
Victimhood and Villainisation: Misogynist Narratives in Women's Media Representation in Bulgaria

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Abstract: In the last decade, gender equality in Bulgaria has failed to progress. Anti-gender sentiments, far-right politics, and persistent misogyny have sought to retain women in an inferior position, while avoiding pressing issues such as femicide, domestic violence, and social hostility. The Bulgarian Constitutional Court's rejection of the Istanbul Convention in 2018 further worsened this situation, cementing an unfavourable stance on women's rights and the combatting of violence against women, which thrives in online spaces.

This short article highlights this issue through two snapshot case studies: the invalidation of experiences of violence against women through victim-blaming and denial, and the villainisation of women in positions of power by reference to immorality in Bulgarian online news articles and associated public, post-moderation user generated content (comments).

Introduction

Over the past decade, instead of moving towards substantive gender equality, women in Bulgaria have faced an environment of increasing hostility with culture and tradition, far-right politics, anti-gender sentiments, and persisting misogynist stereotypes across various social spheres. [CEDAW's concluding observations](#) on the 8th periodic report by Bulgaria (2020) noted increased cases of anti-gender discourse in the public domain, public backlash in the perception of gender equality, misogynistic statements in the media, and increased occurrence of hate speech and sexism in the media, especially online social media. These observations come in the context of the Bulgarian Constitutional Court (BCC) [decision](#) from 27 June 2018 barring the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence ([Istanbul Convention](#)). The decision defends the “anti-Constitutional” nature of the “gender ideology” expressed in the Convention ([Ilcheva, 2020](#); [Darakchi, 2019](#)), formulating an incorrect and damaging perspective ([Kanev, 2021](#)).

The proclamation of the Istanbul Convention as unconstitutional started a misfortunate domino effect with [a later decision](#) by the Constitutional Court in 2021, affirming the “purist” view on sex, the biological perspective on the matter, and the irrelevance of “gender” in Bulgaria. The aftermath of this stillborn ratification, and the ideologically influenced decisions by the BCC, saw a slow and laborious pro-

cess of adopting changes to [the Protection against Domestic Violence Act](#) (PDVA) – a processes that is still unfinished and highly contested. Thus, where CEDAW sees an increase of hostility towards women in the public domain in Bulgaria, the manifestations of this are manifold - from femicide and violence, to violations of human rights online, omnipresent discrimination and intolerance in all domains of life. The subject – women.

This article presents a snapshot from a pilot study of misogynist narratives arising in Bulgarian online media through two examples: the media coverage and public reactions to a case of intimate partner violence against an 18-year-old woman from Stara Zagora; and the media coverage and public reactions to an insulting song about the Head of the Prime Minister’s Political Cabinet, Lena Borislavova, in the context of the wider defamation campaign against her. The article thus reviews two examples of hostility towards women – 1) the invalidation of experiences of violence against women through victim-blaming and denial; and 2) the villainisation of women in positions of power by reference to immorality. The case studies presented are based upon the thematic analysis of 10 online media articles (5 per case) and associated comments (210 (n₁=65; n₂=145), public, post-moderation).¹

Demystifying narratives

The first step in undertaking this research is conceptualising what a narrative is. In the literature the idea of a narrative takes a plethora of forms: narratives can be connected to memory ([Milivojevic, 2019](#)), to political dispositions ([Cantat, 2015](#)), to interpretation and cognition ([D’Amato & Lucarelli, 2019](#); [Kinnvall, Manners & Mitzen, 2020](#)), etc. The multifaceted nature of narratives calls for expansive and loose understanding and thinking about the concept as perceptions and stories that can be created by various actors, and can change in time, depending on new circumstances, new actors, new subjects ([Kuneva, et al., 2022](#)). Narratives are also often emotionally charged, i.e., they convey a particular sentiment, whether positive, negative, or a combination of the two. It is perhaps helpful to think of narratives as a way of describing the world around us in a way that seems intuitive and inertial.

Digging deeper into the anatomy of a narrative, several key components can be identified:

Agent: The agent creates the narrative or participates in its (re)formulation. This is usually a stakeholder or a group of stakeholders (e.g., members of a particular political party). Agents play a key role in the dissemination and reinforcement of narratives as well.

Trigger: This is an event, a process, an outcome, a period in time, an experience, etc. It provides the “need” for a narrative to be formulated, and justifies its existence (e.g., the Ukrainian refugee crisis).

¹ The ethical considerations applicable to this study are aligned with the [British Psychological Society’s Ethics Guidelines for Internet-Mediated Research \(2021\)](#). Quotations of user-generated content (comments) are purposefully not linked to their respective news articles to prevent de-anonymisation.

Subject: The subject is, in plain language, the stakeholder or a process to whom or to which the narrative attaches to. Narratives often have collective subjects, i.e., they pertain to groups of people, or address processes of high social significance (e.g., women as a group, or legislative changes as a process).

Knowledge: The production of knowledge entails a process of formulation, validation, and entrenchment. The narrative gains meaning through this process, while simultaneously finding an audience through which its validity is confirmed.

Dynamism: Finally, narratives exist within a repeatable loop of adjustment, change, and reformulation. While they express seemingly stable dispositions, they can be adjusted to reflect on different subjects, be taken up by different agents, and grow in terms of the knowledge they contain.

Thinking about narratives through this “anatomical” lens provides an opportunity to see them not as overarching truths and “things as they are,” but as outcomes of social knowledge production processes that are neither self-evident, nor naturally valid. Thinking about narratives as socially produced lies in the heart of this case study research exercise.

Case Study 1²: 400 Stitches: The invalidation of victimhood on Bulgarian online media

The first case study pertains to [a case of intimate partner violence](#) in which a 26-year-old male suspect inflicted numerous wounds to an 18-year-old woman, shaved her head, and broke her nose, leading to the victim receiving 400 stitches in hospital. At the time of writing this article, the suspect is in custody on charges for threatening to kill the victim.³

Despite the absence of legislation addressing media coverage neutrality and objectivity, three of the five news articles report on the case in a neutral and objective manner without reflecting any particular sentiment. They contain descriptions of the injuries sustained by the victim in various levels of details and describe them as “disfigurement.” The remaining articles in the sample are markedly different in two ways. The first article includes a paragraph with reflections on the impact of the case for the ongoing process of amending the Bulgarian Protection against Domestic Violence Act. The 400 Stitches case prompted proposals to include “intimate partner violence” in this Act. The article addressed this proposal as an instance of “Sorosoids”⁴ high-jacking the case to push for the legalisation of same-sex marriage in Bulgaria. This inclusion is interesting, because it revives a popular disinformation narrative that emerged in the context of the anti-gender discourses surrounding the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2018 ([Ilcheva, 2020](#)). The

² The sample contains 5 online news articles from 5 online media channels, 65 comments associated with the included articles, covering the period of 28 June 2023 – 14 August 2023.

³ The charges in relation to the injuries inflicted upon the victim were not sustained in the District Court’s decision classifying the harm as “trivial bodily harm” – a crime that does not assume *ex officio* prosecution under the Bulgarian Criminal Code.

⁴ A term referring to non-governmental organisations who receive financial support from foreign funding bodies such as George Soros’s Open Society Institute Foundation ([Darakchi, 2019](#)).

second article, in turn, views the case not as an instance of intimate partner violence, but one of human trafficking for the purpose of sex work – an attempt to divert the focus from the feminised issue of violence in intimate relationships to the more masculinised issue of trafficking.

It is, however, in the public comments associated with these articles that there is more prominent evidence of misogynist narratives. Just under 4 in every 5 comments exhibit empathetic sentiment towards the victim, whether it is in the context of positive or mixed sentiments (e.g., comments that show empathy, but nonetheless present the victim in a negative light). A notable section (1 in every 6) aligns with the idea that the 400 Stitches case is not truly one of intimate partner violence, but of retribution by sex traffickers upon a woman that has refused to work for them. These comments are not associated with the article that puts forward this theory but are unevenly spread out across three of the remaining four articles.

The comments also paint a vivid dichotomy of a sadistic, monstrous perpetrator and a young, naive, materialistic, and even childish victim. Most of the comments that offer descriptions of either the suspect, or the victim, are likely to speak of the suspect as a “monster,” “animal,” “threat to society,” “sadist,” “freak,” and “criminal”, as well as someone who “deserves to be killed,” be beaten and brutalised, or “raped in prison.” On the other hand, a small number of comments push victim-blaming narratives, painting the victim as a “Lolita,” “looking for a luxurious lifestyle,” parties, money, fame, and attention, purposefully “chasing” violent men.

In the opinions put forward in relation to this case, by both media and the public, the following narratives of misogynist undertone can be identified:

Women are at least partially responsible for the violence perpetrated against them.

Intimate partner violence is not a real or significant phenomenon. Events are rationalised by reference to human trafficking, and illegal sex work.

Violence must be answered with violence. Perpetrators of violent crime should be brutalised or killed as punishment.

Case Study 2⁵: A Song about Lena: The villainisation of women in positions of power

The second case reviewed in this article has to do with an element of the defamation campaign against the now former Head of the Prime Minister’s Political Cabinet, Lena Borislavova, whereby the Bulgarian showman and founder of the “There is Such a People” political party, Slavi Trifonov, produced [an insulting song](#) describing Borislavova as a “cougar” and insinuating to an alleged affair between her and the Prime Minister – “A Song about Lena.”

Similarly to the articles reviewed in the first case study, those included in this sample mostly report on the “Song about Lena” in a neutral and objective manner with few instances of mild sentiment observed (e.g., describing Lena’s career as “scandalous” or the song as “ironic” or “full of insults”). Only one of the articles

⁵ The sample contains 5 online news articles from 5 online media channels, 145 comments associated with the included articles, covering the period of 05 January 2023 - 08 March 2023.

offers a critical perspective on the enmeshment of political messaging, entertainment, and media control, bringing in the context of the political ownership of the TV channel through which the song gained popularity – namely, Trifonov’s own “7/8” channel. This perspective raises curious questions about the role of gendered disinformation and defamation tools in fighting political battles in times of uncertainty.

On the comments side, however, a stark, polarised, but generally even split in sentiment is observed vis-à-vis Borislavova, Trifonov, their respective parties, the right to freedom of speech, and to privacy and private life. Freedom of speech supporters view “A Song about Lena” as an example of social satire that should not be censored as it offers an important “internal” point of view into the character of politicians “who rule the country.” Commenters who support this narrative and who back Trifonov are likely to villainise Borislavova through references to materialism, immorality, hunger for power, promiscuity and adultery, trading sex for power, even masculinity (e.g., in several comments, posters argue that Borislavova has facial hair ordinarily seen in men). Such comments also include the idea of Borislavova’s responsibility for her own “fate,” and the conflation of being in the public eye with having to endure insults and harassment – the “what did she expect” question makes a notable appearance across the sample. Commenters on this side of the debate are also likely to view the song as “true,” “real,” and “a reflection of reality,” echoing the common aphorism that the something cannot be insulting if it is true.

On the other side of the spectrum, support for Borislavova is voiced by describing the song as “tasteless,” “oafish,” and “rude,” pointing out the futility and inappropriateness of undermining political opponents through such tools. In this section of the comments Trifonov is painted as “old,” “outdated and irrelevant,” “undeserving of attention,” and “a caricature of a politician, a singer, and a man.” The epithets used to describe the showman also allude to mental infirmness and senility, jealousy, fear of growing old, and even maliciousness. Very few comments in the sample (n=3) condemn Trifonov’s and the song’s intrusion in Borislavova’s private life and relationships, voicing the perspective that even for people in power who dwell in the public eye the differentiation between professional and personal live needs to be upheld.

In this case, the points of view put forward in the articles and the associated public comments support the following narratives:

Women are at least partially responsible for the harassment and insults they are faced with.

Women in positions of power are likely to have reached and sustain their achievements through sex and immoral behaviour – trading sex for power.

Women in positions of power should treat intrusions upon their personal lives as an expected and normal part of being in the public eye.

Implications and Recommendations

The legal framework in Bulgaria may be powerless to address instances of discrimination and sexist harassment in online media and especially in associated user generated content. While [the Protection against Discrimination Act](#) does prohibit

all types of direct or indirect discrimination, including on the grounds of sex (as a biological characteristic), and allows citizens to file complaints with the Commission for the Protection against Discrimination and with Regional Courts, [the Criminal Code](#) does not recognise gendered hate speech and harassment as crimes, relegating this issue to the private-character violations of insult and slander. [The Radio and Television Act](#), in turn, prohibits commercial communications of a discriminatory character, including on the grounds of sex, and commercial communications that impact human dignity. It does not, however, make provisions for non-commercial communications. Online news articles and user generated content fall within the latter category.

Within this legal environment, the types of coverage and responses examined in this article give rise to at least several key human rights implications. In the first case study, these have to do with the violation of the victim's right to privacy early on in the media coverage of the court case with her identity (real name and photographs) published widely online. Images of the injuries she sustained also circulated online spaces, including photographs in which she is partially undressed. In the second case study, the human rights implications pertain to the key dichotomy between the right to freedom of speech and the right to privacy and private life, as well as human dignity, and the implicit consensus that the freedom of speech outweighs the right to privacy and private life of women in positions of power who are in the public eye. Interestingly, none of the content reviewed engaged with the idea of either case as a form of online violence and gender-based harassment, despite the clear misogynist undertones and sentiments.

It thus remains to be seen what the impact of [the EU ratification of the Istanbul Convention](#) and [the proposed Directive on Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence](#) would be for Bulgaria, with instruments such as the [Digital Services Act](#) making but a modest contribution to issues around gender-based violence, hate speech, and harassment.

On the basis of the findings presented in this article, some recommendations can be made:

For online media moderators: Closer attention should be paid to instances of misogynist hate speech and sexist hostility in user generated content, along with the prompt removal of insulting, disinformation-related, and discriminatory comments. This should be carefully balanced with considerations around the right to freedom of speech in conjunction with the right to freedom from discrimination, human dignity, and the right to privacy and private life.

For media regulators: Rules around ethical representation of victims of violence, including the preservation of their anonymity and the confidentiality of details around relevant court cases, should be drafted, and implemented with urgency. Guidelines on rigorous moderation of user-generated content should also be developed.

For legislators: Sex- and gender-specific hate speech should be included in the definition provided in the Criminal Code to facilitate appropriate measures of sanction against those formulating and proliferating misogynist narratives. Online manifestations of gender-based violence against adult women should be explicitly addressed in applicable laws.

For the research community: Negative media representation of women in Bulgaria and online hostility towards women is an extremely under-researched field with scarce statistics and gaps in exploration of problematics such as cyberviolence and hate speech against women in positions of power, the representation of victims, and the effect of sexist narratives on human rights. Research in these areas is crucial.

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