

CASE STUDY 2.

BULGARIA:

HOW CHILDREN'S, WOMEN'S, AND LGBT RIGHTS GOT LOST IN TRANSLATION; THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MOST EFFECTIVE GENDER-RESTRICTIVE MOVEMENT IN EASTERN EUROPE

OVERVIEW

The Istanbul Convention (IC) was the first European treaty to provide a comprehensive framework to address all forms of violence against women and girls. With wide support from across the political spectrum, the EU presented it to member states for ratification in 2011. Despite the endorsement of 18 European countries, Bulgaria became the first country to decide against ratifying it in 2018. Furthermore, the Bulgarian Constitutional Court declared the treaty unconstitutional. Though this decision took many by surprise, it was the culmination of years of work by *gender-restrictive groups* in the country.

As a member of the European Union since 2007, Bulgaria is a signatory of multiple international declarations that protect LGBT,⁶⁰ women's, children's, and human rights. However, over the last decade—and particularly since 2018—the country has also seen the rise of well-organized gender-restrictive groups that have successfully worked to curtail the advancement of human rights and gender justice.⁶¹ Bulgaria's rejection of the IC was the first of a series of events that jeopardized human rights by directly undermining LGBT, women's, and children's rights.

⁶⁰ Intersex and non-binary people's rights are also undermined by the actions of gender-restrictive groups. However, the researchers did not find evidence of gender-restrictive groups instrumentalizing the experiences of intersex persons in their narratives. Therefore, throughout this report we use the acronym LGBT when speaking of the rights explicitly targeted by gender-restrictive groups, and LGBTI to denote the consequences of their actions that also affect intersex and non-binary people.

⁶¹ "Gender justice" is a systemic process of redistribution of power, opportunities, and access for people of all genders through the dismantling of structures of oppression including patriarchy, homophobia, and transphobia (Global Fund for Women, 2021). It encompasses the affirmation and protection of LGBTI rights, including the rights of LGBTI children and (cis)women's rights, that is, the "ending of—and if necessary the provision of redress for—inequalities between women and men that result in women's subordination to men." (Goetz, 2007).

Gender-restrictive groups and actors are organizations, politicians, researchers and institutions that seek to establish a gender-restrictive world order.

A gender-restrictive order organizes economic, political and social life through the imposition and enforcement of a restrictive and hierarchical vision of gender. It has two main and interdependent components: the naturalization of the gender binary, and the enforcement of gender-normativity.

Most of these groups and actors are faith-based, religiously affiliated or explicitly confessional. These groups attack human rights and gender justice, as well as the principles of self-determination and equity.”

Unlike any other country in the region, **gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria have been 100% effective in accomplishing their goals:** they have successfully blocked the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, several Comprehensive Sexual Education (CSE) initiatives, and the implementation of the Social Services Act. **The country is a case in point of how former political, economic, religious, cultural, and ideological opponents found in gender normativity a powerful unifier and a common rallying cry.**

The effectiveness of the narratives deployed by gender-restrictive groups, as well as the complex interplay between Eastern Orthodoxy, Islam, Evangelical forces,⁶² and communism in the country make Bulgaria a cautionary tale for progressive funders, advocates, and organizations.

An in-depth look at the Bulgarian case provides valuable insights about how gender-restrictive movements instrumentalize children⁶³ to curtail LGBT,

women’s, children’s, and human rights in Eastern Europe and across the globe.

The following case study begins by **I)** describing how gender-restrictive groups successfully blocked initiatives that sought to protect women, children, and LGBT people. It then **II)** provides context to understand some of the cultural, historical, religious, and political underpinnings of these campaigns. Later, it **III)** analyzes the types of messages and communication strategies employed by gender-restrictive groups, **IV)** and takes a look at how these messages were spread and mobilized. Finally, the document **V)** provides general conclusions.

⁶² In this report we use “Evangelical,” “Orthodox,” and “Anglican” to name non-Catholic Christian denominations. When relevant, specific denominations are mentioned.

⁶³ Throughout this report we highlight the ways in which gender-restrictive groups weaponize children. This is why we will usually speak about children, and the child protection rhetoric, unless explicit references to children’s rights are made by gender-restrictive actors.

KEY EVENTS: TRACKING THE SUCCESS OF GENDER-RESTRICTIVE GROUPS

TAKEAWAYS

- Gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria were highly effective in both the cultural and political realms: they blocked initiatives to advance women’s, children’s, and LGBT rights and mainstreamed their narrative regarding gender, gender justice, gender-based rights, and gender and sexual diversity in judicial, legislative, policy, and public spaces in Bulgaria. For example, the Constitutional Court’s majority used their (mis)translation of “gender” in its ruling to declare the unconstitutionality of the Istanbul Convention.
- In addition, gender-restrictive groups successfully campaigned against Comprehensive Sexuality Education initiatives in Bulgarian schools.
- Gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria also targeted the regulation for the provision of Social Services initiatives (including child welfare and protection). By spreading misinformation and conspiracy theories, gender-restrictive groups blocked the implementation of the National Strategy for the Child and the Social Services Act.
- Finally, as part of their misinformation campaigns, gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria smeared civil society organizations and lobbied to undermine their financial sustainability.

The following events exemplify the successful mobilization of gender-restrictive groups against human rights and gender justice in Bulgaria. One of the key triggers of these mobilizations was the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, which took place against the backdrop of Bulgaria’s alarming data on domestic violence against women.⁶⁴ Schools and child protection social services have also incrementally become a battleground for gender-restrictive movements in the country.⁶⁵ More recently, gender-restrictive groups are seeking to jeopardize the financial sustainability of civil society organizations that defend human rights, including children’s, women’s and LGBT rights, by promoting regulation to curtail their funding streams, particularly from international sources.

Actions and Policies That Aim to Protect LGBT, Women’s, or Children’s rights

Actions Against LGBT, Women’s, or Children’s rights

Bulgaria joins the EU.

**Jan.
2007**

The EU presents the **Istanbul Convention** (IC) for ratification to its member states. The IC is the first European treaty providing a comprehensive framework to address all forms of violence against women and girls (Council of Europe, 2011). Across Eastern Europe, opposition to what gender-restrictive groups call “genderism”—supposedly codified in the Convention—intensifies and expands.

**Nov.
2011**

⁶⁴ The ratification later became controversial in other Eastern European countries. In Poland, for example, gender-restrictive groups decried what they saw as the undue influence of transnational organizations in the IC.

⁶⁵ This also happened in other Eastern European countries. In 2015, Romanian gender-restrictive groups protested against a bill that mandated CSE in schools, denouncing the move as undue interference by foreign interests who were imposing their ideology and comparing efforts to provide CSE in the nation’s schools to communist indoctrination (Kovatz & Poim, 2015). In Poland, the idea that children were in danger and needed to be saved from sexual predators was central to gender-restrictive mobilizations (Kovatz & Poim, 2015). Marek Jurek, a prominent Polish political leader, opposed CSE in schools arguing that it sexualized children and encouraged what he saw as immoral sexual behavior, such as masturbation (Jurek, 2013).

Turkey is the first country to ratify the IC.

**Dec.
2012**

Proposal to the Bulgarian Parliament to ratify the IC.

**Jan.
2018**

Gender-restrictive groups and religious organizations such as The Bulgarian Orthodox Church, the Society and Values Association (SVA) and the Grand Mufti's Office of Muslim Denomination fiercely oppose the IC's ratification. The active social and political discussion that ensues put "genderism" (not women's or human rights) at the center of the debate about the ratification of the IC. As a result, 75 members of Parliament, mostly from the ruling GERB party, ask the Constitutional Court to determine the constitutionality of the IC (Balkan Insight, 2018).

The **Constitutional Court declares the IC unconstitutional**. Bulgaria becomes the first country to decide against ratifying the IC after 18 European countries have already signed. The Court's majority endorses a problematic definition of gender (see Messaging Strategy #1 in this case study, p. 73 and, in an eight to four ruling, determines that the IC threatens women's rights and is thus unconstitutional.

**July
2018**

The Court's majority argues that the IC's definition of gender "relativizes the borderline between the two sexes, male and female, as biologically determined," making it difficult, if not impossible, to fight against domestic violence (Gotev, 2018).

The ruling has additional repercussions for LGBTI rights. A pending law that would have allowed trans individuals to change their name and sex in official documents is declared unconstitutional, as well (Eurochild, 2019b).

According to a Gallup poll, **55% of Bulgarians support the declaration of the IC's unconstitutionality** (Darakchi, 2019: 1209). Public figures from the ruling party and the opposition alike increasingly make statements against LGBT rights and gender justice (Radosveta, 2018).

Aug.
2018

The Ministry of Education and the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences block the **Forum for a Gender Balanced Model in Schools: The Bulgarian Case** after its proposal document is leaked. The Forum followed the principles outlined in UNESCO's Gender Equality Action Plan 2014-2021 (Margolis, 2018), but gender-restrictive groups accuse it of peddling "genderism." Its primary goal was to research school teachers' competence and motivation to instill gender justice in their students (Monova et al., 2018). The initiative would have also conducted a school-based survey to collect data on gender violence and stereotypes.

The government submits a draft of the **National Strategy for the Child 2019-2030**. The strategy seeks to introduce "a holistic approach for family policy, oriented not only towards vulnerable children but also towards family support, including non-violent parenting" (CIVICUS, 2019). The proposal follows UNICEF's goal of ensuring that "all children and adolescents, especially the most disadvantaged, enjoy their rights and develop their full potential in an inclusive and protective society respectful of their voice" (UNICEF, 2018).

Jan.
2019

Organizations such as **the SVA and the Association of Parents United for Children (ROD) campaign against the Strategy**. Initially, the debate revolves around the fact that the Strategy introduces a total ban on corporal punishment, which is surprising since Bulgarian law already banned this practice (Eurochild, 2019b). Gender-restrictive groups use this alleged introduction of the prohibition to reject the Strategy by promoting the idea that its "totalitarian approach" gives the state undue power over individuals, families, and children (interview with Nadejda Dermendjieva, 2020; SVA, 2019). This campaign triggers heated debates and public protests, with more than 1,000 people protesting outside government buildings in Sofia, Bulgaria's capital (Eurochild, 2019a).

The Ministry of Health creates a brochure for Bulgarian high school students called **“Love Without Consequences”** and charges the Regional Health Inspectorate in the city of Yambol with distributing it. The brochure aims at preventing sexually transmitted infections.

**Feb.
2019**

Because it includes photos of young men in sexually charged situations (dne.dir.bg, 2019) the brochure “Love Without Consequences” galvanizes gender-restrictive opposition. To make matters worse, the brochure is mistakenly delivered to young children (ILGA Europe, 2019). The Ministry of Education withdraws the brochure after a letter from the Regional Inspectorate demands its removal on account of “scandalous” content (dne.dir.bg, 2019).

**Mar.
2019**

The **SELFIE survey is suspended**. The survey, distributed in SELFIE schools⁶⁶ across Europe to help embed digital technologies in teaching, learning, and student assessment, includes a question that asks students about their gender, giving the options “boy,” “girl,” “other,” and “prefer not to say” (novinite, 2019). This question enrages gender-restrictive groups who claim it introduces (and promotes) a third sex. Rising pressure from gender-restrictive groups and civil society drives the Minister of Education, Krassimir Valchev, to unsuccessfully request that the European Commission eliminate the “other” option within the category “gender” in the survey. Bulgaria then suspends the SELFIE survey (novinite, 2019).

The Parliament adopts the **Social Services Act**, enabling the state to provide social services to improve the quality of life of vulnerable populations (Bodganov & Zahariev, 2019). Children at risk are among the people this act seeks to protect.

Gender-restrictive groups campaign against the Social Services Act, arguing it delegates social services to foreign NGOs that follow “the Norwegian model” and that it makes social services compulsory, threatening parental authority. The **“Norwegian model” is a conspiracy theory that claims children will be taken from their families and given to same-sex couples in Norway**. The Act is supposed to enter into effect in January 2020, but the government concedes to mounting political and social pressure and postpones its implementation (interview with Lilly Dragoeva, 2020).

**Apr.
2019**

The Ministry of Labor and Social Policy and the State Agency for Child Protection fail (or refuse) to explain the main policies outlined by the National Strategy for the Child 2019-2030 and why they are important (Eurochild, 2019a). Conceding to mounting pressure from gender-restrictive groups, **Prime Minister Boyko Borisov halts the Strategy’s implementation**.

⁶⁶ SELFIE is the acronym for “Self-reflection on Effective Learning by Fostering the use of Innovative Educational Technologies.” SELFIE schools use the SELFIE survey as a tool to embed digital technologies into teaching, learning, and student assessment. The survey is currently available in the 24 languages of the EU (European Commission, n.d.).

**Oct.
2019**

The Socialist Party asks the Constitutional Court to review the constitutionality of the **Not-for-Profit Legal Entities Act or Civil Society Organizations (CSO) Law**. One of the arguments put forth is that CSOs represent and advance foreign interests (National Network for the Children, n.d.).

**July
2020**

Fifty-four deputies from the Bulgarian Socialist Party challenge several provisions in the Social Services Act.

Three provisions of the Social Services Act, but not the law as a whole, are declared unconstitutional (Radio Bulgaria, 2020).

Representatives from the United Patriots Party, a member of the ruling coalition, put forth a package of amendments to the Civil Society Organizations Law. The amendments include proposals to **eliminate state funding for projects of CSOs and obligations to report income from foreign sources. According to the National Network for the Children, the measures would officially label CSOs as “foreign agents” and give authorities the power to subject these organizations to financial inspections**—without any specific violation of the law—simply for receiving foreign funding (National Network for the Children, n.d.).

**Dec.
2020**

VMRO, the government’s party, submits a **proposal to the National Assembly to amend the Child Protection Act**. The proposal’s understanding of child rights is inconsistent with the one found in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and in other internationally recognized European instruments (National Network for Children, 2020). According to a letter signed by 70 civil society organizations, if passed and adopted, the law would set back progress on the Bulgarian child protection system by 20 years.

As a result of these events, today **Bulgaria does not have a national policy for child welfare, state-funded programs to support initiatives against domestic violence, nor programs to assist teachers and schools in addressing gender inequality and SOGIE-based bullying and discrimination.**

This situation is further aggravated **because funding mechanisms for local civil society organizations are also seriously endangered**, limiting their ability to continue to advocate for gender justice and human rights.

II. CONTEXT

Gender-restrictive groups across Europe have successfully instrumentalized children to curtail women's, LGBT, and, also, children's rights primarily by causing moral panic through disinformation⁶⁷ about the meaning of "gender," and the creation of related neologisms like "genderism." However, they have had a different impact in each country. Central and Eastern European countries like Bulgaria, which generally have a shorter history of democratic governance, relatively fragile institutions, newer civil society movements, worrisome gender-based violence indicators, and culturally entrenched anti-LGBT sentiment, have been more vulnerable to misinformation campaigns (European Parliament, 2018).

1) The Increasing Power of Religious Forces

TAKEAWAYS

- Organized religion has had a formidable return to Bulgaria and other Eastern European countries after its repression during the communist era ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall.
- Organized religion is increasingly central to the lives of many individuals and communities in Bulgaria.
- As in other regions of the world, Evangelical Churches are expanding in Bulgaria, and some of their political representatives are now in positions of power.
- Despite historical frictions, the Orthodox, Catholic, and Evangelical churches, along with the Grand Mufti of the Muslim Denomination, worked together to prevent the ratification of the IC and to block other rights-affirming initiatives in Bulgaria.

Over the last 30 years, most of Eastern Europe has experienced a shift in its religious landscape.⁶⁸ The communist regimes that were previously in power repressed religious worship and encouraged secularism (Pew Research Center, 2017). After the end of the Cold War, most national constitutions were revised to guarantee freedom of religion and spirituality. As such, the transition to capitalism also signified a drastic transformation of the role of religion in public life. **Organized religion became a key source of individual, communal, and national identity; an effective social cohesion mechanism; and a source of relief from poverty and other social ailments** (Gerlach & Topfer, 2015). Interestingly, demographic data also indicates a greater shift to religiosity in countries where communism promoted secularism more forcefully, compared with those where religious repression was less severe.⁶⁹

As of 2018, 76% of Bulgarians identified as Christian Orthodox, 10% as Muslim, and 1.1% as Evangelical (U.S. Department of State).

Bulgaria is a case in point of the increasing power of religion in postsocialist Eastern Europe. Since the postsocialist constitution recognized freedom of religion and thought, a steady rise in the number of adherents and scope of influence of the Christian Orthodox Church has become evident in the country.⁷⁰ According to the 2011 census, 76% of the population identifies as Eastern Orthodox Christian, Muslims make up approximately 10% of the population, Protestants are 1.1%, and 0.8% are Roman Catholic (U.S. Department of State, 2018).

Although Evangelicals account for only 1% of Bulgarians, they are a fast-growing community, primarily concentrated in areas with large Romani populations

⁶⁷ While misinformation is false information that is created and spread regardless of an intent to harm or deceive, disinformation is a type of misinformation that is created to be deliberately deceptive (Gebel, 2021).

⁶⁸ Comparing data from 1991 and 2017, the proportion of survey respondents who self-identified as Orthodox Christian grew significantly in Bulgaria, Russia, and Ukraine (Pew Research Center, 2017).

⁶⁹ The degree to which religion was absent from public life in these countries differed as a function of their religious histories and their association with the Soviet Union. Therefore, the current dominance of specific religions or denominations and the religiosity of citizens varies from country to country. For instance, in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, Catholicism continued to be a feature of life during the communist years. Nowadays, in both the Czech Republic and Hungary, the population has become more secular and Catholicism has lost influence (Pew Research Center, 2017).

⁷⁰ Since 1990, religious groups have been allowed to worship without formal registration, but registered groups receive government benefits. The Constitution identifies Eastern Orthodox Christianity as Bulgaria's "traditional" religion and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church receives government benefits without needing to register (U.S. Department of State, 2018).

(U.S. Department of State, 2018), and **have been able to attain positions of political power. Prominent Evangelicals include the current Minister of Defense, Krasimir Donchev Karakachanov, and his head of communications, Alexander Urumov** (interview with Krasimira Velichkova, 2020). Both opposed the IC and are vocal supporters of other gender-restrictive campaigns and initiatives.

Specific churches and denominations exerted great influence in the public perception of the IC and other policies seeking to protect human rights, particularly those of children, women and LGBT population. For example, during the protests against the National Strategy for the Child 2019-2030, the Orthodox Church made an official statement condoning the liberty of parents to slap their children as a form of discipline. The statement, widely covered by the Bulgarian media, also reinforced the Church's opposition to abortion, contraception, and CSE in the nation's schools (*The Sofia Globe*, 2019).

Furthermore, despite their historical antagonism, the Orthodox, Catholic, and Evangelical Churches, along with the Grand Mufti's Office of the Muslim Denomination, worked together to prevent the ratification of the IC and block other rights-affirming initiatives in Bulgaria (Darakchi, 2019: 1210).

2) Growing Anticolonial Sentiment

TAKEAWAYS

- At the beginning of the 21st century, Bulgaria became a member of the EU, which required the implementation of international legal frameworks that protect and advance human rights and gender-justice.
- At the same time, gender-normative, religious, and nationalist sentiments—which had remained mostly absent from public life in the previous decades—reemerged with force.
- Gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria recognized and instrumentalized the tension between progressive international legal frameworks that protect human rights and gender justice and gender-normative and nationalist worldviews that promote a patriarchal and less democratic sociopolitical order.

In the first decade of the new millennium most Eastern European countries became members of the European Union (EU). Among other required reforms, this meant ratifying and implementing a liberal international legal framework that protected women's rights and was increasingly—and rapidly—advancing LGBT rights. Two worldviews collided: a conservative one that sought to reinstate a patriarchal, hetero/cis-normative, and nationalist order; and an international, progressive one that, at least on paper, proclaimed equality as one of its core values and regarded diversity—in terms of race, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, etc.—as a decisive marker of modern democracies.

Gender-restrictive groups recognized and instrumentalized this dichotomy, mainly through strategic messaging and mobilization against so-called “genderism.” Consistent with what has happened in other contexts like Africa and Latin America, gender-restrictive groups in Eastern Europe framed the defense of women's, children's and LGBT rights as a neocolonial project of “Western” countries that are trying to impose what they call a “gender delusion” on the rest of the world (Korolczuk & Graff, 2018).

The anticolonial narrative was highly effective in Bulgaria due in part to the long history of foreign invasions the country has endured. Gender-restrictive groups successfully instrumentalized nationalist sentiment to portray the protection of LGBT, women's, and children's rights as a foreign imposition contrary to national values and interests.

In this sense, **Bulgaria is a prime example of how legislative or court-mandated human rights protections and initiatives—particularly those with origins in international bodies—can backfire if they are not implemented in tandem with sustained cultural dialogue, or if they disregard a country's social, cultural, and political context.**

3) Normalized Anti-LGBT and Anti-Women Sentiment and Behavior

TAKEAWAYS

- At the beginning of the 21st century, Bulgaria became a member of the EU, which required the implementation of international legal frameworks that protect and advance human rights and gender-justice.
- At the same time, gender-normative, religious, and nationalist sentiments—which had remained mostly absent from public life in the previous decades—reemerged with force.
- Gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria recognized and instrumentalized the tension between progressive international legal frameworks that protect human rights and gender justice and gender-normative and nationalist worldviews that promote a patriarchal and less democratic sociopolitical order.

Like other Eastern European countries, Bulgaria has historically struggled to guarantee the rights and freedoms of women and the LGBT community (Radosveta, 2018). The primacy of the heterosexual and patriarchal family, with its attendant gender-restrictive values, cannot be solely explained by the surge of organized religion and interfaith alliances. Before the events of 2018-2019, Bulgaria had only achieved minor reforms affirming and protecting LGBT and women's

rights. According to the U.S. Department of State, Bulgaria has **no laws that protect against hate crimes based on sexual orientation and gender identity, and authorities often refuse to investigate and prosecute cases of homophobia and transphobia because they are not recognized by the law as crimes** (U.S. Department of State, 2019).

Additionally, homophobia, transphobia, and misogyny were identified by international monitoring organizations as worrisome trends in the country. The 2018 Rainbow Europe Index, which ranks countries based on policies and laws that have a direct impact on the human rights of LGBTI people, ranked Bulgaria 34th out of the 49 European countries it monitors. According to a 2018 Open Society Institute Study, the number of Bulgarian respondents who witnessed hate-speech incidents directed at LGBT people had doubled from 21% to 42% within two years (U.S. Department of State, 2019).

Regarding women's rights, the European Institute of Gender Equality's composite measure of violence against women placed Bulgaria as the country with the highest prevalence of violence against women and the greatest severity of such incidents compared to other EU countries in 2018. Civil society organizations also point out that domestic violence is normalized and considered a private matter in the country, which partly explains some of the reaction against the Istanbul Convention (interview with Yana Buhrer, 2020).⁷¹ Finally, the Special Eurobarometer survey on gender equality in 2017 shows that Bulgaria maintains considerably more patriarchal beliefs on the role of women compared to other EU member states: 81% of respondents agreed that the role of women was to take care of the home and the family (Radosveta, 2018).

The declaration of unconstitutionality of the Istanbul Convention leaves Bulgarian women, both cisgender and transgender, at heightened risk of domestic violence. This is even more troubling since gender-restrictive groups have also weakened state-funded programs that combat domestic violence and provide services for survivors.

⁷¹ Fine Acts, a collective in Bulgaria that seeks to combat "activist burnout," did an experiment in Sofia to illustrate this point. In 2017, a woman in Bulgaria was beaten for over 50 minutes before she died. The morning after, the neighbors told the press that they heard her screams, but they did not intervene. Fine Acts rented an apartment right below the murdered woman's apartment and started beating a drum set. It took the neighbors one minute and 52 seconds to react in this case (interview with Yana Buhrer, 2020).

4) Corruption and Political Unrest

TAKEAWAYS

- Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Bulgarian politicians have been mired in corruption scandals and the country has experienced political repression.
- Political turmoil and social unrest provided gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria an avenue for gaining support from a broad spectrum of Bulgarian society.
- **Unpopular governments with little political capital are more likely to yield to pressure from gender-restrictive groups** that portray themselves as restorers of moral and national values, as well as sociopolitical order.

As in other post-socialist Eastern European countries, Bulgaria's transition to democracy and capitalism has not always been smooth. In the last decade, the country has faced economic and political turmoil, as well as social unrest. Its entrance to the EU in 2007 brought unprecedented international scrutiny and criticism of the government's failure to take effective action against corruption and organized crime (BBC, n.d.).

After several years in which the Socialist Party (BSP) and the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) alternated power, Boyko Borisov—from the center-right, populist Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) party—was elected prime minister in 2009. Borisov has now been in power for three consecutive terms. But his administration has been tainted by multiple scandals and corruption allegations, including connections to organized crime, political use of the prosecutor's office, and the persecution of journalists (Euronews, 2020). These charges weakened his political capital and strengthened that of his adversaries. Most notably, Rumen Radev, the current president of Bulgaria who was elected with the Socialist Party's support, initiated five votes of no-confidence against Borisov in Parliament, all of which the prime minister survived. However, his reputation and popularity have suffered as a result of these accusations.

In August 2020, there were more than 50 days of protests across Bulgaria. Protestors, mostly young people, stood up against what they see as the endemic corruption of the country's government and political system.

*Transparency International has ranked Bulgaria as the **most corrupt** of the 27 nations in the EU for seven consecutive years.*

III. MESSAGING AND COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria used communication and mobilization strategies similar to those used by other gender-restrictive movements around the world. **One of their primary and most successful tactics was the deployment of the term “gender,” and other neologisms derived from it, like “genderism,” to stoke moral panic and turn it into effective political action** (Squire, 2018).

Like “gender ideology” in other contexts, gender-restrictive groups used both “gender” and “genderism” as umbrella terms that gave cohesion to three distinct yet interrelated strategies that sought to prevent the implementation of rights-affirming policies and instruments:

- (Mis)translating the term “gender”
- Framing the “best interest of the child” as contrary to parental authority
- Presenting the “Norwegian Model” as a neocolonial and moral threat

Through the use of “gender” and “genderism,” Bulgarian gender-restrictive groups successfully crafted **a common language to pejoratively describe organizations, individuals, policies, laws, instruments, and initiatives that seek to protect and/or advance women’s, children’s, and LGBT rights.**

In this section, we unpack how gender-restrictive groups used these three messaging strategies to successfully block initiatives seeking to advance human rights and gender justice by politically mobilizing moral panic through the instrumentalization of children.

1) The (Mis)translation of “Gender”

TAKEAWAYS

- Gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria are increasingly coopting the language of feminism and gender theory, turning it into a powerful weapon against human rights and gender justice.
- The (mis)translation of the term gender, and the creation of neologisms derived from it, like “genderism,” effectively brought together different issues that gender-restrictive movements were seeking to highlight in order to organize sociopolitical opposition to the advancement of LGBT and women’s rights (Mayer & Sauer, 2017).
- The strategic (mis)translation of “gender” and the use of related terms like “genderism” successfully amplified the misconception of LGBT rights as contrary to children’s and women’s rights, causing moral panic and preventing or stalling collaboration between women’s, children’s, and LGBT groups and advocates.
- The resignification of “gender” has been so productive that all anti-gender campaigns that have mobilized the term for concrete political outcomes in Bulgaria have succeeded.

The communications strategy deployed by Bulgarian gender-restrictive groups to instrumentalize the language of human rights begins with the idea of gender itself. To talk about gender theory, Bulgarian feminists in the 1990s did not use the English transliteration of the term. Instead, they used the existing Bulgarian word for speaking about gender in a biological—and taxonomical—way (род).

However, gender-restrictive groups started using the English transliteration of “gender” (джендър) and creating neologisms like “genderism” from it, intentionally shifting the definitions of these terms depending on context, always with negative connotations. For example, the English transliteration

of “gender” was—and still is—used as a homophobic slur similar to the term *f***t* in English, while it also functioned as a pejorative term to describe feminists, LGBT activists, and, more recently, anyone supporting the IC (Darakchi, 2019: 1210; National Network for Children, 2019).⁷²

TRANSLATING “GENDER” IN THE BATTLE FOR LANGUAGE

A key element in the modern attack on women’s and LGBT rights is the appropriation and resignification of the term “gender.” For decades, the use of the term “gender” has been key to raising awareness of and mobilizing support for the rights of cisgender girls, women, and LGBT children and adults. However, as the expressions “gender ideology” or “genderism” show, gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria have effectively appropriated this term, giving it pejorative, panic-inducing connotations.

In addition to the legal outcomes of the resignification of the term, millions of people in Bulgaria now see “gender” as a belief system that 1) promotes the moral and sexual corruption of children; 2) attacks life, parental authority, and religion; and 3) disregards national sovereignty and culture.

The campaign against the IC was partially based on these difficulties of translating the term “gender,” as well as a misrepresentation of the idea of gender as a social construct, which was at the core of the IC. Gender-restrictive groups argued that accepting the use of the term in any context, but particularly in legislation or other binding documents and state programs or initiatives, posed a grave threat and would lead to what they called “genderism.” With this expression, gender-

restrictive groups meant the supposed imposition of a belief and legal system that 1) promotes the moral and sexual corruption of children; 2) attacks life, parental authority, and religion; and 3) disregards national sovereignty and culture. This messaging was used during the debates around the ratification of the IC and the National Strategy for the Child.⁷³

Concretely, gender-restrictive groups argued that **replacing “sex”—a supposedly binary category determined by biology and assigned at birth—with “gender”—understood as a socially-constructed identity category that could be freely determined by individuals, without essential traits or abilities attached to it—would lead to moral, social, and political chaos.**⁷⁴

In particular, they claimed two disastrous outcomes would follow the ratification of the IC: **a)** increased violence against cisgender women, and **b)** the destruction of the heterosexual family, which would in turn have catastrophic consequences for Bulgarian children.

a) Increased violence against cisgender women:

According to the slippery slope logic advanced by gender-restrictive groups, since the IC uses gender as an identity category that can be self-determined, not an unchangeable biological essence revealed at birth, then the state can no longer accurately differentiate between men and women. This would make cisgender women more vulnerable since they could become targets of men who, by pretending to be women, could enter women-only spaces with the intent to attack and defile women and girls. In consequence, ratifying the IC would make it impossible for the Bulgarian government to protect the rights of cisgender women, particularly concerning domestic violence (the argument upheld by the Constitutional Court).

72 Something similar happens in Bulgarian with a term that gender-restrictive groups have adapted to be used as an adjective: *sorosig*. The term, which refers to George Soros, describes a person who supports initiatives to advance the rights of women and the LGBT population (interview with Krasimira Velichkova, 2020).

73 For instance, the Grand Mufti’s Office of Muslim Denomination in Bulgaria offered the following comment about the term “gender” introduced in the Convention: “Article 3 of the Convention determines the biological sex and the new for us phenomenon ‘gender.’ An English word from the American vocabulary, it is one of the many new terms that have recently entered the Bulgarian language in the last 30 years. According to the first explanation, ‘gender’ is a woman of ‘social gender,’ that is, a ‘third gender.’ In this sense, the foreign word does not have meaning in Bulgarian life and literature. The clarification on the case came from the scientific circles.” In the same document, they also claim: “‘Gender’ was the name of the ritual for the circumcision of the female genitals in Yemen” (2018).

74 It is worth noting that the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights stated that the translation of gender by Bulgarian gender-restrictive groups is inconsistent with the translation of the term in other international documents (2019).

b) The destruction of the heterosexual family: The reasoning behind this theory was relatively simple. If a person could self-identify according to their gender identity instead of their assigned sex at birth, then it would be impossible to ensure that marriage remained restricted to opposite-sex partners, de facto legalizing equal marriage and hence same-sex adoption (Darakchi, 2019: 1209). According to gender-restrictive groups, equal marriage and adoption would, in turn, have three devastating consequences:

- It would put vulnerable children at substantial risk of sexual abuse by same-sex couples (due to the conflation of nonnormative gender identities and sexual orientations with pedophilia and sexual deviance).
- It would put children at risk of becoming sexual deviants themselves.
- It would threaten the continuation of humankind by disrupting the link between sexuality and reproduction, only possible within normative heterosexual relations.

Through the mistranslation of the term “gender” and the creation of neologisms derived from it, like “genderism,” gender-restrictive groups succeeded in framing key elements of gender justice, such as LGBT rights and equal marriage and adoption, as contrary to children’s and cisgender women’s rights (particularly related to matters of protection from domestic violence).

2) Framing the “Best Interest of the Child” as Contrary to Parental Authority

TAKEAWAYS

- Gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria claimed that those who advance women’s and LGBT rights seek to undermine parental authority.
- Gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria intentionally misinterpreted the principle of “the best interest of the child” to claim that women’s and LGBT rights advocates wanted to remove children from the patriarchal, heterosexual home.
- Gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria created confusion about the legal concept of “juvenile justice,” which does not exist in the country, to claim that women’s, children’s, LGBT rights advocates wanted to introduce this mechanism in order to remove children from the patriarchal, heterosexual home.

Gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria successfully framed parental rights and children’s rights, including those of LGBT children, as oppositional to each other.

One of the most widespread and pernicious arguments of gender-restrictive groups in Eastern Europe claims that those who advance women’s and LGBT rights seek to undermine parental authority, and to deprive children of their supposedly natural site of care and wellbeing: the patriarchal, heterosexual home. The recent messaging in Bulgaria has gone so far as to assert that the ultimate goal of these groups is to give the state total control over children, even facilitating “abductions” of children from their homes by civil servants (Eurochild, 2019b).

An intentional misinterpretation of the principle of “the best interest of the child” supports these statements. According to gender-restrictive groups, the state could invoke this principle to remove children from the care of parents or guardians on the most superficial of bases, such as denying a toy to a child or missing an immunization.

Another aspect of this strategy, and the most visible evidence of the of Russia’s contribution to the disinformation campaign, also misinterprets a legal concept: “ювенална юстиция,” or “juvenile justice.” Bulgaria does not have a juvenile justice system, nor was there a bill to create one. Regardless, gender-restrictive groups built on previous events in Russia and Ukraine⁷⁵ and successfully claimed that the National Strategy for the Child wanted to introduce a juvenile justice system that would give the state enormous powers to take children and adolescents from their homes (National Network for Children, 2019b).

*As a consequence of the moral panic manufactured by gender-normative groups, **today Bulgaria does not have a comprehensive national policy for child welfare.** This puts all Bulgarian children at risk, particularly those who are more likely to suffer discrimination and violence, like LGBT children and adolescents.*

Finally, gender-restrictive groups presented the ban on physical punishment and efforts to implement CSE in all schools as examples of undue intervention of the state in family affairs. This argument has an extremely pernicious effect: **by framing “the best interest of the child” as an attack on parental authority, gender-restrictive groups pitted children’s and parental rights against each other, eroding the idea of the universality of human rights.** Additionally, this logic upholds an antiquated and dangerous paradigm that treats children as their parents’ property, not as independent subjects of rights who need care and guidance to exert those rights.

3) Presenting the “Norwegian Model” as a Neocolonial and Moral Threat

TAKEAWAYS

- Gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria created moral panic through a misinformation campaign that claimed that the National Strategy for the Child and the Social Services Act allowed the undue interference of the Norwegian state in Bulgarian affairs.
- This misinformation campaign is known as the “imposition of the Norwegian Model.”
- As a conspiracy theory, the “Norwegian Model” combines nationalist sentiments with other strategies, including the conflation of homosexuality with sexual corruption and abuse of children, and the idea that the recognition of non-heterosexual couples and families will necessarily result in moral and societal decomposition.
- **The conspiracy theory around the “Norwegian Model” presented civil society organizations, social workers, and state child-serving agencies as contrary to children and parental rights.**
- Gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria successfully framed LGBT and women’s rights as detrimental to national sovereignty and society at large.

⁷⁵ In Russia, the moral panic about “juvenile justice” erupted in 2011 with the rumor that, through this system, foreign powers would be able to take away Russian children. The panic then swept Ukraine, where Orthodox and Evangelical churches united against the “strategy of juvenile justice in Ukraine” (National Network for Children, 2019b).

One of the most effective forms of the instrumentalization of children to attack the rights of women and the LGBT people in Bulgaria was the moral panic produced by the supposed imposition of the “Norwegian Model,” purportedly hidden in the fine print of the IC, the National Strategy for the Child 2019-2030, and the Social Services Act.

The “Norwegian Model” refers to a disinformation campaign about the supposed undue interference of the Norwegian state in Bulgarian affairs. According to this conspiracy theory, the Norwegian state was financing progressive NGOs in Bulgaria to lobby to diminish parental authority so that the Bulgarian government could more readily remove children from their own homes for minor parental misconduct (interview with Nadejda Dermendjieva, 2020).⁷⁶ Once these children were in state custody, they could then be adopted by international—mostly Norwegian—same-sex couples.

The conspiracy theory around the “Norwegian Model” alleged that civic society organizations, social workers, and state child protection agencies were contrary to children’s rights. It claimed that “social workers in countries such as Norway [Barnevernet, the Norwegian Child Welfare Services], Sweden, and Germany [have] become a means of controlling parents” (SVA, 2019). The disinformation campaign was even presented on national television, using misleading data to imply that one out of every two children in Norway is taken away by social services (National Network for Children, 2019b). The speculation went so far as to say that Norwegians would transport Bulgarian children by train to give them to same-sex couples in Norway and the Netherlands, where, they contended, pedophilia is sanctioned and protected by law (Dragoeva, 2019).

The “Norwegian Model” combines nationalist sentiments with some of the most effective and common strategies of gender-restrictive movements against “gender ideology,” including the conflation of homosexuality with sexual

corruption and child abuse, and the idea that the recognition of nonheterosexual couples and families will necessarily result in moral and societal decomposition.⁷⁷

By placing Norway at the center of the controversy about the IC, the National Strategy for the Child, and the Social Services Act⁷⁸ and insisting on the supposedly devastating impact such intervention(ism) would have in Bulgarian society and political life, gender-restrictive groups successfully reinforced the idea that gender justice and human rights, including those of LGBT people, women, and children, are a neocolonial imposition that threatens national values. **Hence, opposing the IC, the Strategy, and the Act became a matter of protecting children and defending Bulgarian sovereignty from foreign intervention.** Despite the baselessness of these accusations, the strategy was highly effective.

76 In their words: “As concerned parents and with the support of reputable lawyers, we oppose the ideology financed by Norway’s Child Protection Services, the Barnevernet, that undermines the traditional family and gives the CPS and dubious NGOs wrong powers to interfere in normal family life” (To Save the Children of Bulgaria, 2019).

77 The following text from the SVA highlights the anticolonial underpinnings of this rhetoric: “[The National Strategy for the Child] is extremely far from Bulgarian reality, identity, and history, for which the family institution has played a key role in preserving the self-consciousness and survival of the Bulgarian people over the centuries. For the Bulgarian nation, the role of parents and family is of fundamental importance. With the possible implementation of this Strategy, dubious European practices leading to the destruction, control, and separation of children from their families will be legitimized.”

78 For some, the fact that Norway was put at the center of this conspiracy theory points to Russian influence. Norway is a convenient enemy for Moscow for many reasons: its firm stance in favor of progressive principles, the role it plays in the NATO, and the fact that it is Russia’s direct competitor in the oil and gas market, especially for resources from the Arctic region (National Network for Children, 2019b).

IV. SPREADING AND MOBILIZING DISINFORMATION

Deceitful Use of Social Media

Gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria use social media, particularly Facebook, to accomplish four main goals:

- Share their (mis)information campaigns and organize events during key political junctures.
- Make their messaging and support appear more grassroots than it actually is.
- Make the number of active supporters appear much larger than it actually is.
- Obscure the networks, organizations, and individuals behind these gender-restrictive messaging and organizing efforts.

The main channel of communication used by Bulgarian gender-restrictive groups is social media, specifically Facebook. There are various Facebook groups that supposedly congregate thousands of “concerned parents.” However, many of the participants’ profiles are fake (interview with Krasimira Velichkova, 2020) and the administrators of the groups are usually unknown.

No to the Strategy for the Child 2019-2030 (He на Стратегијата за детето 2019–2030 г.), Bulgaria’s most important gender-restrictive Facebook group, is a case in point of this deceitful use of social media.

The group was created in 2019 by a profile called Hristina Runtova, whose first social networking activity was logged only two days prior to the establishment of the group. The group has over 202,000 members, but only 10 profiles are responsible for over 15% of all posts.⁷⁹ One of them, Runtova, is the most prolific and posts as much as the next five most active members

combined (Yurukov, 2019). Messages shared in the group commonly send users directly to other spaces of the gender-restrictive e virtual ecosystem, primarily YouTube, where there is an abundance of gender-restrictive materials (Yurukov, 2019).

The activity of the group peaked during the elections for the European Parliament in April 2019, after which time it waned considerably. In notable contrast to the impressive number of followers, only a few hundred people actually attended the protests advertised on the page, which indicates that **the number of followers does not necessarily translate to active supporters.**

In 2019, after some of the administrators were blocked, the group was renamed National Group – Parents United for Children [Национална група – Родители обединени за децата]. The current administrators are no longer individuals, but two Facebook pages registered as Community and Cause. This label obscures almost all information about who is actually managing the page⁸⁰ (National Network for Children, 2019b).

Few but Powerful Evangelical “Warriors”

Evangelicals in Bulgaria represent less than 1.1% of the population. However, in the last years, Evangelicals who vocally express their gender-restrictive views have reached important positions of power and achieved considerable visibility and public recognition. These include Krasimir Karakachanov, current Minister of Defense; Alexander Urumov,⁸¹ press secretary to the Ministry of Defense; Ivaylo Tinchev, the organizer of the March for the Family, a demonstration against the Sofia Pride Parade; and pastor Encho Georgiev Enchev, whose videos of himself preaching from his car are extremely popular (his Facebook profile is called driver.evangelist).

79 In 2019, Boyan Yurukov analyzed the behavior of the 158,000 participants that the group had at the time. He found that, of the 158,000 members, 2,518 had published a total of 7,827 posts. Of these, 1,526 people had posted only once, while 23.4% of all posts came from less than 1% of posters and an additional 16% came from only 10 people. Similarly, there were 280,493 comments from 22,961 people: 1% of the commenters were responsible for 27.8% of the comments, and 18% were made by only 100 individuals. Seven members had made over 1,000 comments in less than a year (Yurukov, 2019).

80 Other Facebook groups include: Let’s protect the Bulgarian Family [Да запазим българското семейство], a public group created in 2019 with over 11,000 members; Bulgaria’s Children [Децата на България], a public group with over 10,000 followers linked to a law firm’s webpage; and Join the Fight Against Child Trafficking [Включете се в борбата против трафика на деца].

81 Urumov has been an active evangelist since the 1990s, and his sermons can be seen on YouTube. He has long been popular on social networks as a vocal warrior against liberal values and especially against what gender-normative groups call “genderism” (National Network for Children, 2019b).

Attacking Local Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)

Gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria have succeeded at repealing progressive policies and legal frameworks through disinformation and conspiracy theories. However, their actions are not merely “defensive,” as they do not just react against regulation or policy efforts.

As part of their strategy to advance a gender-restrictive worldview in Bulgaria, they are now seeking to “**clear the field**” by attacking the reputation and the international funding streams of Bulgarian CSOs. This strategy takes advantage of the fact that, due to the Soviet legacy, the Bulgarian CSO ecosystem is relatively new, historically stigmatized, and largely grant-dependent (interview with Krasimira Velichkova, 2020).

Representatives from the United Patriots Party, a member of the ruling coalition, proposed a package of amendments to the CSO law. The amendments

included proposals to eliminate state funding for projects presented by CSOs and obligations to report income from foreign sources. According to the National Network for the Children, if adopted, the measures would lead to the official labelling of CSOs as “foreign agents” and give authorities broad powers to subject them to financial inspections without any specific violation of the law, simply for receiving foreign funding (National Network for the Children, n.d.).

This attack on much-needed funding streams for local CSOs that are already under-resourced is a serious threat to their sustainability and to human rights and gender justice in the country. This is particularly worrisome taking into consideration the notable influx of resources that gender-restrictive and de-democratization organizations have been receiving in the last years from both local and foreign sources.

Division of Labor

Gender-restrictive groups in Eastern Europe are well-organized and their **coordination efforts are supported by individuals and organizations with different skillsets and roles.**⁸²

Organizers Institutions, usually religious groups, that play a central role in convening large events.

Insiders Sympathizers of the gender-restrictive agenda who do not occupy official positions in gender-restrictive organizations or institutions, but who nonetheless attend their meetings or conventions. These individuals usually hold roles in government, serving as senators, deputy foreign ministers, or members and leaders of parties or of the European Parliamentary Assembly.

Ideologues Those who set the agenda, develop key arguments, and create slogans. These individuals and/or organizations also adapt international strategies to national contexts and specific political or social circumstances.⁸³

Sponsors Experts with decades of experience in gender-restrictive work in the United States. They provide financial resources, technical expertise, and strategic knowhow to Eastern Europeans.⁸⁴

Implementers Loose and vast network of smaller organizations and individuals who attend marches and replicate messages in social media and other venues.

⁸² The following chart has been modified from the report on a recent Agenda Europe meeting written by the European Parliamentary Forum on Reproductive and Gender Rights (EPF) (Datta, 2019).

⁸³ For example, the five main strategies presented at the 2015 Agenda Europe Summit were related to euthanasia, religious freedom, marriage and the family, anti-discrimination, and anti-surrogacy (Datta, 2019).

⁸⁴ Sponsors include individuals such as Brian Brown of the National Marriage Organization, Laila Rose of Live Action, Marie Smith of Priests for Life, and Sharon Slater of Family Watch International. In the case of Bulgaria, the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) advised national organizations on how to campaign against the ratification of the Istanbul Convention.

V. CONCLUSION

Bulgarian gender-restrictive forces have been particularly successful at curtailing the advancement of LGBT and women's rights in part through the instrumentalization of children and the language of human rights.

Their messaging strategies have effectively halted public policies seeking to advance gender justice, particularly, CSE, gender equality, and LGBT rights. As in many other countries, these groups have mobilized the idea of "gender" and used it to seed moral panic and mobilize the public for concrete legislative or political outcomes.

In Bulgaria's case, these groups have benefited from the increasing importance of organized religion in the public sphere, particularities of the Bulgarian language, strong patriarchal beliefs—even when compared to other Eastern European countries—and negative connotations of the communist legacy, including the forced institutionalization of children.

The consequences of the instrumentalization of children and the framework of human rights for LGBTI people, women, and children in Bulgaria are tangible and troubling. The declaration of unconstitutionality of the Istanbul Convention leaves Bulgarian women at heightened risk of domestic violence and gender-based violence. Trans rights have also been undermined: a law that would have allowed trans individuals to change their name and sex in official documents was also declared unconstitutional soon after.

Furthermore, most of **the consequences of the lost battles in the educational and child welfare landscape have yet to be seen.** The lack of a comprehensive child welfare state policy will affect the most vulnerable children and families, including many LGBTI children and adolescents. Also, the fact that the Ministry of Education and Science is no longer collecting school-level data about gender, or gender and/or LGBT-based bullying will directly impact children who suffer this type of violence and discrimination. Defunding or blocking programs that support teachers and schools in addressing gender injustices could further hinder children's rights, especially those of girls and LGBT children of all genders.

Most notably, human rights civil society organizations that advocate for a wide range of issues, ranging from the protection of children's, women's, and LGBT rights to promotion of education and the defense of the environment, are **battling against efforts that seek to curtail their funding streams and compromise their long-term sustainability.**

- *Religious groups in Bulgaria, including the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Christian Orthodox Church, the Grand Mufti's Office of Muslim Denomination, and emerging Evangelical churches, have worked together against initiatives that protect and advance children's, women's, and LGBT rights.*
- *Gender-restrictive groups have exerted **notable influence on both right-wing and left-wing political parties.** As is the case for interfaith alliances, **gender normativity has become a powerful coalition-builder among former political enemies**, which makes them increasingly influential and harder to challenge.*
- *Most local gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria don't publicly identify with specific religious denominations. They present themselves as members of civil society—parents, citizens, lawyers, etc.—and speak the language of rights and patriotism.*
- *Gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria don't have many publicly recognizable faces.*
- *For the most part, gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria operate under the anonymity of "secular" organizations. This gives them a broader reach among nonreligiously affiliated people who may be easier to mobilize under banners like "concerned parents" or "citizens."*

In sum, gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria have not only been extremely effective at the legal and policy level. They also seem to be winning the cultural war. Rooted in the successful framing of LGBT and cisgender women's rights as oppositional to each other, contrary to children's rights and wellbeing, and against national interests, the embrace of gender normativity by the most influential political and religious actors, as well by the Constitutional Court, will continue to negatively impact the lives of millions of women, LGBTI people, and children in Bulgaria for decades to come.