant audience highly receptive to misinformation and manipulation (it is enough to mention anti-vaccine sentiments, COVID-19 denialism, variations of the Great Replacement theory). The convergence of left-wing and right-wing parties playing the populist card in

discussions surrounding gender-related issues can be attributed to both the belief that populism offers an easy path to greater political power and the realization that certain disinformation narratives have already effectively captured public attention and, hence, could be utilized for political purposes.

6. Conclusion

This paper aimed to investigate how two political parties with distinct parliamentary representation in Bulgaria employ the concept of gender and gender-related issues in formulating and disseminating populist messages. Additionally, it examined how these parties utilize populism to advance their perspectives on gender equality and broader efforts to combat GBV, DV, and VAW. In this sense, we hope to contribute to accumulating the still insufficient systemic knowledge about how right-wing and left-wing populism relate to gender equality discourses in different national contexts⁵³. The need for a deeper exploration of the relationship between gender and populism has also been highlighted by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser and confirmed by Abi-Hassan, as acknowledged by Dona⁵⁴.

Two potential avenues for future research emerge. Firstly, there is a need to investigate why misinformation and disinformation narratives centered around stereotypical and degrading depictions of women can permeate society and gain popularity. It is crucial to understand why Bulgarian society still fails to grasp the gravity of gender-based violence – a lacuna widely and freely exploited by

⁵³ Siim B. & Fiig C., *The populist challenge to gender equality*, in *The Routledge Handbook of Gender and EU Politics*, ed. by G. Abels, A. Krizsán, H. MacRae, A. van der Vleute, London-New York, Routledge, 2021, 367-378, 370.

⁵⁴ Donà A., *What's gender got to do with populism?*, 285.

populist actors. Secondly, building upon Graff's observation that women's and LGBT movements in CEE countries have exhibited relative weakness, it is crucial to scrutinize the discourse and counter-narratives generated by Bulgarian civil society. To combat gender stereotypes successfully and implement effective policies that address violence and advance gender equality, it is imperative to foster a vibrant civil society capable of presenting compelling and all-encompassing counter-arguments.

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