HOW DO THE STATE AND SOCIETY TALK ABOUT VIOLENCE? THE MULTIPLE ACTORS IN THE BULGARIAN CASE OF THE ISTANBUL CONVENTION

By

Maria Atanasova

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Department of Romani Studies

Supervisor: Andreea Nicutar

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Abstract

The present thesis examines a case of plurality regarding the question of how the Bulgarian state and society discuss gender-based violence. By examining the multiple actors in the debate about the Istanbul Convention and the Bulgarian government's reaction, I analyze the emergence of an institutional language and the usage of terms such as "gender", "gender ideology" and "pink liberals" to transform the message about gender-based violence into jokes that appeared in everyday life about homosexuality. As a result, the discussion about gender-based violence in Bulgaria could not continue and the Istanbul Convention was not ratified, mainly because of the nationalist party's linguistic strategy. By analyzing this process, the thesis aims to open a new discussion about gender-based violence and the situation of feminism in Bulgaria.

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Introduction

This thesis examines the case of plurality regarding the question of how the Bulgarian state and society discuss gender-based violence. I will analyze the multiple actors in the case of Bulgaria, such as the nationalist party, "United Patriots Coalition", the feminist group, "Bulgarian Found for Women" and the society. By examining the Bulgarian political reaction to the Istanbul Convention, I will examine the emergence of an institutional language and the usage of terms such as feminism, gender and "pink liberals" to transform the message about gender-based violence into jokes about homosexuality.

This thesis will then discuss how speech acts (as defined by Butler) lead to an institutional language that then aggressively restricts the spaces of appearance. I argue that the language and the terms in the Istanbul Convention were not clarified within the discourse carried out by the Bulgarian Parliament, thereby allowing politicians from the nationalist party, United Patriots Coalition, to transform the terms. This lack of clarity in turn led to confusion and boycotting the debate about the ratification of the Convention.

On 21 April 2016 the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, known as the Istanbul Convention, was signed by the Bulgarian Ministry of Justice. As a European country and a member of the Council of Europe, in 2017 Bulgaria opened its own parliamentary debate regarding the ratification of the Convention. In 2018 the leaders of the United Patriots Coalition claimed that the Istanbul Convention is "anti-constitutional" and the Convention was not ratified. According to the Bulgarian constitution, the Istanbul Convention is unconstitutional because of its interpretation of the term "gender." (Gotev, 2018) In the opinion of the nationalist party, including the

concept of gender opens the door to legalizing same-sex marriage and will require legalization or legislative changes in the Bulgarian Constitution.¹

Gender-based violence in Bulgaria

The World Health Organization reports that 30% of women worldwide have experienced a form of violence. (World Health Organisation, 2020) In Europe 1 in 3 women over the age of 15 have experienced physical or sexual violence at least once in their life according to the results of a report of the European Union Agency of Human Rights. In Bulgaria, most of the cases of gender-based violence are not monitored by Governmental institutions. The topic is raised and monitored by the civil sector and the situation is alarming. In April 2021 the institution of the Ombudsman released a report in which civil monitoring is mentioned. Since the pandemic of 2020/2021 began, 27 women have been murdered by their husbands or partners in Bulgaria2.

In spite of the government's stance on the Istanbul Convention, there is a genuine need for more awareness regarding gender-based violence in Bulgaria. Women are being killed and violence happens before the very eyes of the Bulgarian institutions and society. There are cases where neighbors see the violence or hear the screams of the victim but they do not talk about it. The cases of gender-based violence are treated with ignorance, as something that does not actually happen and instead of calling the police because of witnessed crime, they remain ignorant. Still, the attitude towards gender-based violence is considered or named as a "normal family thing"/ "family matter" and shortly after, it turns out that the woman has been killed.

¹ https://btvnovinite.bg/bulgaria/politika/deputat-ot-vmro-tretijat-pol-njama-da-razbie-koalicijata.html Position of the United patriots about the Convention

² <u>https://www.ombudsman.bg/pictures/Izkazvane%20Razgrad(1).pdf</u> Report released by the Bulgarian Ombudsman.

How violence became a joke?

In 2017, after the opening of the debate about the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, there were many discussions about the Convention but not debates about its function of preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. Instead, discussions surrounded the word "gender". About "gender" the document of the Istanbul Convention, says the following (Istanbul Convention; 2011 p.3) "gender" shall mean the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men;"; "gender-based violence against women" shall mean violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately;"

During the discussion about the Istanbul Convention the Bulgarian nationalist party, the United Patriots Coalition was in the Parliament as a part of a coalition with the major Bulgarian party. The nationalist party picked up the word "gender" from the document. Not in the meaning of "socially constructed gender roles" and defining "gender-based violence". The nationalists played with the word and gave it another meaning., the meaning of defining sexuality or choosing sexuality, referring to people with different sexual orientation, mainly to homosexual people. They sent a completely different message to society. The message was that the document will allow and give freedom to people to "choose" their sexual orientation or legalize being gay and same sex marriage, even inventing a "third" sex — "gender", therefore with the meaning of not a male, not a female, but gay. ³

The assumption of being gay in Bulgaria holds the stigma of being "abnormal", "shameful", "too liberal" and so on. As a conservative country, Bulgaria does not give any rights to LGBTQ+ people or does not even open a discussion in this regard. The nationalists believe in

³ More about the "third" sex and the 'gender-ideology', here: .<u>https://ohrh.law.ox.ac.uk/promoting-gender-ideology-constitutional-court-of-bulgaria-declares-istanbul-convention-unconstitutional/</u>

"family values", "Christian values" in marriage only between a man and a woman. They referred to the Istanbul Convention as a document legalizing the freedom of "choosing" one's sexual orientation. The invention of those new meanings opened the discussion in the Bulgarian society but not anymore as a discussion about gender-based violence but as a discussion about the "third" sex.

The space of appearance

In the chapter "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance", Butler argues that vulnerability emerges prior to any gathering when people demonstrate to oppose the precarious conditions in which they live –that might be conditions of oppression or violence. She discusses that to be able to resist or to oppose we need an infrastructure/a space, a space of appearance. The space or the infrastructure is not always there, it is not always given. She gives an example with the poor neighborhoods where a group of people live, such as immigrants or Roma. In some of these neighborhoods people do not have running water or infrastructure: streets for instance.

Butler argues that the street is not only an infrastructural good, which some people have and some people do not, but It is also a platform for political demand. (Butler, 2017, p17.) Protests are happening on the street in order to create, keep or open the platform for political expression itself. The street cannot be taken for granted. Butler uses Hannah Arendt's phrase for, "the space of politics" that comes into being at the moment of political action. The space can be not only the street, it could be the space of the media and the everyday conversations.

In the case of the Istanbul Convection and the roles of the nationalist party, the nationalists through their language and appearance in the public spaces, media, parliamentary discussions, try to destroy the space of appearance for feminism. Every act, claim for a right or demand for protection is marked as an act of "those too liberal" or of "pink liberals" that are the enemy of the "traditional family" and values, those that just want to ruin the traditional family by changing it through acts of creating/ choosing their gender.

The question of speech act

According to Butler, "We do not only act through speech act; speech act also acts on us." Butler discusses the matter and the effect of speech act, she discusses the question: does speech continue to act on us at the very moment in which we speak, so that we may well think we are acting, but we are also acted on at that very same time. (Butler 2016, 16-17) By this Butler argues that speech act has the effect of name calling, shaping and formulating how we understand others and ourselves. We are shaped by speech act. If something has been said, speech act continues to work through us and affects us by shaping our thoughts, visions and opinions.

Speech act is a powerful tool for formulating opinions and creating meanings. For instance, the word gender has many ways to be used. In the main way is defining gender's socially constructed roles and gender as a sex. But in the case of the Bulgarian nationalist the word "gender" was used in a way that created assumptions about homosexuality – naming it as a synonym for gay. What happened when the word "gender" entered the public space, as a part of the nationalist's strategy is that the nationalists shaped the public assumptions about the term "gender". The speech act, acted on the people and on the public space. Even the citizens who are not politically active and do not pay attention to every law, debate or a Parliamentary discussion, heard about "gender" and they started to use it as a slur and a joke. They were acted on by the public space, by the media, by the public discussions. At home, in schools or on the street, the speech act continued to act on the people.

Speech act shows how important it is to be cautious what messages we are sending and what speech act operates through us, what words continue to talk through us, affect us and re-produce meanings, names and discourse. The more we act, the more we reinforce and reproduce the discourse. That is why it is necessary to oppose the dominant discourse that talks about

"gender" as the "third sex" and not about gender-based violence and homophobia. We need to ask ourselves: can we act on the assumptions spread by the nationalist about gender? We are acted on, but we are acting on, so we have to act on with the right tools and words that will bring violence and homophobia into the light and build another discourse that talk about the issues in a way that we will get closer to the change of normalizing mentally and culturally the discussions about the problems and not joking about them.

Institutional language

The institutional language acts on us in every aspect and level through the political institutions, political bodies and through citizen bodies. The word "gender" is an example of how it was discussed and addressed, how it became a joke and a slur, all that because of the institutional language that politicians used. One might ask, what the institutional language does? Transforming the term "gender" does not only take the space from women who fight for right and protection, ignores gender-based violence but also harms. It does violence itself to the LGBTQ+ people, by setting statements, conditions and a frame, where if you do not fit in and perform as (BUTLER, 2016, p. 18) one or the other gender, you are a joke. The institutional language that had been used in the case of the Istanbul Convention is erasing the ground for gay rights and the possibility of living out of the performative genders barriers.

The institutional language is part of the dominant discourse of the nationalists that operate in the society. (bell hooks, p.177) discusses English as the master's language, forced to be used by the enslaved Black people. The master's language operates as the dominant notion used in the public space. "They put together their words in such a way that the colonizer had to rethink the meaning of the English language." She offers an account of resistance through the master's language as space for bonding and resistance. To intervene in this discourse feminists, activists

and all citizens need to offer another way of talking about violence, a way that will show the problem and initiate the debate about violence.

Religion and nationalism

The first group to react against the Istanbul convention was the Bulgarian nationalist's coalition, "United Patriots Coalition". At the same time different religious organizations which support "Christian values" and the "traditional family" also reacted; there were complaining and even organized protests. ⁴The messages sent by the politicians from the nationalist coalition were conformed and spread by the Christian organizations. They spoke the same language, talking about protecting the family and children from becoming gay. They talked about the Istanbul Convention as a document spreading the gender ideology and "pink liberalism".

A politician, a member of the Bulgarian nationalist party and a former Member of the European Parliament, Angel Dzhambazki posted a video in March 2021 where he thanks to the partners of the evangelic churches in Bulgaria for their support against the "gender ideology" and the resistance against the Istanbul Convention⁵. He even confirms that there are members of the churches, religious leaders, who belong to the nationalist party. The nationalists, those who marked the Convention as anti- constitutional, have religious leaders in the party. According to the Bulgarian Constitution, as Article 13 stipulates "(4) Religious institutions and communities, and religious beliefs shall not be used to political ends." as it is against the Bulgarian constitution⁶.

⁴ https://bntnews.bg/bg/a/protest-sreshchu-istanbulskata-konventsiya Protest against the Istanbul Convention

⁵ https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=210686780837121 Video posted by the Member of the European Parliament - Angel Dzhambazki

⁶ To read the Bulgarian constitution, follow the link https://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/bg/bg033en.pdf

Who maintains the space for feminism in Bulgaria?

Among the multiple actors, there are feminists who are trying to bring back the discussion about the reality; the issues of gender-based violence and homophobia. There are foundations and formal groups of feminists that are trying to act toward the political and public debate about gender-based violence and doing initiatives against gender-based violence. One of their main focuses is to help victims of gender-based violence.

One of the actors is called Bulgarian Found for Women. ⁷They are a non-governmental organization devoted to empowering girls and women and working on gender issues and discrimination. They have campaigns to provide shelters for victims of gender-based violence and how to recognize the early signs of gender-based violence. They are doing fundraising and support women's initiatives and they are in solidarity with queer people.

In the debate about the Istanbul Convention, they were among the first to react to the false interpretation and messages against the Convention. ⁸They organized a demonstration to support the Istanbul Convention after the rejection from the Bulgarian Parliament and the successful nationalist's strategy. They are recognized as the main structure with a different position, supporting the Istanbul Convention. ⁹They often take part in interviews, debates and round tables, discussing gender-based violence. Through their appearance in the public spaces, they are raising awareness why the Convention is crucial as a document and how the document will provide better protection and policies for women. They maintain the space for feminism in Bulgaria.

⁷ To read more about Bulgarian Found for Women, follow the link https://bgfundforwomen.org/en/

⁸ https://bgfundforwomen.org/en/2017/12/20/bulgaria-ratify-istanbul-convention-end-2017-bfw-round-table-reveals/ A round table, discussion for Bulgaria to ratify the Istanbul Convention.

⁹ <u>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EGzq4qgQ9UM</u> Bulgarian Found for Women – interview, position about the Istanbul Convention

The pink liberals

In this section, I would like to discuss some terms that I heard used by different political parties in Bulgaria that identify themselves as nationalist, conservative and supporters of the "Christian values" and the "traditional family". "Pink liberals" is used by different nationalist politicians at different political levels, even by a former member of the European Parliament from the nationalist party in Bulgaria.

In an electoral campaign for the parliamentary election in April 2021 a discussion about the" pink liberals" appeared. The term this time was used by another n nationalist party. The conservative/ nationalist Bulgarian parties use the common term "pink liberals" to call people who have the feminist view, who advocate for the ratification of the Istanbul convention and who support LGBTQ+ rights. Those are the "pink liberals".

Feminists who want to open the discussion about the socially constructed gender roles, who want protection against gender-based violence and equality for other groups such as queer people or every other person/ activist who is defending the rights of any kind of minorities – ethnic, religious or sexual – is marked as "pink liberal". The solidarity between the oppressed groups makes them a problem for the political groups who want patriarchy and dominance.

How do we talk about violence?

To provide examples of how Bulgarian society reacts to violence, the following case that occurred in May 2021 shows a reaction to violence that is not related to gender. In the neighborhood of the Kapana's streets, in Plovdiv, a city in Bulgaria, a Roma man called Mitko was selling socks. One of the owners of a restaurant there did not like that Mitko was selling socks around his restaurant. The owner of the restaurant started to cause problems, insulting the sock's seller, pushing him and physically attacking him. There were people around who intervened, helped and stopped the situation.

A video from this situation went viral, people started to talk, share and discuss it, the case was in the media and the citizens were angry because of the restaurant owner's attitude. The people of Plovdiv made a campaign to buy socks from Mitko and to show their support, even though he is Roma, and to show their solidarity and that they do not tolerate aggression in their city. After the case went viral and everyone new about the case, even the Prosecutor's Office pressed charges against the owner of the restaurant.

This second example is about violence towards sexual minority. A few days after the Mitko's case, in the same city – Plovdiv, a youth LGBTQ+ organization was discussing a new book releasing related to queer rights. The discussion was happening in one of the spaces in a Bulgarian radio show. 15 minutes after the start of the discussion, the place was physically occupied by a group of people, nationalists, who claimed to defend the "traditional family" and do not want their children to be educated about sexuality and to become gay. ¹⁰ These people

 $[\]frac{10}{\text{https://bntnews.bg/news/futbolni-agitki-opitaha-da-nahluyat-na-sabitie-na-lgbt-organizaciya-v-plovdiv-1157346news.html?fbclid=IwAR3TIXUT_ynWac0t9R72lbFM-DT_rTz1fFEek9AEpIMK7tzcuSbTCiUgzBE} \text{ A video from the occupied event}$

started to verbally insult the people inside the place and to vandalize the windows of the place with stickers "Stop the LGBTQ virus".

There were police at the event but they did not react. After the effort of the organizers of the event, more police arrived at the place after an hour of the occupation, and the nationalist group left. But there was not a public reaction, no charges, even though the people inside the place were object of aggression and violence. Pictures and posts in the social media were shared only by close friends or members of the LGBTQ+ community. ¹¹The case was not viral in the media, as Mitko's was.

People did not react with any campaign to show solidarity toward a minority and to stand against the aggression. In the case of homophobia and queer rights, the society did not react. It was ignored in the same way as gender-based violence is ignored. There is a selective solidarity, to what kind of violence to react and talk about, what to share in our social media and for what to be angry about. It turns out that it is easier to create the picture of being in solidarity with the poor Roma man than with queer people or women who became victims of violence. Because 'even though he is Roma, he is a good guy earning his money in a good way', said some of the people who showed solidarity with Mitko.¹²

The question arises: why is it easier for the Bulgarian society to discuss violence toward a Roma man than the violence committed toward queer people and gender-based violence toward women? In the first case the only uncomfortable issue is that the man is an ethnic minority, a Roma. Nevertheless, that is an opportunity for the society to build the image of being tolerant even with the Romani minorities. But for feminism and queer rights it is too uncomfortable

¹¹ https://www.deystvie.org/post/homofobia?fbclid=IwAR1 eLuDSXo ml0oPT4rqK49gGOq8CefCBKZKi LEi jLBcmZxn3MRBgQdu0 An article about the aggression toward the LGBTQ+ community.

¹²More about the campaign in solidarity with Mitko https://btvnovinite.bg/bulgaria/sleda-agresijata-v-kapana-plovdivchani-podkrepiha-mitko-i-izkupiha-vsichkite-mu-chorapi.html

discussing it in the patriarchal society and being tolerant with these topics. Defending queer rights or gender-based violence will correlate with the ideas of the nationalists for being "too liberal" or even marked as "pink liberals". It is easier to fit into the hegemonic discourse than to claim a space for topics that are too uncomfortable.

Conclusion

In this paper, I scrutinized the question of how the Bulgarian state and society discuss gender-based violence. For that purpose, I used the document of the Istanbul convention released by the Council of Europe. I argued that the terms used in the debate were not clarified and this enabled the Bulgarian Parliament to change and question those terms as if they were used for homosexuality. Through the case of the Istanbul Convention and the debate about its ratification, I explored the multiple actors and their role in the debate, the institutional language used by the nationalist party and how the term "gender" has become a slur and a synonym for gay and used as a joke.

With Butler's theoretical help, I discussed the concepts of speech act and the spaces of appearance - how speech act continues to act and how important it is to be cautious about what speech act we are reproducing. I examined the concept of spaces of appearance as a space for political demand and as a space for bonding and resisting. In this paper, I discussed the feminist group as the actor that maintains the space for feminism and queer rights in Bulgaria.

Furthermore, I discussed the term "pink liberals", used by nationalist groups to call feminists and activists. I also examined the relationship between the nationalist political party and the religious groups that stand together against the Istanbul Convention, moving the debate from gender-based violence to a debate about "gender ideology" and the "third sex". After that, I examined how we talk about violence and the selective solidarity toward different minorities and why it is more comfortable to talk about violence against a Roma man than the violence committed toward women and the LGBTQ+ community.

This paper offers an account of the answer to the question: why the gender-based violence is necessary to be carried on as a discussion. A space of appearance should be created regarding

the ussies of gender-based violence. Created or kept in order to be able to maintain the possibility to fight. Because sometimes the fight is for the right to fight - to be opened a discussion or just to be seen as the opposite of something. That keeps the discussion and gives a chance to create the space for it.

It is vital to carry the discussion about feminism, to able to maintain the space for feminism and women's right and to do not allow major issues such as gender-based violence to be erased from the public discussion. The right to fight is not always given, sometimes you have to fight for it. Some never had in the first place. If you do not ask and fight for that possibility or if you do not practice the right you might lose that right to fight, talk and discuss essential issues.

It is vital as feminists, activist and as a society to keep the conversation open and to bring an alternative language to the discussion about gender- violence. It is an essential matter to build solidarity within the different groups and to raise the problems about selective solidarity. In that way we will not only carry the discussion but also will maintain the right to talk about it and create a different discourse This paper itself is about it, to bring a discussion, to help see the actors and the violence in the society.

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