“Are You A *Gender*?”: [Homo]Sexual Belonging in Bulgaria

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Abstract

This thesis looks at the ways in which LGBTQIA+ rights have been contested in Bulgaria as a way to illustrate broader patterns surrounding questions around national identity, citizenship and belonging facing Bulgaria after the fall of socialism in the country in 1989. Despite its geolocation in the Balkans, Bulgaria is rarely situated in conversations around Balkan national identity in favour of post-Yugoslavian spaces, leaving a gap in research discussing the role that Balkan collective memory plays within Bulgaria and the particular ways in which this affects the success of European Union initiatives in the country. The Ottoman legacy, however, is crucial to understanding why the country was subject to such a degree of retraditionalisation after the fall of socialism, while Western Europe was taking the first steps towards detraditionalising citizenship in favour of LGBTQIA+ rights.

Keeping this in mind, using theories of 'balkanism,' 'nesting orientalisms,' 'leveraged pedagogy,' and sexual citizenship, my thesis aims to portray the ways in which the struggle for LGBTQIA+ rights in Bulgaria actually reveals questions about the role that Bulgaria plays within the European Union and the ways in which the actors involved in this are subject to multiple layers of 'othering'. Due to its location, Bulgaria has been 'othered' by Western Europe long before it was given the ability to return to it. Once within the European Union, however, a reverse trend took place: the European Union's 'pink agenda,' along with the LGBTQIA+ individuals that became associated with it, became the subject of 'othering' by Bulgarian politicians, media and ultranationalist groups alike. The connection of the European Union to LGBTQIA+ rights in Bulgaria led to the creation of the queer scapegoat that came to signify the repression that many felt the European Union was placing on the country to become more 'progressive'. In an attempt to define who is 'us,' LGBTQIA+ citizens of Bulgaria were disregarded as an inherent 'them.'

After analysing four sites in which the dynamic between who belongs and does not belong to the nation is more visible, I conclude by arguing that Bulgarian LGBTQIA+ individuals hold an in-between space in Bulgaria, where they are considered only so much Bulgarian as everything but their sexuality indicates. Nevertheless, I contend that the Bulgarian LGBTQIA+ community should not lose hope, as by the mere act of existing in public, they break the heterosexual performativity of the spaces of the heteronormative nation.

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Finally, I want to thank the Bulgarian queer community. This whole project is dedicated to you, to your bravery, to your fearlessness, and to your dedication for fighting human rights. I hope I did you justice.

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

I further declare that the following word counts for this thesis are accurate:

Body of thesis (all chapters excluding notes, references, appendices, etc.): 24, 599 words

Entire manuscript: 31, 370 words

Signed: Anita Lekova

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List of Abbreviations

LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, and Others
EU	European Union
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
VMRO	Bulgarian National Movement
SVA	Association “Society and Values”
SDS	Union of Democratic Forces
BSP	Bulgarian Socialist Party

Introduction

"What makes queer people second-class citizens? The idea that sexual orientation is a private matter." (Kuhar, 2011:151)

In the summer of 2019, standing outside of a venue full of my uncle's former classmates celebrating their high school reunion, I engaged in a discussion with a family friend who asked me what I was going to study at CEU. Without giving it a second thought, I replied 'gender studies'. Before I knew it, I found myself in the middle of a conversation about gay rights, proceeding with something along the lines of "I have nothing against them, but why are they putting them up on billboards for the whole world to see!? It's ugly!"

Anne Fausto-Sterling writes that fear of the homosexual and the political struggle around gay rights is inevitably apart of the power struggle over gender (Jackson, 1998:73). Without realising it, the family friend I had spoken to shed light on the importance of LGBTQIA+ rights within the broader context of discussions around gender, especially in Eastern Europe. The main difference is, of course, that he was discussing the LGBTQIA+ individual with a level of disgust that can only come from, as Graff notes, when "the figure of the homosexual has moved out from the shady margins of collective consciousness" (Graff, 2006:445) and into the public realm. The most ironic thing about my interaction that summer night is that I have yet to see a billboard illustrating LGBTQIA+ people in Bulgaria. It was, rather, the *idea* that a billboard like that could exist that unsettled him. In this way, he had made it clear that for him, the limits of tolerance existed in a plane of invisibility; a degree of civility that respected the heterosexual order of things.

The most disheartening thing about this story is that this person's way of thinking is, as I have come to learn, the majority view regarding both gender and LGBTQIA+ rights in Bulgaria. Yet, despite local newspaper articles and some off-handed chapters dedicated to Bulgaria within larger books about anti-gender movements, rarely does anyone focus on this phenomenon. As a matter of fact, for a country in which nearly the whole Balkan Peninsula lies (Todorova, 2019:89), Bulgaria is oftentimes left out of conversations surrounding the Balkans in favour of countries from the Former Republic of Yugoslavia. Yet, just as them, Bulgaria has also been struggling to develop a national identity in between the East and the West, coming out of an unstable transition period that has been marked by corruption and distrust (Latcheva, 2010:188; Cianetti, Dawson and Hanley, 2018:244).

In this thesis, I will look at the ways in which LGBTQIA+ rights have been contested in Bulgaria as a way to illustrate broader patterns surrounding questions around national identity, citizenship, and belonging facing Bulgaria after the fall of socialism in the country in 1989. If Bulgaria is apart of the European continent, and if Europe has "a shared history of antagonisms to overcome" (Pagden, 2002:20), then this work is an important factor in better understanding such antagonisms as a way to work towards positive change for the LGBTQIA+ community in all of Europe. By the end of this thesis, I hope to have expanded the growing scholarship of gender panics in Central and Eastern Europe to the limits of Eastern Europe, exploring how Bulgarians balance tensions relating to progress, religion, and civility.

Theoretical Framework

What is Eastern Europe?

It is impossible to engage in conversations around Bulgaria without acknowledging theories surrounding the ideological construction of Eastern Europe. Lary Wolff, in *Inventing Eastern Europe*, argues that it was Western European intellectuals that invented Eastern Europe during the Enlightenment as a way to measure the progress of Europe on a developmental scale from barbarism to civilisation. In a similar fashion, Robert Kulpa presents the concept of leveraged pedagogy as a way to describe a "didactical and cultural hegemonic relation of power, where the CEE figures as an object of West/European pedagogy" (Kulpa, 2013:432). For Kulpa, Western Europe has used the promise of redemption via capitalism and democracy as a way to encourage Eastern European countries post-1989 to 'return to Europe.' Thus, as long as, as Laszlo Kürti writes, the Western 'other' exists, there will always also exist its Eastern other (Kürti, 1997:41). What is important to note is that the status of Eastern Europe, despite permanently sandwiched in-between West/'East' as signified by Islam, is consistently unstable. The promise of redemption echoes hope into the ears of countries left just outside of newer lines demarcating progress: those of the European Union (something Kulpa refers to when using 'Western Europe'). This unstable status especially affects countries located in the Balkans - an area rich with Ottoman legacies that touch the sore wounds of those proving to be 'civilised' enough.

The Balkans: A Case of Regionally Specific 'Othering'

Michal Buchowski, when discussing the place of the Balkans in Europe, writes that the Balkans' aforementioned ambiguity in status causes anxieties, as the work of shedding the Ottoman legacy is never really over until rationalism, secularism, and capitalism are fully implemented (Buchowski, 2006:464). Maria Todorova gives a name to this ambiguity, coining the term 'balkanism' over orientalism as a way to better describe the Balkans in her book *Scaling the Balkans*. According to Todorova, the Orient and the West are permanently incompatible, whereas the Balkans are a bridge into Western civilisation that, whilst both mirroring and foiling orientalism, are presented as Western Europe's incomplete *self* (Todorova, 2019:89, 204). In this way, the Balkans have evolved from "Asia in Europe" to simply "Europe" with a few conditional requirements. Therefore, the status of 'other,' and the stronghold of Western Europe in the region, now vis-a-vis leveraged pedagogy, still remains. Recognising the significance of the Balkan region in this way is important to understanding why certain anti-gender movements are more successful in places such as Bulgaria.

'Othering' both Eastern Europe and, more specifically, the Balkans, results in, according to Milica Bakić-Hayden, even more 'othering' on a local scale. In *Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia,* Bakić-Hayden coins "nesting orientalisms" as a way to describe a Russian-doll-styled pattern of reproducing an 'other' even lower than the self, therefore creating 'nesting divisions' (Bakić-Hayden, 1992:930). Applying this theory to my thesis, then, would mean that where the Balkans have become Western Europe's 'other', the homosexual has become the Balkans' 'other.' These divisions can carry on further, presenting themselves in Bulgaria under a plethora of other divisions not limited to: Christian > Muslim, Citizen > Refugee, Bulgarian > Roma, and so on.

Theorising the Private, Theorising the Sexual

The heterosexual > homosexual othering in Bulgaria that this thesis engages with can be best understood not only by nesting orientalisms, but also by theories surrounding sexual citizenship. Discussions in this section will engage with theories surrounding the European Union and the incorporation of the homosexual as a way to continue ostracising Eastern Europe. It is important to note that despite this, it is wrong to think of the homosexual as fully incorporated within Western European frameworks. As Stefan Dudink rightfully recognises, the discursive materials with which the homosexual citizen have been created in the broadly

speaking West are the same ones that used to other LGBTQIA+ people (Dudink, 2011:260). The status of the homosexual citizen is thus another tool for measuring progress, becoming an appropriated "orientalised construct" (Sabsay, 2012:615) that in some ways has yet to become fully equal.

That being said, there are three theorists that I am using when discussing sexual citizenship: Diane Richardson, David Bell and Jon Binnie, and Jeffrey Weeks. Weeks argues in *The Sexual Citizen* that the contradictory nature of sexual citizenship existing both in the public and private sphere has led to the creation of a "hybrid being" that fights for the right to live intimately in both spaces (Weeks, 1998:36). Here, parallels can be drawn to the Balkans' insider/outsider status, although Weeks was writing in the late 90s when issues surrounding sexual citizenship were in the early stages of discussions within the European Union. Diane Richardson's own observations support this, as in *Sexuality and Citizenship* she writes that if we were to judge citizenship as a set of civil, politics and social rights, lesbian and gay men "are only partial citizens" (Richardson, 1998:88). She goes on two years later to define sexual citizenship as "specific sexual rights granted/denied to groups" based on three sub-categories of rights claims: conduct, identity, and relationship based (Richardson, 2000:107). When discussing citizenship throughout the thesis, I am keeping in mind the distinction between the use of citizenship when compared to sexual citizenship. Where sexual citizenship specifically refers to rights that specifically relate to intimacy, citizenship refers to the exclusionary concept of rights anchored in a nation that, as Bell and Binnie argue, is automatically heterosexual (Bell and Binnie, 2002:446).

The European Union's 'Pink Agenda': How the Myth of Eastern Europe Actively Pervades

Discussing the situation of LGBTQIA+ rights in Croatia, in 2016 Kevin Moss wrote that "tolerance of homosexuality is one of the clearest ways to split Europe into East and West" (Moss, 2016:57). This is the case due to the incorporation of sexual citizenship within the value system of Western Europe and, more importantly, the European Union. One of the main ideas that my thesis will be building off of is that the European Union utilises the tool of sexual citizenship as a way to further define what progress means with regard to EU membership.

The EU uses sexual citizenship in two ways: economically and legislatively. David Evans, Carl Stychin, and David Bell elaborate on the former. Evans in *Sexual Citizenship* writes

about the value sexuality has to economic policies, stating that by the 1980s citizenship rights shifted in Western Europe towards civil rights that focused on market access. For Evans, citizenship for sexual minorities was wholly related to the commodification of their identities (Evans, 1993:8) - sexual citizenship could not exist without the economy. David Bell supports this argument by looking at the UK, noting that sexual citizenship rights developed through market consumption via gay tourism, gay nightclubs, and so on (Bell, 1995:142). Applying this directly to the European Union, Carl Stychin notes that sexual rights in the EU came to exist due to the economic goal of free movement between countries. In this way, universal rights were established, including sexual rights, to catalyse greater movement in-between countries (Stychin, 2001:292).

With regard to legislation, Francisca Ammaturo in *European Sexual Citizenship: Human Rights, Bodies and Identities,* as well as, "The 'Pink Agenda': Questioning and Challenging European Homonationalist Sexual Citizenship" contests that the European Union actually has a pan-European citizenship that has been established on human rights. By the 2000s, the EU began using the "queer liberal subject" (Ammaturo, 2017:1152) in a more expansive way, leading to the creation of what Ammaturo coins is the 'Pink Agenda': a set of legal, social and political instruments that promote LGBT identities in such a way that they re-establish the boundaries of queer-friendly Western European countries and homo-transphobic Eastern European countries (Ammaturo, 2015:1152-1161). Building on the work of Stychin, she argues that it is actually the Pink Agenda that has come to create a civilised version of trans-nationhood (Ammaturo, 2017:99). In other words, the Pink Agenda is crucial to the construction of European citizenship that has, through its use of human rights debates, a moral compass judging countries that lack certain legislative changes as paralysers of overall European progress. This type of homonationalism - a term coined by Jasbir Puar with regard to American nationalism using queers as a way to re-define the Orient (Puar, 2007:39) - is distinct in its transnational approach.

To summarise, European homonationalism, catalysed by economic incentives and concretised into pan-European legislation, began around the mid-1980s. By the late 90s, Western European society was witnessing a detraditionalisation of relationships and a shift towards new ways of thinking about bodily autonomy, self expression, and individual rights (Weeks, 1998:40-45). At the same time, however, Eastern Europe was undergoing a retraditionalisation that intensified nationalism and religion - the forbidden fruits of many post-socialist countries (Trošt and Slootmaeckers, 2015:160; Kuhar, 2013:8; Trofimov, 2019:40). The literature that I have welcomed into my theoretical analysis, in other words, is Western-

centric in its views, mostly assuming that people recognise the situation that Eastern Europe found itself in post-1989. Without explicit explanation and reasoning though, the myth of 'backwardness versus civilisation' only continues to thrive. Thus, due to the historical context of post-socialist countries, detraditionalisation was called upon before traditionalisation could re-establish itself. This is the context that my work finds itself in.

Is the Anti-European Struggle an Anti-Colonial Struggle?

The final part of my theoretical framework is engaging with various theories about whether the anti-European struggle happening in Bulgaria can be considered an anti-colonial struggle. Maria Todorova argues that postcolonial theory cannot be used in the Balkans, questioning whether every national movement necessarily produces a postcolonial situation (Todorova, 2019:99-101). Whilst she recognises that legacy is an important factor in establishing Balkan national identity, this legacy is constructed in ways that redefine the past and its perceptions, leading to skewed memories (ibid:107). Elżbieta Korolczuk and Agnieszka Graff take a similar approach, stating that post-colonialism needs to be used with caution when discussing Eastern Europe, as it can serve as fuel for nationalist groups to essentialise the "local at the expense of foreign and universal" (Graff and Korolczuk, 2018:810). Post-socialism could be a more fitting term, as it has similarities with post-colonialism whilst recognising the spatial effects of Cold War knowledge systems (Chari and Verdery, 2009:11). However, this is also tricky. As Shannon Woodcock notes, the use of post-socialism as a theory automatically places Eastern Europe in an ideologically stagnated position between capitalism and socialism (Woodcock, 2011:65). Madina Tlostanova offers decolonialism as a way to avoid the pitfalls of both the post-colonialist and post-socialist theoretical points of view, writing that by using decolonialism, the theorist removes the boundary between the object and subject studied (Tlostanova, 2012:132). In my thesis, I will refer to Bulgaria as *post*-socialist country, all the while recognising the connotations this may have. Nevertheless, in mentioning the role of sexual citizenship within the EU and the unfair advantage that Western Europe has placed upon itself when judging human rights standards with Eastern Europe, as well as, focusing on the mythological aspect of the West/East theoretical divide, I hope that by the end of my work, I will have contributed to decolonising discussions around Eastern Europe and queer lives.

Literature Review

Local Disparities of Sexual Citizenship

At the core of the theory of sexual citizenship is a politics of belonging, which Nira Yuval-Davis defines in *The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations* as political projects constructing collective belonging in distinct ways (Yuval-Davis, 2011:10). These ways of constructing belonging are conducive to establishing an 'us' versus 'them' approach to community inclusion that can be applied to sexual citizenship as well. Terrell Carver mentions this in "Sexual Citizenship: Gendered and De-Gendered Narratives," arguing that sexual citizenship is a set of narratives that establish hierarchies of inclusion at "different times for different purposes" (Carver, 1998:14). As we have seen, on a trans-national scale, the theory of the Pink Agenda implies how the EU uses sexual citizenship to judge Eastern Europe 'modernity.'

On a more local scale, sexual citizenship is deployed by nations oftentimes in unspoken agreement with what is considered the good, agreeable citizen. Within this definition, there exists a naturalisation of heterosexuality that Richardson argues in *Sexuality and Citizenship* actually puts the existence of queer people into question (Richardson, 1998:93). Due to this naturalisation, the inclusion of members of the LGBTQIA+ community into the definition of a concrete idea of the sexual citizen becomes a process through which, Roman Kuhar believes, sexual strangers are actively created (Kuhar, 2014:85). How does one become a sexual stranger? In Carl Stychin's eyes, through not following the rules of the 'responsible citizen': self-restraint, monogamy, responsible personal life decisions (Stychin, 2001:289). To take it one step further, Jyl Josephson makes an important mention that race and class can also thoroughly affect whether someone is to be considered a responsible citizen. For example, low-income men and women are considered sexual strangers because they are seen as failed heterosexuals (Josephson, 2016:67).

The result of the creation of sexual strangers leads to the discussion of the normalisation of homosexuality, which Kuhar also discusses. The normal homosexual is the opposite of the sexual stranger; their power stems from their *lack* of ability to surpass the hetero/homo binary (Kuhar, 2011:160). In this way, tolerance is masked as conditional acceptance (ibid.) Stevi Jackson elaborates on this in a UK context, recognising that the Liberty Report, a document published in 1994 framing gay rights as a human rights issue, was an attempt to bring homosexuals within the norm of heterosexuality (Jackson, 1998:71). The question of gender

and the unequal citizenship given to heterosexual men and women is left out of specifics related to the report.

Anna van der Vleuten in “Transnational LGBTI Activism and the European Courts: Constructing the Idea of Europe” argues that it is easier for the European Union to promote the interests of well-off queer folks than LGBTQIA+ members who have "more to gain from a structural transformation" rather than just legislative changes (van der Vleuten, 2014:132). If we take what she says to heart, we are confronted with one overarching question: who truly cares for LGBTQIA+ lives in marginalised places?

The Role of Nationalism and Gender in Sexual Citizenship

Up until now, I have engaged in discussions mainly about the role that sexual citizenship plays within the European Union and the ways in which that sexual citizenship is oftentimes built upon a strict set of factors. The role of nationalism in maintaining certain understandings of sexual citizenship, which may vary from place to place, cannot be overlooked. As Tamar Mayer observes in *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation*, nationalism, gender and sexuality all mutually enforce each other due to the nature of their origin as socially and culturally constructed ideas (Mayer, 2000a:1). Thus, the ‘responsible citizen’ that is advocated in sexual citizenship, whether that be a citizenship that explicitly allows certain forms of homosexuality or criminalises all but heterosexuality, is the same citizen that is reproduced through national rhetoric. This is an important idea for my thesis, especially with regard to Chapter 2 and my discussion around anti-Pride events. Using this sexual citizenship = nation = gender scheme, the language of sexual citizenship gatekeeping can serve as a microcosm for broader discussions around who belongs in the nation.

As multiple authors have noted, the way that nationalism, sexual citizenship and gender is concretised is through repetition and performativity. Joanne Sharp, in “Gendering Nationhood: A Feminist Engagement with National Identity,” though only discussing gender and nationalism, notes that gender and nationalism are mutually enforced through repetition that both explicitly and implicitly results in a set of gendered norms (Sharp, 1996:98). Where this repetition may produce gendered norms, it will, I argue, also inevitably produce sexual norms that go back to discussions around who is considered the good heterosexual citizen and the tolerated homosexual citizen. What is more, this aspect becomes unavoidable if we recognise heteronormativity to be an indistinguishable part of the “corporeal metaphor of the nation” (Waitt, 2005:164). Although Waitt mentions this in regard to Latvia, the role of

heteronormativity in establishing national boundaries can fit almost anywhere where sexual citizenship surrounding the specific rights of LGBTQIA+ people came later than the creation of citizenship rights for the heterosexual family.

Hadley Renkin and Ezster Timar, both using Hungary as an example, elaborate on discussions surrounding heteronormativity and nationalism. Renkin, in "Perverse Frictions: Pride, Dignity and the Budapest LGBT March," notes that national pride is "bound to distinctly heteronormative desire and performance," which usually takes the shape of marching in Hetero Pride, engaging in homophobic violence, and so on (Renkin, 2014:9, 19). Yet, when LGBTQIA+ people insert themselves within the national narrative, it does not necessarily lead to the challenging of these hegemonic boundaries; sometimes, depending on the situation, it is more beneficial for them to reinforce such boundaries. Timar, in "The Politics of Coming Out and Hungarian Nationalism," gives examples of this in Hungary, arguing that due to the strength of nationalism and the role of history within the country, lack of assimilation to the heteronormative order may be perceived as unpatriotic, and therefore lead to more harm than good (Timar, 2013:142).

Backtracking to the local, when the nation is so intertwined with questions surrounding heteronormativity and gender, all local space becomes, unless otherwise fought for, heteronormative through repetition and regulation (Gruszczynska, 2009:315). As Gill Valentine in "(Re)negotiating the 'Heterosexual Street': Lesbian Productions of Space" observes, repetition leads to assumptions on a mass level about what is considered proper behaviour in a given space. Consequentially, the heteronormative nation continuously reproduces in the local conscience. In such an atmosphere, any type of protest, no matter how small, arguing for rights outside of what is deemed 'responsible' (which for queer people may mean living peacefully in the shadows) can lead to a widespread disapproval.

Anti-Gender Campaigns and the Appeal to the Transnational

This thesis would be incomplete without briefly discussing the role of anti-gender campaigns in Europe within the past few years. As Paternotte and Kuhar in *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilising against Equality* observe, anti-gender ideology is a recent phenomenon stemming from 2010 onwards in most of Europe and Russia (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2017:3). Proponents of anti-gender campaigns view gender ideology as a leftist ideology resulting from the fall of socialism and advocated for by the agendas of global organisations such as the EU and the UN (ibid.:7) (similar arguments are made regarding homosexuality's 'sudden'

emergence post-1989). This advocacy, proponents argue, takes the form of imperialism in the region at stake (Kováts, 2017:176). Put another way, in the words of Eszter Kováts in "The Emergence of Powerful Anti-Gender Movements in Europe and the Crisis of Liberal Democracy," anti-gender movements mobilise in reaction to whatever they feel is threatening their particular view of sexual citizenship rights (ibid.). The irony of anti-gender movements lies in their balancing of the national and the transnational. In disowning what in their view are imperialist approaches based on soft power politics, they are inadvertently becoming part of a whole network of transnational actors who think in similar ways. Thus, anti-gender campaigns are both transnational and yet distinctly local. Throughout the thesis, this will come up when I discuss the role of the Association "Society and Values" (SVA), which is similar to other associations across the region of Eastern Europe.

Returning to the work of Elżbieta Korolczuk and Agnieszka Graff in "Gender as "Ebola from Brussels": The Anticolonial Frame and the Rise of Illiberal Populism," I wanted to discuss their use of the term antigenderism to describe the anti-gender trend that Europe is witnessing. According to them, antigenderism should be seen as a political movement that is held together by an anti-colonial frame (Graff and Korolczuk, 2018:799). In no means denying the literature that has come before them in terms of recognising the importance of anti-gender movements within broader questions about universal and human rights, Korolczuk and Graff go one step further by arguing that it is by masking themselves as a political organisation, rather than a religious one, that allows antigenderism to appeal to moral values, dignity, and so on (ibid.:805). The fight is not against the Christian West, but the West whose core has been destroyed by feminist and Neo-Marxist movements of the 1960s (ibid.:812). Although there are examples to illustrate that what Korolczuk and Graff argue is absolutely correct, especially (once again) when I engage in discussions around the Association "Society and Values" and their representation as a non-governmental organisation, rather than an association funded by evangelicals (Genova, 2017), their assertion that antigenderism is "the new language of anticapitalist mobilisation" (Korolczuk and Graff, 2018:816) is not fully applicable to Bulgaria. It would perhaps be better to qualify antigenderism as a reaction to globalisation, as anticapitalist carries implications charged with discussions around leftist ideologies that are oftentimes excluded from populist conversations of Bulgarian nationalists.

Methodology

My thesis is divided into four chapters: two chapters dedicated to Sofia Pride and its backlash, one chapter discussing the Istanbul Convention as an example of the ways in which sexual citizenship may get (re)defined outside of the boundaries of deliberate Pride campaigns, and one chapter dedicated to the practical application of my framework and arguments throughout via an ethnographical exploration of my internship in the summer of 2020 at CATRO Bulgaria. Throughout these chapters, I incorporate semi-structured and open-ended interviews that I have held with various key actors discussing the question of nation, citizenship, and the actors' lived experiences within these categories. Each interviewee has filled out a consent form written and translated by me, upon which they have given their consent to be interviewed and quoted throughout, some anonymously, others not. Given I have approached my research in a partially ethnographic way, at times I also include ethnographical analysis outside of my final chapter, especially when discussing people's feelings towards Pride and the Istanbul Convention.

Aside from an ethnographical approach, I also engage with discourse analysis by looking at the ways in which institutions on a transnational (the EU) and national level (the Bulgarian government) work with or against local actors in order to constantly demarcate the boundaries of an almost inexhaustible set of tensions between west/east, Bulgarian/European, civilised/backwards, progressive/conservative, and so on. A large part of my analysis stems not only from reading and applying literature to a specifically Bulgarian context, but also engaging with newspaper articles, websites, videos and stickers as places in which discursive formations may take place. All of the translations done are my own.

A majority of my thesis focuses on the ways in which LGBTQIA+ rights and queer lives are shamed, attacked and framed as unacceptable. I am cognisant of the fact that in many ways, given I am speaking of an Eastern European country, discussions around the violence that LGBTQIA+ people face may be utilised against Bulgaria within broader discourses of "Eastern European difference" (Kahlina, 2014:75). Todorova also pleas to academics to become more aware of the ways in which their research may be used by politicians and governments alike, as "Europe" is continuously being defined by politicians (Todorova, 2019:281).

As a queer researcher living in the region I discuss, I am aware of how both Bulgaria is left outside the table of European progressiveness, and how (perhaps because of this?) queer people are removed from stories of Bulgarian honour and pride. Whilst I do not wish to contribute to further scholarship that promotes one view over the other, I find focusing on anti-LGBTQIA+ discourses in Bulgaria crucial to painting a broader picture of the situational

context of the country. This approach is rooted in Conor O'Dwyer's approach to the topic in *Coming Out of Communism.* According to O'Dwyer, who focuses his discussion on Poland and the Czech Republic, if we calculate the impact of transnational norms on domestic politics, which may be thought of in this thesis as the success of the 'Pink Agenda,' we notice that Eastern Europe falls outside of the 'impact zone.' Consequentially, whereas joining the EU was posited as a big step for LGBTQIA+ rights, years into EU membership many countries see a rise in anti-gay politics (O'Dwyer, 2018:38-40). Bulgaria is no exception; a study done by the non-governmental organisation GLAS in 2019 noted that more people in the country are against having a homosexual neighbour now than in 1999 (Vezenkov, 2019).

What O'Dwyer ultimately argues is that in order to understand the impact that LGBTQIA+ activists have in Eastern Europe, it is crucial to focus on opponents of those same individuals (O'Dwyer, 2018:22). According to him, it is backlash from the hard-right that transforms how homosexuality is framed, thus enhancing in certain situations the credibility of queer activists (ibid.:90). Furthermore, as Andrew Light and William Chaloupka write, if discussions around identity politics as a framework for social movements focuses on a group considered the "left," which in the case of this thesis is pro-LGBTQIA+ individuals, then right-wing reaction to such a group is crucial in understanding the larger picture (Light and Chaloupka, 2000:332).

Chapter One:
We are Here, We are Queer, and We are Bulgarian!

"A Skinhead would come in, we would beat each other up…"
"It was really nice!"
Interview with Magdalena Genova and company, June, 2021

At the gates of what Simon Vasilev, member of the LGBTQIA+ organisation "GLAS" (Gays and Lesbians Accepted in Society), considers one of the Bulgarian LGBTQIA+ movement's biggest achievements (Vezenkov, 2019) - Sofia Pride - one might at first feel confused as to whether they took a wrong turn and ended up at the security line of an airport instead. In the midst of colourful clothing and LGBTQIA+ flags there stands a row of police officers, some of them dressed in full anti-riot gear, guarding a makeshift fence through which the promise of freedom awaits. When you reach the checkpoint to enter this localised version of heaven, you are greeted by volunteers who pat you down, check your bag, and finally allow you in. Once inside, you are met with an interesting combination of colours. Apart from clothes and flags, you have a wide variety of rainbow cocktails, soap, and scarves to choose from. If not bamboozled by the endless possibilities of choice, you may be bamboozled by the atmosphere: with a huge stage taking up most of the space, your thoughts are accompanied by performances showcasing some of Bulgaria's most famous pop singers and their dedicated sea of fans. In that moment, you remember that you are, in fact, at Sofia Pride. You also forget, however, that you are in Bulgaria.

In and of themselves, pride parades are public declarations of belonging that take over certain heterosexualised public spaces in a way that demands recognition and reclaims citizenship (Gruszczynska, 2009:326; McGarry, 2016:2-5; Weeks, 1998:37). Sofia Pride is no exception to this theory; as a matter of fact, it is no coincidence that Sofia Pride has become a larger, more central event with time. If visibility facilitates active voter participation (McGarry, 2016:2) and if Sofia Pride is the Bulgarian media's ticket to discussing topics of LGBTQIA+ rights openly (Transnational Queer Underground, 2018), then it becomes needless to say that the very existence of Sofia Pride will facilitate both conversations around and support for LGBTQIA+ rights in on way or another, so long as the parade is visible. Judging by the 10,000 people turnout of Sofia Pride 2021, the organisers of Sofia Pride really are doing something right. What is interesting to note is that albeit 'pride' being a transnational event (Elefheriadis,

2014:146), Sofia Pride is distinct in the ways in which it incorporates the transnational into the national. For example, the singers invited to the stage were all Bulgarian, as they have been for all of the years Sofia Pride has had a live concert. Furthermore, although supported by international European embassies, Sofia Pride puts particular emphasis on Bulgarian politicians to support the cause, because at the end of the day, pride is one foot into the door of broader questions surrounding LGBTQIA+ rights in a given country.

What follows is a discussion surrounding a brief history of queer rights in Bulgaria until the first Sofia Pride in 2008, followed by an analysis of a few chosen Sofia Pride moments that I will focus on as a way to lean into discussions surrounding sexual citizenship and the Bulgarian LGBTQIA+ individual.

LGBT Rights in Bulgaria: From Red to Pink

(Homo)sexuality in Bulgarian History: Where'd the Queers Go?

The place of the homosexual within communist and socialist countries may be summarised in one word: invisibility. In the former USSR, silence surrounding non-heterosexual sexualities consolidated the status of sexuality within the private sphere, leading to the ultimate invisibility of queer lives during both the Stalinist period and beyond (Stella, 2007:150, Baer, 2013:37; Lorencová, 2013:86). Albeit not the USSR, the situation in Bulgaria, - a socialist country considered the most loyal satellite state to the USSR (Vodenicharov, 2005:76) - was not much different. Homosexuality was seen in the Republic of Bulgaria as a remaining element of bourgeoisie decadence that had to be liquidated (Gruev, 2009), oftentimes under the false pretence of 'normality' that was abused for the sake of regulating sexual identities (Fojtová and Sokolová, 2013:110). Due to these reasons, very little research exists on the lives of Bulgarian homosexuals before 1989. As a matter of fact, apart from Mihael Gruev's 2009 analysis of the history of homosexuality in Bulgaria through historiography, including analysing newspapers, personal archives, and oral history interviews, I have been unable to find any information regarding queer lives in Bulgaria under socialism.

According to Gruev, Bulgaria prior to the establishment of socialism (1944) can be classified as mostly homophobic due to a large-scale cultural emphasis on tradition and values (Gruev, 2009). This categorisation of Bulgaria is not unproblematic; by naturalising homophobia as apart of the heteronormative and 'traditional' nation, we are led to believe that, as Renkin argues, homophobia is as unchanging as the nation itself (Renkin, 2009:23-24). In this way, we theoretically close the doors to any potential conversations around change.

Nevertheless, Gruev goes on to discuss the ways in which said homophobia was carried through to state socialism. For example, in 1946 under the "Law on Work Mobilisations of Idlers and Vagabonds," political prisoners, drunkards *and* homosexuals were considered enemies of the people. In similar light, the Criminal Code of 1951 allowed for the imprisonment of homosexuals for up to five years (Gruev, 2009).

The use of homosexuals as a political scapegoat did not stop with the softening of the regime in the 1960s. From 1962-1964, the People's Republic of Bulgaria paralleled America in its anti-homosexual politics, performing its own liquidation of homosexuals from higher ranks such as from the Student Tribune, which is akin to McCarthy's post-war "lavender scare" politics (Ghaziani, Taylor, and Stone, 2016:167; Gruev, 2009). Amidst this political climate, one of the only marches akin to 'pride' during the People's Republic of Bulgaria in 1962 and 1963 involved gay men who gathered at the Central Baths and walked as a group all the way to Gorna Banya - a route taking them out of the city, where they ended up eating pretzels, going nude, and carrying a bucket of vaseline - the nickname for homosexuality at the time (Gruev, 2009). Unfortunately, there is no more information available to analyse whether this walk was truly a symbol of protest or recognition of identity.

By the 1980s, homosexuals found themselves in a precarious position between being loyal to their sexuality and being loyal to the state. From the information Gruev gathered, governmental policies by the 1980s regarding homosexuals usually involved the Specialised Group for Combating Immoral Crimes, who would seek homosexuals in key 'hot spots' across Bulgaria (the train station in Plovdiv, the Doctor's Garden in Sofia, etc.) and either beat them up for what was considered 'live' training of newly joined members of the forces, or blackmail them into loyalty to the communist state via, for example, spying on others (ibid.). One actor remains out of the scope of Gruev's analysis: the woman. Oftentimes, government crackdowns on homosexuality were focused on targeting only gay men (Pisankaneva, 2002:136-137), as gay women were situated outside of the scope of the heterosexist order. This, in result, hindered the development of a lesbian subculture later on.

The Queer Cost of Returning to Europe

Like most of its neighbours in the region, after the fall of socialism, Bulgaria found itself in an economic crisis that, when combined with a national identity crisis, left it vulnerable to the influence of the Orthodox Church, who offered the cure of dogma as a way to strengthen cultural identity (a main focus in the next chapter) (UNDP, 2017:9, Lorencová, 2013:102;

Ganzevoort and Sremac, 2015:4). At the same time, Bulgaria created a new constitution in 1991 to signify a change towards democracy. In Article 32, Section 1 of the document, it stated that "the privacy of citizens shall be inviolable" (Roseneil and Stoilova, 2011:171). This was an important feature - under socialism, the family was regarded as one of the only private spheres of resistance against the state where non-state matters could be discussed (Sharp, 1996:101). By adding this clause, the government in some ways signified the possibility for positive change after socialism. On the other hand, by putting everything under the scope of 'privacy,' LGBTQIA+ matters, at least on a legal basis, still remained invisible.

What is the solution to fighting invisibility? Fighting for visibility. In 1992, the first gay organisation, Gemini, opened its doors, followed by the first gay bars opening in Sofia in 1995 and the first gay disco in 1997 (Pisankaneva, 2002:136; Roseneil and Stoilova, 2011:172). In this way, LGBTQIA+ people in the country provided much needed social spaces where LGBTQIA+ identities could flourish. According to Magdalena Genova, a lesbian activist and one of the first people to become involved in the political organisation of an LGBTQIA+ movement in Bulgaria, the nineties were a calm period. Although there would be occasional mishaps with skinheads, she argued that they were one-off moments that people came to accept as the cost of being out and proud.

By the mid-2000s, more organisations emerged, including the Gay-Straight Alliance, Bilitis, Deystvie, and LGBT Action (Roseneil and Stoilova, 2011:172). What made their emergence noteworthy is their explicit focus on LGBTQIA+ rights and political inequalities, making Bulgaria similar in its trajectory to both Poland and the Czech Republic (Lorencová, 2013:87; O'Dwyer, 2012:344). Their emergence is not coincidental: the process of Europeanisation - or when domestic policies of a country are subject to EU policy-making (Božović and Ejdus, 2019:494) - had already begun in Bulgaria, who was approved for EU membership in 2005 (Council of Ministers, 2021). Given that the EU by that time was already well into its soft power politics related to the 'pink agenda,' which began with the creation of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Kahlina, 2014:75), Bulgaria's approval came at the cost of revoking discrimination towards same-sex partners in its Penal Code, including changing the age of consent to be equal with that of heterosexual men and women (Roseneil and Stoilova, 2011:175). The country also had to accept (with the influence of Gemini) the Protection Against Discrimination Act (PADA), effectively banning all forms of discrimination on any ground, including sexual orientation (Stanev, 2014:1). At the time, these were considered by politicians calculated sacrifices that they would make as a way to ensure EU membership and, by extension, more party support and greater political power

(Spendzharova and Vachudova, 2011:46). They were not without tensions, however, and as the LGBTQIA+ individual became more visible, others soon began to feel forgotten.

History in the Making: Sofia's First Pride

The first Sofia Pride was organised by Gemini and took place in Sofia on June 28, 2008, on a day symbolising the first day of the Stonewall Riots in New York and under the theme "Me and My Family" (Sofia Pride, 2021a; Amnesty International, 2008). With the goal of LGBT+ liberation through both acceptance into society and due justice for homophobic crimes in mind (Sofia Pride, 2021b; Amnesty International, 2008), the organisers strategically chose the route, which began at the National Palace of Culture in the far ends of the centre of Sofia, as a way to maximise security after recommendations by then-mayor Boyko Borisov (Amnesty International, 2008). What stands out on photographs of the event are not the 150 people attending it (Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, 2012), but the fact that the majority of those participants were either men or police officers holding a steadfast line between the parade and the nationalists and skinheads who threw Molotov cocktails wherever they could find the space to do so (Sofia Pride, 2021a; Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, 2012b). In this regard, Sofia's first Pride was similar to tenth annual Budapest Pride in 2007 (Renkin, 2009:6, 21).

If we judge the success of Pride to mean turnout rates and therefore visibility, perhaps Sofia's first Pride was not as successful as some of the organisers had hoped. Yet, the behind-the-scenes work that went into it, including, as Magda informed me, organising press releases and round table debates around the topic of LGBTQIA+ rights, indicates that for Gemini, Sofia Pride was just one of the many channels through which queer liberation could come to fruition. Furthermore, I would argue that by using 'family' as a theme, the first Sofia Pride inadvertently forced people to confront the concept of family as that which is so inherently connected to the private sphere and the silence around LGBTQIA+ lives within it.

2011: *Monumental* Pride

In just two years, Sofia Pride had managed to go from 150 participants to over 1000, becoming the second largest Pride Parade in the Balkans (Sofia Pride, 2021a). 2011 was a special year for Sofia Pride because it was the first year that the parade received open support from a Bulgarian politician, the then-candidate for Sofia mayor, Georgi Kadiev, and not just support from Western European embassies (Sofia Pride, 2021a). This combination of international and

national elements of solidarity is also visible through the flags used at the parade, where in the midst of the colours of the rainbow some people can be seen waving the white, green and red colours of the Bulgarian flag.

With regard to spatiality, Sofia Pride in 2011 once again began at NDK. This time, however, it ended in the heart of the city centre at the Statue of the Soviet Army. Built in 1954 celebrating ten years since the start of Bulgarian socialism, the four scenes it depicts on its sides are all related to both the Red and Soviet army. Given Bulgaria's history as an Axis power during WWII, many claim that the statue is not true to Bulgaria's history, since the Soviet army "was not a liberator, but a coloniser" (Atanasova, 2021). Symbolically, ending Sofia Pride at a statue that was meant to be demolished thirty years ago could be interpreted as a "here to stay" statement. What is more important, though, is that the statue is the tallest building in that area of the centre. In other words, the open space around it and its height demands it, and by extension Sofia Pride, to be seen.

Figure 1: In Line with the Times (Sofia Pride, 2021a)

Around the same time Sofia Pride took place in 2011, the statue was already used for different political commentary: some of the soldiers on its sides were graffitied in the like of American pop-culture characters including Spiderman, Ronald McDonald, and Santa Clause, with the lines "in line with the times" written underneath. According to the authors, the message behind it was that Bulgaria was losing itself in an attempt to follow the broadly defined 'west' (BTV News, 2011). Pride participants used this message to their advantage, hanging the Pride flag on some of the drawn superheroes to add their own twist to the artwork **(Figure 1).** If pride parades are considered "attempts to use urban space to influence cultural codes and discourses as a way to affirm a group identity" (McGarry, 2016:4), then we can interpret the combination of Bulgarian and LGBTQIA+ elements in that year's Sofia Pride as an effort to publicly solidify the place that LGBTQIA+ people have in the Bulgarian nation by 'queering belonging' (Renkin, 2009:32).

2012, or the Fight for Legislative Equality

Although Sofia Pride in 2012 was not novel in the ways in which it proceeded spatially or in terms of the concerts that were held, it was novel in the explicitly political message it took to advocating. Previous themes of Sofia Pride concerned themselves with friendship, family and supporting the Bulgarian queer community. In 2012, however, the focus was on making explicit one of the main goals of Sofia Pride to begin with: changing the Bulgarian Criminal Code so as to classify LGBTQIA+ crimes as hate crimes and punish the perpetrators of such (Sofia Pride, 2021a; Vezenkov, 2019). The route that Sofia Pride took that year actually directly began at the Statue of the Soviet Army, crossing onto two central boulevards, and ending once again at the statue - in other words, the march was completely located in the centre part of the city (Parvomai, 2012).

Despite Sofia Pride's unsuccessful attempt to change the Criminal Code that year, it was successful in more publicly and actively reframing the conversation around gay rights in Bulgaria. Discussing Poland, O'Dwyer writes that what ultimately reframed gay rights conversations in Poland was activists' use of EU law to frame legitimacy of political demands on a local level, which clashed with national interests that claimed Polish values were not connected to EU values (O'Dwyer, 2012:432-434). In a similar fashion, Sofia Pride in 2012 opened the doors to conversations around demands for *rights* and not just tolerance, which led to a serious amount of backlash from those that had served as the moral boundaries of acceptable sexual citizenship since their re-instatement into Bulgarian political life: the church.

Pride 2017: The Colourful Kuker

When discussing the role heteropatriarchy plays in Latvian folklore, Gordon Waitt mentions that there is an inherent connection between folklore and the role of women in the nation (Waitt, 2005:165). If folklore provides a window into the workings of the nation and its heterosexist order, then Sofia Pride's 2017 campaign of bringing Bulgarian folklore into the picture via the use of a *kuker* (кукер) becomes a microcosm of political commentary on the ways in which Bulgarian LGBTQIA+ people are actually, in many ways, just as much apart of Bulgaria's ritual culture as its non-queer, Christian citizens.

To backtrack, the theme of Sofia Pride's 2017 parade was "Let's Clean Transphobia from Bulgaria," which was a clever play on the right-wing march against Pride that year titled "Let's Clean Bulgaria from Homosexuality" (Sofia Pride, 2021a). The message was not as

overtly political as 2012, although the allusion to right-wing groups does carry, I would argue, a message of strength and courage in it. Rather than shying away from death-threat sentiments, the organisers leaned into them as a way to spread empathy and recognition, thus illustrating that they were ready to face hatred with something better: acceptance and love.

Such a message was paired with a marketing campaign that in my view has provided the largest degree of symbolism around the place of LGBTQIA+ lives in the Bulgarian nation. On the posters spread around the city to encourage participation in Pride, there was an image of someone dressed up as a kuker with the words" written underneath **(Figure 2).** The kuker is a traditional Bulgarian masked outfit made from goat or sheep hide and worn mostly in villages during the ritualistic scaring away of bad spirits from the area, usually in the Spring so as to encourage good harvest, favourable weather, and so on (Zlatkovskaia, 1968:34). An important aspect of the kuker is to be loud: the louder they dance, stomp, and jingle the bells on their waists, the more afraid the bad spirits become.The use of the kuker by the organisers of Sofia Pride was, in this regard, an incredibly clever way to add depth to their message of fighting transphobia and stereotypes in the country, consequentially turning the antigender groups against Pride into the 'bad spirits' that kukers fight off through the visibility and loudness of the parade itself.

Figure 2: "Let's Scare Away Stereotypes" (GLAS Foundation, 2017)

There are gendered aspects to the kuker that are worth mentioning here. Traditionally, the kuker outfit is worn by men, and in some parts of the country, it is still considered a coming-of-age ceremony only for boys (Brown, 2018). As a matter of fact, the ritual is the closest thing Bulgarian culture has to drag: much like men during Shakespeare's plays in the Globe Theatre, men participating as kukers would oftentimes perform the male and female parts of the 'scenes' they depict, including the bride and the grandmother, who albeit not being 'kukeri,' are still an important part of the tradition **(Figures 3 and 4)**. At its heart, kukeri are leftover remnants from a time when Bulgaria was still pagan.


Figure 3: A Traditional Kuker (Brown, 2018)

Yet the steps of the ritual itself contain deeply religious elements, not only through the inclusion of wedding scenes alongside scenes of harvesting as a way to indicate the "natural order" of village life (Angelova, 2017), but also through the use of symbolic killings done by the kukeri, after which people are resurrected, indicating a "reborn divinity of vegetation" (ibid.:42).

The kuker therefore symbolises not only an important part of Bulgarian culture, but the interplay of religion within it. Sofia Pride's 2017 campaign did not use the traditional 'nature' colours of brown, white and black for the kuker mask; instead, they combined elements of the LGBTQIA+ flag within the colour scheme of the mask itself, making it more beaded and colourful. When the man behind the kuker mask, photographed by People of Sofia for Facebook, was asked why he was wearing it and about the message behind the mask, he said: "this is a kuker mask interwoven with colours and elements of the gay community….the idea behind the recreation of a kuker that is designed in the Pride flag colours carries with it the message that our efforts to reach equality should be targeted inward towards removing people's internal barriers - their stereotypes. It is time for the terrible spirit of homophobia and transphobia to leave Bulgaria." Thus, by altering the appearance of the mask, the kuker representing Sofia Pride turned into a symbol of both the national and transnational, outstepping the traditional and, consequentially, the religious and turning it into a unique creation reflecting the promise of a future that includes LGBTQIA+ into national discourse that accepts LGBTQIA+ citizens for who they are: just as Bulgarian as everyone else.

Figure 4: An Example of Kuker 'Drag' (Stoycho, 2014)

Sofia Pride 2021 and Beyond: Implications and Trajectory

Despite regional elements that make Sofia Pride a specific combination of expanding what it means to be Bulgarian in the face of homophobia and establishing an international support network to gain greater visibility and thus encourage more political pressure on the government to change certain laws, the path Sofia Pride is on is not that much different from the paths other pride parades have taken across the region. As a matter of fact, amidst marketing strategies, conferences and social media, every Sofia Pride still carries with it the dark reminder to participants to go in groups to and from the parade and to remove anything that would out them as participating in it, including rainbow flags and pins, so as to not become targets of

discrimination (Sofia Pride, 2021b). Referring back to the beginning of this chapter, Sofia Pride has the same checkpoints that Budapest Pride had in 2008, Serbian pride parades have had in 2014 and 2015, Romania n prides have had in 2007-2009, and Lithuania had for its first pride parade in 2010 (Renkin, 2014:16; Božović and Ejdus, 2019:494; Woodcock, 2011:75; Davydova, 2012:41). Although a lot can be said about the fact that Sofia Pride has an ever-growing amount of participants, if the parade is visible as a form of containment, in some ways the symbolic barriers of the nation into an 'us' versus 'them' become easier to distinguish (Davydova, 2012:39). By surrounding the area with fences, cops, check-in points and disclaimers, everything that may have seemed natural about Sofia Pride suddenly feel artificial and conditional.

The fight for legislative changes is also still very far from over. In fact, since Bulgaria's accession into the EU in 2007, little institutional changes have occurred concerning LGBTQIA+ rights - a situation similar to Poland (Sharlandjieva, 2016; O'Dwyer, 2012:345). Stanimir Panayotov argues that this is due to the fact that queer visibility and activism in Bulgaria were depoliticised, due to legal agreements with the EU, before the politicisation of sexual orientation could take place (Panayotov, 2013:167). Thus, the whole movement began backwards, fighting for rights that the population perceived they had already received on paper. In reality, the pace at which legislation changed between 2002 and 2006 in the country was too fast to change attitudes towards LGBTQIA+ people on a mass, long-term scale (Roseneil and Stoilova, 2011:175), leaving Sofia Pride under a lot of pressure to deal with changing societal attitudes almost exclusively alone.

This year, Sofia Pride created an online platform for the 2021 parliamentary elections in which it asked politicians to pledge themselves to helping stop the discrimination of LGBTQIA+ people in Bulgaria, which was signed only by 17 people out of over 300 candidates (Sofia Pride, 2021c). With lack of political support, the Bulgarian Penal Code will continue to exclude sexual orientation as the basis for a hate crime motive (GLAS Foundation, 2017:4). Due to this, there is almost no reporting of LGBTQIA+ hate crimes in the region despite evidence that they occur (ibid.:8; Deystvie, 2018:10). Even when there is, little action is taken. Let us take the extreme case of Mihail Stoyanov, a medical student who went to take a walk in the evening in Borisov Park in 2008 and was consequentially murdered there by Alexander Georgiev and Radoslav Kirchev, who both claimed to be cleansing the park of gays. The Sofia Court of Appeals admitted that for the case, there was no law that could be applied with regard to hate crimes on the basis of Stoyanov's murder, despite Kirchev and Georgiev admitting to their motives (Deystvie, 2018:25; Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, 2015). In 2010, both of the

men were placed under house arrest for two years, but when they reached the maximum pre-trial detention period, they were released (Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, 2012a). If it were not for the work of LGBTQIA+ NGOs and the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, which through systemic pressure led to the men being tried again and finally sentenced in 2015 (Deystvie, 2018:25; Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, 2015), perhaps Stoyanov's case would be long forgotten. It was the only time, both before and after, that the Bulgarian government admitted that a homophobic hate crime had taken place.

From Symbolic to Literal: How Do Queers Feel?

Placing aside discussions around the symbolic value of Sofia Pride and the importance of LGBTQIA+ visibility in a country whose political scene is overtaken by homophobic rhetoric, it is important to ask the question: how do queer people feel themselves about their place in Bulgaria? The nature of this question is broad-reaching and therefore, in attempting to answer it, I by no means am claiming to represent the whole LGBTQIA+ community in the country. However, I find it important to mention here some of the feelings towards national belonging that I came across through analysing comments under a Facebook group for LGBTQIA+ people in Bulgaria, in which someone asked group members what people understand by the phrase "I am Gay and I am Bulgarian." Out of fourteen comments, five people wrote that they did not understand the question because to them, there was no contradiction, i.e. "I am gay and I am Bulgarian, end of story," "The same as I am gay and I am Hungarian. What has to be understood?," and "That the person is gay and from Bulgaria. What else is there to understand?" Perhaps for them, a kuker in its traditional mask could be just as gay as it is Bulgarian without the additional beads and rainbow colours.

Two people commented something of a similar sort to the aforementioned, but discussed that they understood it as someone who is a Bulgarian and has undergone a lot of humiliation and bullying and nevertheless fought back. This seemed to be the answer the person asking the question was looking for, as they liked both comments and wrote under one of them "I really wanted to hear exactly this type of comment!" On the other end of the spectrum, four people commented that it was either "a shitty combination," "a car crash," "an impossible combination," or an "oxymoron." One person added that in Bulgaria, it has been really hard to get a gay movement going, perhaps implying that the lack of a large LGBTQIA+ community actually isolates Bulgarian queers even further from each other. What do you do when there is strength in numbers but your numbers are low?

Concluding this chapter and going forward, there are a few key points I want to reiterate. The first of these is that despite the fight being far from over, the value that Sofia Pride adds to LGBTQIA+ visibility in the country, even within its isolated space of the centre of Sofia, is irreplaceable as of yet with anything greater. In some ways, the political message of Pride is becoming drown out by the loud voices of those screaming the words to their favourite song in what they view as one huge party - a point of view my friend shared with me in crossing while we waited for her to grab an Absolut cocktail. Magdalena shared similar views, arguing that the organisers of Pride today do not make efforts to engage with political parties in the ways that they did when Pride was first getting started. Nevertheless, I see it as a positive thing that Sofia Pride markets itself to a wide audience, Bulgarian pop folk lovers and all. If survival is based on ensuring visibility, then as the only LGBTQIA+ parade of the year, I encourage Sofia Pride to only get bigger, louder, and prouder.

Chapter Two:
Pride for Queers is Pride for No One

"in a country where there had been an absolute suppression of alternative truths, what followed was the intolerant proclamation of alternative absolute truths" (Todorova, 2019:451)
//
"A good faggot = a dead faggot" (Deystvie, 2018:19)

The rise of LGBTQIA+ visibility in post-socialist countries has been a double-edged sword. As we have seen, in some ways, the prospect of joining the European Union served as motivation enough for countries like Bulgaria to turn to the begrudging tolerance of LGBTQIA+ individuals. In other ways, however, the rise of LGBTQIA+ visibility during a period defined by an unstable economic transition led many to associate homosexuality as a symptom of democratic transition, rather than as something that has always been (Baer, 2013:40). This was paired with a gender identity crisis stemming from the lack of ability for men to fulfil their primary breadwinner role due to the economic conditions (UNDP, 2017:9), which ultimately fed into broader conversations around national identity.

In such a climate, discovering who 'we' are requires the inherent creation of something against whom the 'we' may be defined and compared (Josephson, 2016:30). For supporters of the Orthodox Church, which came to play an important role as the saviour of the nation, ready to embrace true believers openly after decades of restricted religious freedom (Lorencová, 2013:102), the new scapegoat became the image of the European homosexual. This became especially concretised once Western European/EU identity became aligned with LGBTQIA+ rights (Chetaille, 2013:120), therefore transforming sexual citizenship into a contested terrain revolving around questions about modernity, national identity, and the European Union (Kahlina, 2014:78). In other words, the fight for LGBTQIA+ rights, especially in the post-socialist region of Eastern Europe, was never just about LGBTQIA+ rights (Renkin, 2009:25). Instead, Pride Parades have turned into a conglomerate of symbols relating to religion, morality, and even history (Sremac, Momčinović, Topić, and Jovanović, 2015:58; Mikuš, 2015:25).

Srdjan Sremac and Ruard Ganzevoort write that religious nationalist ideologies and their relationship to homosexuality cannot be separated from the process of nation-state building (Ganzevoort and Sremac, 2015:7). Using this, we may draw the conclusion that the increased visibility of anti-LGBTQIA+ nationalist groups and their pro-terror tactics, especially in Bulgaria's case when connected to widespread homophobia on a governmental level, is actually setting the stage for the creation of a new nation in which the homosexual is not only

pushed back into the closet, but rather removed from the picture altogether. Slowly but surely, the pervasiveness of such groups establishes homophobia within the doctrine of what it means to be patriotic (Kuhar and Švab, 2013:22; Graff, 2006:447; Sremac, Momčinović, Topić, and Jovanović, 2015:54). Within this ethnic religious nationalism (Kilp, 2015:115), neither gays, nor Roma, nor migrants have a space, as neither of them fit into the definition of what is considered a "true" member of the nation (Trošt and Slootmaeckers, 2015:154). In Bulgaria particularly, this chauvinistic attitude not only has its roots very far deep into historical myths about the heteropatriarchal, Christian nation under Ottoman siege, but is only getting worse with time (Latcheva, 2010:208-209).

In this chapter, just as the last, I will look at key years that are important to understanding the ways in which anti-Pride protestors view who is considered inside and outside the Bulgarian nation and how those boundaries are defined. The majority of my focus concerns itself with two anti-Pride parades: those organised almost every year since 2010 by the National Resistance, and those organised since 2017 by the Association "Society and Values" (SVA). By comparing and contrasting these, we come to realise that although the delivery is different, the anti-LGBTQIA+ message is ultimately the same. The protests are not in any way local, nor are they regional. In fact, the nationalistic aspects of their arguments may be placed into global trends of right-wing anti-gender movements, which posit that inequality is natural, that society is ultimately the pure Christian versus the elite, and that the world is subject to new versions of colonialism (Mügge and de Lange, 2015; Graff and Korolczuk, 2018: 807; Barry, 2020:80).

Fight Them With Fire

Sofia's first Pride witnessed widespread disapproval from nationalists, skinheads and football hooligans alike. In the spirit of Budapest's Pride in 2007, participants of Sofia Pride in 2008 were greeted with nationalist threats and Molotov cocktails that were thrown directly in front of them (Sofia Pride, 2021a). The 'event' was attended by leader of the ultranationalist party Bulgarian National Union (BNC), Boyan Rasate, who was arrested alongside 80 others (Novinite, 2008).

By 2010, an organised counter-protest was allowed to take place in Sofia at a separate area of the city than the area where Sofia Pride would take place. Almost no documentation exists of the protest except for a blogger that writes about the feeling of walking through the protest after seeing Sofia Pride. According to the author, "everything turned grey and foggy…[and] was like a black and white war film in which the only colourful things were the

national flags" (Kaburche, 2010). The author went on to explain that aside from a group of bald, militant men holding signs with slogans on them like "all gays back to Uganda" and "homosexuals want death for Bulgaria," there were no other attendees. The inclusion of Uganda seems strange at first, but upon deeper reading, it can be assumed that the creator of the sign may have been trying to use Uganda and homosexuality as a way to allude to the HIV/AIDS epidemic and its origin or Ugandas strong anti-LGBTQIA+ laws at the time. In any regard, by holding up the signs, the implication becomes that the well-being of the nation rests upon the removal of not only the homosexual, but the African too. Or else, as Nagel discusses, Bulgaria, according to such nationalists, needs to be defined by "a white, male, heterosexual notion of masculine identity" (Nagel, 2010:258).

Do You Remember Batak?

The counter-march organised by the National Resistance was prevented from taking place in 2011, but that did not deter any of the organisers from coming together once again in 2012, this time with direct support from a member of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church: Father Evgeni Yanakiev of Yambol. Yanakiev originally sparked controversy among human rights organisations after stating that supporters of Sofia Pride should be "drowned in the sea with millstones tied around their necks" and then proceeding to encourage "all those who consider themselves Christians and Bulgarians" to throw stones at marchers of Sofia Pride (Human Rights Watch, 2012; Knight, 2017; Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, 2012). Yanakiev's strategic plea to Christian Bulgarians has strong implications about who he, as a member of the Church, feels are the most important actors in charge of shaping the political landscape of the nation. Shortly after, supporters of the nationalist groups Ataka, the Bulgarian National Movement (VMRO), and the National Resistance came together at the National Palace of Culture to write a letter demanding Sofia's mayor stop Pride - the only solution, according to them, to preventing violence towards gay people in the city (Parvomai, 2012). In an interview done by the Bulgarian National Television before Sofia Pride asking nationalist parties why they were against it, members claimed that they did not agree with the political demands that Sofia Pride was trying to push forward, stating that the legalisation of same-sex marriages was going too far (BNT, 2012). This was, as we know, a truth hidden in a lie; although Sofia Pride did come out with a political platform that year, the legalisation of same-sex marriages was off of the agenda.

During the actual anti-Pride march, Yanakiev joined along the ranks of front-row patriots as a supporter rather than an affiliate of the Orthodox Church, although he strongly

encouraged the Church to condone homosexuality (Zajkova, 2012). The theme of the march was "Stop Foreign Dictatorship - We Don't Want a Gay Parade!" (Bulgarian National Union, 2012), which was kickstarted with the chant "death to the faggots" - similar in its sentiments to chants used against participants of the first Split Pride in Croatia (Bulgarian National Union, 2012; Zajkova, 2012; Moss, 2016:60). The only colours present were those of the Bulgarian flag, which, according to the Bulgarian National Union, was indicative of "the single position" held amongst marchers (Bulgarian National Union, 2012). Three couples attended the march in their wedding clothes, holding a sign with the words "protest by patriots against paedophilic aggression" written on it (ibid.) There were also constant allusions to history, including signs that had "68 years under foreign rule are enough," "we have a 1300 year old history no thanks to gay marriage," and "do you remember Batak?" written on them (Zajkova, 2012). In the spirit of a full circle, the protest ended at the Sveta Nedelya in the heart of the centre of Sofia, during which participants had a minute of silence for all of the Bulgarian patriots that had come before them (ibid.)

The protestors reference three historical periods in Bulgaria's timeline: its creation, Ottoman occupation, and the socialist state. Similar to the way that some view the Statue of the Soviet Army, the patriots attending anti-Pride in 2012 clearly viewed state socialism as a colonial situation similar to Ottoman occupation. In this way, the self-proclaimed patriots feed into what Todorova calls "imaginary rape syndrome," referencing post-WWI Bulgarian politics' self-victimisation for the sake of certain motives (Todorova, 2019:364). This is not to say that some moments of history were not worth discussing. Batak refers to a massacre that occurred in Batak, Bulgaria by the Ottoman Turks as a result of an attempted uprising there during the beginnings of national conscience raising (Reid, 2000:391-402). A large part of the massacre occurred in a church and its courtyard (ibid.:396-397), making Batak the perfect example to use when wanting to symbolically portray attacks on national values and attempts at religious suppression. The implication becomes that LGBTQIA+ people are not only not apart of the nation and instead a foreign import driven by the EU that has come to rule Bulgaria by forcing widespread acceptance, but also that the main agenda of Sofia Pride is to single-handedly kill the nation by going against that which "has supported Bulgarians from some of their darkest centuries" (Parvomai, 2012): the Orthodox Church.

There are also undeniable gender aspects to the march. Appealing to the historical nation and the church implies support for patriarchal understandings of what both a community and nation should be (Mostov, 1998:378), which in this case is driven by patriotism that is called to from fear of being considered the homosexual (Nagel, 2010:252). In this bubble, anyone who

decides to cheat on the Bulgarian nation by flying a flag other than the Bulgarian one is automatically labeled as unpatriotic; as Timar writes about Hungarian nationalism, the perceived lack of assimilation is directly understood as "an explicit gesture of unpatriotic dissent" (Timar, 2013:142). In this climate, anyone who supports Sofia Pride is seen as a traitor standing the way of an independent Bulgaria.

"Democratic" Desecration

In 2014-2017, anti-Sofia Pride marches all took place in a similar way. In 2014, ATAKA - one of the right-wing parties that helped write the plea to the Mayor of Sofia calling off Sofia Pride in 2012 - commented once again that Sofia Pride was an event made by "outside forces foreign to our national traditions and moral deformity" (Novinite, 2014). Or, put in another way, that Sofia Pride was not naturally Bulgarian, which once again provides evidence that according to nationalists, the homosexual and the Bulgarian are complete antitheses of one another.

By 2015 and 2016, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church began to officially take a stance on Sofia Pride, with Bulgarian Patriarch Neophyte calling Sofia Pride a parade of "immoral behaviour" that destroys Orthodox Christian values (Reuters, 2015; Theresheva, 2016; Zehirova, 2016). The Bulgarian Orthodox Church is not the only Church that condones LGBTQIA+ rights in the region. A similar pattern emerged in Serbia during 2010 Pride, where the Church did not attempt to distance itself from extremist nationalist and ultra-right groups calling for violence against LGBTQIA+ individuals (Trošt and Slootmaeckers, 2015:165). What makes Sofia's 2015 anti-Pride march more noteworthy is not the second attempt at writing a petition to the mayor and calling Sofia Pride discriminatory against the Christian morale (Peticiya, 2015; Fakti, 2015), but rather the more creative tactics at getting the anti-EU message out to the public. Not only was the flag of the EU burned during the march (Fakti, 2015), but the National Resistance created stickers to spread around the city in the days coming up to Sofia Pride titled "stickers against sodomites" that they encouraged people to pick up at their headquarters (Marginalia, 2015). The stickers came in two varieties: whilst both depict a man, woman and child in workers' clothing, with the woman wearing a modest scarf around her head, on one sticker, the father is holding his family and looking back to witness two men kissing with a rainbow behind them, while on the other sticker, we see a man who, with an overly-exaggerated nose, is Jewish (ibid.), looking at the father, face partially covered by the EU flag, also in front of a rainbow **(Figures 5 and 6).** On both stickers the words "LET US SAVE THE CHILDREN FROM CORRUPTION" are written with

the Bulgarian flag on either side of them and the date and time of the event printed on top. The pairing of the two stickers, alongside the burning of the EU flag, once again implies that anti-Pride marches are not just about homosexuality, but about greater processes of assimilation, EU politics, and in some ways, the economy itself. The use of the overly-exaggerated Jewish man also engages with the question of Bulgarian independence in the face of the EU. In Poland, Agnieszka Graff writes, "Jew" remains a category that is central to discussions around Polish innocence, moral uprightness, and European betrayal (Graff, 2010:592). For anti-semites, Jewishness is understood to be a position in the national conscience that threatens; a villain against the state (ibid.:592-593). In Bulgaria, by handing out both stickers to be used in conjunction against Sofia Pride, the National Resistance makes the metaphorical connections between the "homosexual" as equal to the conniving "Jew" as a threat to the Bulgarian family.

Figure 5: LET'S SAVE OUR CHILDREN FROM LGBT (Marginalia, 2015)

Figure 6: LET'S SAVE OUR CHILDREN FROM THE JEW (Marginalia, 2015)

2017 was the final year that Sofia had only one anti-Pride parade. Once again organised by the National Resistance, the theme was "Let's Clean Sofia of Trash." When asked about the title, members said that there was no correlation with Sofia Pride or its theme (Velyova, 2017); yet the National Resistance's own leader Blagovest Asenov supposedly encouraged people to "cleanse the plague" of homosexuality by coming to the park with shovels (Theresheva, 2017; Knight, 2017), leading Sofia Pride to organise even greater security (All Out, 2017).

The Emergence of SVA in the Bulgarian Socio-Political Field

The National Resistance continued to organise their yearly anti-Pride protest in 2017, this time joined by a new protest organised by the Association "Society and Values." Masking themselves under the veil of concerned parents, SVA wrote a letter to the supporters of Sofia Pride, including other EU member states. Roman Kuhar, when discussing the role of the Roman Catholic Church in contribution to narratives around sexual citizenship, writes that the new strategy of the Church is to use 'science' as a way to back up their claim that LGBTQIA+ people do not fit into the notion of the 'good citizen' (Kuhar, 2014:84-85). In a similar manner, SVA used 'scientific' understandings of both gender identity and European law to convince the supporters of Sofia Pride to revoke their support. In their letter, they write that gender identity is not recognised as anti-discrimination in the legal text of any of the human rights charters that Bulgaria has signed (SVA, 2018:1). Furthermore, they claim that gender identity is not a "common European value" and should therefore not be propagated in the country. By showing support, they were, according to SVA, meddling with Bulgarian legislative law and disrespecting its religious and national diversity (ibid.:2). Similarly to the National Resistance, SVA's overall message was of Bulgarian independence in the face of forced assimilation. The difference lies in their focus on 'evidence' and their concentration specifically on gender - a phenomenon the next chapter will go more into depth about.

SVA's March was titled "Walk for the Family," during which people showed support for Christian family values such as heterosexual marriage and the gender binary, which was illustrated by women wearing their wedding dresses and blue and pink balloons being handed out (OFFNews, 2018). According to attendees, their hope was that people would realise that given Christianity's role in saving Bulgaria for hundreds of years, Bulgarians should remain faithful to it instead of disrespecting it (Yanev, 2018). Once again, the themes of Christianity and Bulgarian identity are present, with the homosexual placed outside of the construct. There was also an emphasis on the important of saving the kids, "Bulgaria's future" (ibid.). The view that LGBTQIA+ rights mean death for the nation and therefore parents should do their best to prevent their children from becoming apart of it is the same view that the League of Polish Families had in Poznan in 2005 (Graff, 2006:439), the National Alliance of Families and Parents had in Lithuania for its first Pride in 2010 (Davydova, 2012:36-37), In the Name of the Family has in Croatia (Sremac, Momčinović, Topić, and Jovanović, 2015:64) and Dveri had in Serbia in 2009 when organising Family Walks (Mikuš, 2015:21).

The Family, the Children, and the Fallen Heroes

In 2019, three anti-Pride events were organised throughout Sofia. National Resistance is worth mentioning due to the banner they used in their counter-march titled “Let’s Save Our Children From Debauchery” (Svoboda na Evropa, 2019). Encouraging people to join the protest because the “gay parade” would otherwise once again “shit on God” and “bully the Orthodox Christian Bulgarian nation” (Petrov, 2019), National Resistance created a banner whose illustration was taken from a 1930s Nazi Propaganda poster that encouraged people to join the Nazi party through the illustration of an aryan German family (The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2021), the woman wearing the same type of modest head covering as in the stickers from 2015 **(figure 7).** Sitting at the forefront of the banner, behind them are images of Austrian drag queen Conchita Wurst singing, two white, middle-aged men reminiscent of Erich Honecker and Leonid Brezhnev kissing with the rainbow flag painted on their cheeks, and men who look like they are apart of some sort of BDSM convention. On either side of the banner is the symbol of the National Resistance, alongside the same words “LET US SAVE THE CHILDREN FROM CORRUPTION” and the time and place of the event **(figure 8)**. Aside from the mother in the image, women are completely excluded from the banner, making the target that people need to be “saved” from the homosexual male. Despite alluding to their fascist sympathies, the choice of using Nazi propaganda as the basis of a highly nationalist *Bulgarian* party’s banner is not void of irony.

Figure 7: Traditional Aryan Family (US Holocaust Museum, 2021)

Figure 8: "LET'S SAVE OUR CHILDREN FROM CORRUPTION" (Petrov, 2019)

On its end, March for the Family once again had 'representatives of the Christian family' attending with their wedding dresses on (Svoboda na Evropa, 2019). Blogger Georgi Draganov, in sharing his experiences going to the march, noted that there were Bulgarian flags everywhere and signs including "Sex is Biological, It Is Not A Choice!" and "Good Politicians Listen to the Folk" (Draganov, 2019). If in their scenario they are the folk, then that would place politicians Krasimir Karakachanov - leader of the Bulgarian National Movement - within the umbrella of good politicians. Talking to the news, Karakachanov questions who ordered Bulgarian money to be spent on "guarding the parade of the perverted and sick" and argues that Bulgaria is a scapegoat for Europe's identity crisis, which continues to support the "gay tourist party" (OFFNews, 2019). To him, not only are Bulgarian queers *not* apart of the Bulgarian nation; they are actually strangers to it as well.

Karakachanov's attendance is an almost perfect example of Julie Mostov's concept of ethnocracy. The ethnocrat, according to Mostov, owes his success to his promotion of (ethno)national interests that are shared by a group of people with a common culture, religion and presumed descent (Mostov, 2000:89). He concretises his power by calling for commitment to traditional values based on "natural" patriarichal bonds (ibid.:101). By playing off of historically grounded fears, which in Karakachanov's case would mean the fear of reoccupation and the denial of freedom of religion, the ethnocrat manages to keep his role as a protector of interests (ibid.:98). Karakachanov is not alone in this case. Stanimir Panayotov looks into the ways that Bulgarian politics have actually consistently been using the homosexual as a symbol of corruption, fuelling the theory of the 'gay mafia,' or the idea that there exists a "homosexual solidarity network" that is designed to corrupt society in ways that make it impossible to be stopped (Panayotov, 2013:160-161). Examples of this include when Boyko Borissov, upon being elected Prime Minister, commented that gay people would be kept out of his party for the sake of unbiased decision making (ibid.:161). There is also the assumption that homosexuality is related to special treatment as apart of this mafia scheme (ibid.:162), which the party Union of Democratic Forces (SDS) provided examples for in its statement against Sofia Pride in 2021, writing that "in many cases, having a different sexuality widely opens the doors for career development" (SDS, 2021).

Apart from these two marches, Volen Siderov, leader of the party nationalist party Ataka, organised a human chain around the monument of Vasil Levski, Bulgarian revolutionary hero and nationalist, to prevent Sofia Pride from walking near it (OFFNews, 2019). Claiming that he was doing it because he would not let homosexuals "walk past the Levski monument and desecrate it" (ibid.), the human chain was reminiscent of

what happened in Hungary when Budapest Pride began at Hero's Square and ignited a right-wing reaction due to the Square's national significant (Renkin, 2009:30). By making the statue a place of significance for the nation through the legacy of the person it depicts, Siderov intertwines nationalism with masculinity in a way that happens through the attribution of a nation's survival to "the heroism of warriors" (Mayer, 2000b:298), effectively once again leaving the woman, in addition to the homosexual out of the picture.

From Molotov Cocktails to Cucumbers

On May 15, 2021, 23 year old Burgas native Rusi Milev decided to take a stand and organise the first ever Burgas Pride (Todorov, 2021). Under the motto "Love is Stronger than Hate," the event took place in the centre of Burgas at Troika Square with the goal that, according to Milev, it would be the required push for "a better and more secure future of LGBTQIA+ people in Bulgaria" (ibid.). Yet, amidst the handful of participants (around 50), there were over 300 police officers to guard them from 300 anti-Pride protestors (Svoboda na Evropa, 2021), effectively turning Burgas Pride into the centre of a circle in which preaching for love was effectively drown out by hate speech. The nationalist party Revival was there, with one of their representatives claiming that they "do not care who loves who, but this has to be something that happens at home" (Atanasova, 2021). Their words were followed by actions, as cucumbers and eggs were thrown directly at the participants and the Pride flag was burned (Svoboda na Evropa, 2021).

In many ways, the reaction to Burgas Pride are not far off from the struggles that Polish LGBTQIA+ individuals have to face in terms of violence. The burning of the LGBTQIA+ flag and the burning of the Rainbow Arch in Warsaw, installed in 2012 as a symbol of tolerance that was ultimately set fire to seven times (O'Dwyer, 2018:301), lead to the same overall message: LGBTQIA+ people do not deserve to have 'pride.' In places like Hungary, pride marches were even renamed to dignity marches after right-wing attacks as a way to side-step the negative connotations 'pride' has and focus on dignity being a human right (Renkin, 2014:8-12). Visibility thus becomes conditional as well; the fight for equality turns into a fine balance of visibility that both does not disrupt the heterosexual status quo and yet allows heterosexuals to be on their guard (Baer, 2013:41; Graff, 2006:444). Participant at Burgas Pride, Vladislav Petkov, said "sometimes, we have to fight for equality with our bodies" (Svoboda na Evropa) - when do we decide that this is a cost that is too high?

What About Europe?

Catherine Bolzendahl and Ksenia Gracheva write in "Rejecting the West? Homonegative Attitudes and Political Orientations in Contemporary Eastern Europe" that "nationalism matters more in Eastern Europe and support for democracy matters more in Western nations" (Bolzendahl and Gracheva, 2018:359). I would argue that this is overly simplistic, not only because it removes the place of LGBTQIA+ individuals who may fight for their place in the nation through democratic principles, but also because it feeds into broader us/them tropes that continue to place Eastern Europe as the backwards Other. What is more, judging the trajectory of Pride, despite the laws and regulations Bulgaria has had to change to become a member in the European Union, little has been done to ensure that those laws are being followed. For example, although homophobic speech is considered on the list of EU crimes alongside things like homophobia (Novak and Pronczuk, 2020), the National Resistance's 2017 anti-Pride campaign received little more than a discussion by Sophie in't Veld, Vice President of the LGBTI Intergroup in the European Parliament, who questioned whether authorities "really want Sofia to become known as the most homophobic city in Europe" (ALDE Party, 2017). What is more, before 2014, PADA was only utilised once to argue hate speech discrimination. The case was against Volen Siderov, whose case, despite having proof of homophobic statements made on national television, was filed as dismissed (Stanev, 2014:33).

Overall, the ways in which Bulgaria's right-wing movements react to LGBTQIA+ rights is neither new nor unique to Europe. That does not mean, however, that their reactions are less important. If we take rights claims as something that is discussed and debated through public places, then the negotiation of citizenship rights becomes severely restricted if certain people are not allowed to enter into those public spaces safely (Richardson, 2000:120). In other words, the pressure of anti-Pride parades across the country serve to effectively maintain certain boundaries of citizenship that upkeep the heterosexual, heteronormative, monogamous family. Although visibility is crucial to this, until Sofia Pride is backed up by both the enactment of legislation protecting LGBTQIA+ individuals and fairer media representation, right-wing parties and concerned parents alike will continue to ostracise the public opinions of everyday individuals. This leads to wide-scale disapproval on the basis of fear tactics and, oftentimes, ignorance: the perfect storm for the Istanbul Convention.

Chapter Three:
Rise of the Genders

"Stereotypes…are the majority culture's ideological means of legitimising the political oppression of sexual minorities" (Gamson, 2002:341)

"Homosexuality appears to make interesting news only in the context of shame and fear" (Graff, 2006:443)

Addressing the Bulgarian Parliament in November of 2018, Bulgaria's Foreign Minister Ekaterina Zaharieva stated, rather ironically, "you can pride yourself with one thing: Bulgaria is the reason why the entire European Union will be unable to implement the Convention" (BNT, 2018). What she was referring to was the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, also known as the Istanbul Convention. Drafted by the Council of Europe, which Francisca Ammaturo argues to be the single most influential body with regard to legislative and political changes towards LGBTQIA+ rights on all of the European continent (Ammaturo, 2017:20), the Convention quickly became one of the most destructive human rights debates in Bulgaria's history (Stanoeva, 2018:723). Written with victims of domestic abuse in mind, discussions around the Istanbul Convention in Bulgaria focused instead on the role that LGBTQIA+ individuals have in the country and whether European "gender propaganda" should be allowed to be taught in schools. The anti-gender panic that took over the country are, of course, apart of larger discourses around "transnational mobilisations of the religious right" (Graff, 2014:434), some of which we already witnessed in the previous chapter. The difference is, however, that the campaigns that ignited fear of the LGBTQIA+ individual and a widespread misunderstanding of sex and gender orientation began in Bulgaria almost out of nowhere. Whereas in Hungary, Germany, Poland and Slovakia the movements were built upon the history of anti-abortion and anti-women's rights campaigns, in Bulgaria there were no similar movements to build off of (Darakchi, 2019:1212). As we have seen, however, there did already exist fertile ground for anit-LGBTQIA+ hate planted by right-wing groups who had waged a war against queer people living in the country long before the 2017 Istanbul Convention debates.

The debates around the Istanbul Convention provide a perfect example of the ways in which gender and sexual citizenship have converged within the Bulgarian national psyche within the past few years and how this has been dealt with on a governmental level. To begin this chapter, I will briefly discuss the history of gender theory within Bulgaria building up to the time around the Istanbul Convention, as understanding the context is as important as

discussing the debates themselves. I will continue by discussing three main factors that I believe were involved in influencing discussions around the Istanbul Convention on a widespread level. Afterwards, I will mention the fate of the Istanbul Convention in Bulgaria and the implications this has for those most affected by the conversations: the LGBTQIA+ individual and the victim of domestic abuse.

What is Gender?

As a concept, gender was introduced into Bulgarian academic circles in the 1990s (Popova, Koev and Popova, 2020:536). Since then, it has been subject to a plethora of translations that never seem to truly fit. At first, gender was translated into the grammatical genus as a way to draw parallels between the concept of gender and the grammatical male/female/neutral structure of Bulgarian (Azarova, 2005:1). However, the use of genus as a way to distinguish between sex and gender did not take hold, leading to translations that included "social sex", "sociosex/sexus" and the direct transliteration "gender" (джендър). Social sex seemed the most promising, since it was used as a way to distinguish between biological sex and cultural, socially determined sex (Slavova, 2019:228-229; Bankov, 2020:345). However, this confused people even more, as 'social sex' made people think that it was biological sex that was socially constructed, and not gender (Darakchi, 2019:1209). By the time that the Istanbul Convention was drafted and translated into Bulgarian, "social sex," despite being commonly misunderstood, was the chosen working translation of gender.

Key Actors

The Role of the Association "Society and Values"

Although the main debate around the Istanbul Convention on a governmental level began at the end of 2017 and continued until March of 2019 (Popova, Koev and Popova, 2020:528), the Istanbul Convention emerged as a widespread topic of debate at the end of 2018. The association "Society and Values," which is apart of the wider World Congress of Families (Slavova, 2019:232) and the same association that worked to organise anti-Pride marches since 2018, has existed since 2007 with a mission statement dedicated to mobilising citizens "to uphold and defend values and policies that protect the human dignity and freedom, marriage and family at a National and European level" (SVA, 2021). Taking advantage of the poor translation of gender as "social sex" for political opportunism and marketing itself (as most

antigender groups do) as an organisation and not a political party so as to gain greater influence in discussions around anticolonialism (Graff and Korolczuk, 2018:799), Society and Values began working towards preventing the implementation of the Istanbul Convention in January of 2018 by posting an online petition in which they became trailblazers in the use of 'gender ideology' as a buzz-word, arguing that they would not allow gender ideology to ruin traditional Bulgarian values that they felt the Istanbul Convention would harm, nor would they allow the 'third sex' to be promoted, claiming that there were only two genders: male and female (Darakchi, 2019:1210, 1220). Once they collected what they believed to be enough signatures to showcase the role of 'concerned citizens,' they presented their findings on the Bulgarian National Radio, encouraging more people to join in the effort to stop the Istanbul Convention (Popova, Koev and Popova, 2020:531).

The Role of [Social] Media and Politics

Society and Values may have kickstarted debates around the Istanbul Convention by presenting the idea of 'gender ideology' as a threat to national values, but the media and politicians alike kept the ball rolling. This is not surprising in the context of Bulgaria in particular, especially if we refer back to Stanimir Panayotov's idea of the gay mafia. According to Panayotov, the media drives anti-LGBTQIA+ prejudice as a way to construct the discourse around the gay mafia and therefore receive more ratings, creating a false regime of truth that does little to actually build on true investigations (Panayotov, 2013). Radoslav Stoyanov, chairman to the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, shares his sentiments, arguing that corrupt media is one of the main obstacles to productive conversations around LGBTQIA+ rights in the country (Sharlandjieva, 2016). It becomes clearer how in such a context, claims of the push for 'gender ideology' spread like wildfire.

The sheer media attention given to the Istanbul Convention from late 2017 until 2019 was unprecedented: just between December of 2017 and January of 2018, over 7,000 articles were published discussing it, more than half of which were against the Istanbul Convention, referring to it as an attempt at 'homo dictatorship' (Stanoeva, 2018:723; Popova, Koev, and Popova, 2020:532-533). Behind the media, however, there stood an important factor: right-wing leaning parties. Parties such as VMRO, Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), United Patriots and the Union of Democratic Forces drove more than 10% of media publications related to the Istanbul Convention (Darakchi, 2019:1210; Stanoeva, 2018:725; Popova, Koev and Popova, 2020:532). Right-wing party VMRO in particular played

off of widespread and well-known fears against LGBTQIA+ individuals in a way similar to the National Resistance during their anti-Pride march in 2012. By arguing that the Istanbul Convention was actually a disguise in order to legalise same-sex marriage, force "transvestite themes" to be taught in schools, harm women by allowing trans persons into their public spaces such as bathrooms, and expand refugee rights - none of which is actually mentioned in the text of the document itself - VMRO joined Society and Values as one of the main drivers behind the anti-LGBTQIA+ hysteria that overtook the country (Vassileva, 2018:1; Stanoeva, 2018:725). The particular use of women by VMRO is worth noting as a trend used by right-wing groups in discussions around protecting the nation and 'our' women, which inevitably become symbols of progress or regress (Mostov, 2000:92). Thus, VMRO shifted the conversation from the protection of domestic violence victims (which never really circulated in popular discourse anyway) to broader questions about national pride and cultural identity ('are we going to let them harm our women?') - a strategy commonly used by nationalist groups (Graff, 2010:584). Not to be confused for a locality, Serbian mayor Dragan Markovic Palma did something similar in 2009 when arguing that by accepting an anti-discrimination law in 2009 to get into the EU, Serbia would be economically putting their beautiful women at a disadvantage (Blagojevic, 2011:35). There was no further elaboration.

Right-wing groups were not the only ones using fear tactics to gain votes and visibility. The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), despite supporting the Istanbul Convention and gender equality when the document was first submitted for ratification (Darakchi, 2019:1215-1216), changed their opinion after Society and Values published their online statement. BSP leader Kornelia Ninova wrote that although the Bulgarian Socialist Party is pro-gender equality, it could not support the revision of traditional values that the term gender implied, as it goes against the party's vision (Darakchi, 2019:1216; Stanoeva, 2018:725). At the Bulgarian Socialist Party's National Convention, Ninova went on to state that Bulgaria is losing its children, "their heads…being brainwashed with pseudo-values" (Slavova, 2019:235). Despite backlash from the Party of European Socialists who remained committed to fighting for women's equality and supporting the Convention, the position of the Bulgarian Socialist Party against the Istanbul Convention after 2017 remains to this day, with their political platform, titled "A Vision for Bulgaria," giving an honourable mention to the Convention and its attempt to go "against Bulgarian traditions and the family" (BSP, 2019:25). In some ways, it is ironic that both left and right-wing parties decided to openly go against the Istanbul Convention. It is not surprising, however; as Joanna Mizielińska writes, all politicians use sexual politics as a manipulatory tool to control societal fears (Mizielińska, 2011:88). Once again, LGBTQIA+

people are used as a marker for what is considered acceptably within and outside of the borders of the nation, existing only as partial citizens.

Society and Values' petition not only influenced the media - it had a huge impact online as well. Medical organisations, teacher associations, parents, and other groups were in agreement that the Istanbul Convention really was trying to enforce 'gender ideology' in Bulgaria (Darakchi, 2019:1220). Even mathematicians were getting involved, with Professor Mihail Konstantinov from Sofia University writing an essay titled "Rise and Fall of the Bulgarian Gender" in which he discussed the convention full of "genders, transvestites…gays, lesbians, bisexuals, migrants, refugees, women in burkas, gypsies, AIDS sufferers, etc." (Slavova, 2019:235). In a tone similar to "all gays go back to Uganda," Konstantinov's text gives insight into just how verbally loaded the Istanbul Convention came to be. What began as a discussion on 'gender ideology' turned into massive conversations on social media, just like elsewhere, around whether the Istanbul Convention was a Jewish plot against Christianity, a way for global actors to get rich through its implementation and thus harm Bulgaria's economy, or a way for the EU to dominate over Bulgaria just as the Ottoman Empire and the Soviet Union had, especially in an attempt to attack Christianity in the country (Darakchi, 2019:1217-1219; Bankov, 2020:344, 359-360; Stanoeva, 2018:270). Priding itself as the only nation to resist the "global plan for the destruction of nations" (Darakchi, 2019:1219), members of online forums held little difference to broader antigender discourses that discuss "the global criminal plot aimed at demoralising and eventually eradicating entire populations" (Graff and Korolczuk, 2018:812).

The Role of the Orthodox Church

The place of religious nationalism is hard to describe in Bulgaria. Although it is obvious that many right-wing and ultranationalist groups use discussions around God and the 'natural order' to fight against LGBTQIA+ rights, Orthodoxy in Bulgaria is in many ways understood similarly to how Marek Mikušdescribes it to be in Serbia: those who declare themselves Orthodox understand it primarily as a political religion that blesses a nation, rather than developing an intense relationship with God themselves (Mikuš, 2015:25). In Bulgaria's case, as we have seen through comments around the March for the Family, LGBTQIA+ people are often blamed for turning their back on what is considered one of the only things that kept their nation stable during Ottoman rule: Christianity. Just as LGBTQIA+ rights have become signifiers for Europe and attempted colonialism, Christianity has become a signifier of Bulgaria, strength and perseverance.

Keeping this in mind, when around the same time as Society and Values the Bulgarian Orthodox Church posted, at the end of January 2018, an online position against the Istanbul Convention, claiming it was incompatible with the Bulgarian civic order and with the ideas of the Holy Orthodox Church (Darakchi, 2019:1121), many people felt that if 'gender ideology' was incompatible with Christian religious values, it was, by extension, incompatible with Bulgaria as well (ibid.:1212). Due to this, one of the main themes of rejecting the Istanbul Convention actually became religious (Bankov, 2020:357). The specific values that the Orthodox Church discussed as not being compatible with traditional values were those of the heterosexual marriage and the creationist division between male and female (ibid.:346). For the Church, there were only two biological *genders*: man and woman.

Discussions revolving around the role of the Istanbul Convention and its place in Bulgaria became so serious that some members of the Church called for any ministers supporting to Convention to be excommunicated (Slavova, 2019:236), which, given the symbolism of the Church, effectively meant that they were called to be removed from the nation. In its fight against 'gender ideology,' the Orthodox Church, like Catholic clergy members in Poland who also engaged in heated debates around the ratification of the Istanbul Convention (Graff, 2014:432), consequentially turned the conversation towards protecting Bulgaria rather than protecting religion. In other words, the Church was not defending religion from being harmed, but rather defending the Bulgarian nation, that would ultimately stop existing if the sanctity of marriage and the Christian family was attacked. This same subject has been discussed in other post-socialist countries as well, including Hungary around questions around amending the Constitution to include civil partnerships (Novak and Pronczuk, 2020) and Slovenia, once again around discussions about reforming the Family Code (Kuhar, 2014:87).

The Role of Collective Memory

In his text discussing sexual politics, Sam Pryke writes that "national conflict is…crucial to understanding the relationship of nationalism and sexuality" (Pryke, 1998:540). In Bulgaria, understanding national conflict becomes even more important when, as we have seen, right-wing groups oftentimes use Bulgaria's historical conflicts with the Ottoman Empire and Russia as a way to build national sympathies and organise such sentiments against Sofia Pride. Just as there, so too during the Istanbul Convention was Bulgaria's Ottoman history incorporated into discussions as a way to appeal to the nation - something that has potent psychological appeal

during times of economic and cultural transformations (Todorova, 2019:361). A key thing to remember is that Christianity is, as aforementioned, also a crucial aspect to understanding Bulgarian nationalism; its entanglement and associations, as will be discussed, almost always serve as stepping stones for greater conversations around the fear of colonialism. For many Bulgarians, Christianity is the "singular nationalist myth…which saved [Bulgaria's] ethnic purity and cultural authenticity" (Stanoeva, 2018:720).

From the start, the Istanbul Convention was not trusted by some people because of the name itself. As a matter of fact, some people thought the document was Turkish because of its shorthand title (Darakchi, 2019:1219). The Orthodox Church did not help in this conversation, hosting a debate discussing the Istanbul Convention in early 2018 with the Catholic Church and the United Evangelical Church in which they all argue that the latin root of gender actually comes from an Indo-European root that carries in it the Turkish word for hell (джендем - gendem) (Stanoeva, 2018:728). By drawing that conclusion, the Orthodox Church provided a 'scientific' reason why the Istanbul Convention should not be ratified: not only was it associated with Turkey (even if just through lexicon), but with hell as well. This was not the only relationship that the Istanbul Convention had with Turkey or the Ottoman Empire at the time. During some in-person protests against the Convention, posters were held saying "During Turkish [yoke] they took our children away to be janissaries. Now they want to take them away in Europe to be genders," which is a reference to propaganda perpetuated under state socialism in the country that posited how janissaries (young Christian boys) would be abducted from their families and brought up in Ottoman armies, only to return to torment the country (Slavova, 2019:233). Many people also argued that national heroes did not fight against the Ottoman Empire only to have Bulgaria accept the Istanbul Convention (Bankov, 2020:357). Velislava Dureva, member of the Bulgarian Socialist Party, in her article about the Istanbul Convention in the newspaper *Duma*, went a step further and wrote that the Convention would cause the birth of a new person "without a country, without a nation, without memory, without history, without roots…without morality, without Belief, without God" (Stanoeva, 2018:727). In all of these cases, to be pro-the Istanbul Convention was to be against Christianity, against Bulgaria, and even against those who died for its freedom. Or, to put it simply: to be against the Istanbul Convention was to be for Bulgaria. And, as the Istanbul Convention signified began to signify yet another piece of legislation that Western Europe was imposing on Bulgaria with little regard for the local realities of the country (Bankov, 2020:344), so too being anti-Istanbul Convention became the "new discourse of patriotism" (Chetaille, 2013:137).

The Illegality of 'Gender'

After countless debates, on July 27, 2018, the Bulgarian Constitutional Court finally declared the Istanbul Convention illegal on the grounds of its incompatibility with the Bulgarian Constitution of 1991 on the basis of two main arguments against one clause. The clause, Article 3 of the Istanbul Convention, stated that "social sex [gender] means socially decided roles, actions and characteristics which a certain society deems proper for men and women" (Stanoeva, 2018:723). Interpreted to mean allowing people the ability to choose their own gender based on social benefit, the court went on to argue that first and foremost, due to the unclarity of the concept 'gender,' the Istanbul Convention blurs the lines between man and woman and therefore renders any attempt to combat domestic violence against women ultimately useless (Vassileva, 2018:2). The second argument built off of the first one, arguing that the Convention went against Article 46(1) of the Bulgarian Constitution that states marriage is a "voluntary union between a man and a woman" (Vassileva, 2018:1; Roseneil and Stoilova, 2011:179), continuing to make a connection between marriage roles and social roles. Thus, if people could choose their own gender, they would be going against the binary understanding of the Bulgarian Constitution that posited that man and woman have social roles that they must fulfil as, for example, husband and wife, or mother and father (Vassileva, 2018:4).

All of this leads us to the question, yet again, of: what about EU law? Although member state constitutions hold more power than non-binding legal documents that are strongly recommended, Bulgaria has ratified both the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights, both of which deal with anti-discrimination legislation against women (Stanoeva, 2018:718; Vassileva, 2018:3). In other words, the Istanbul Convention would not be the only document that the Bulgarian government has ratified in relation to protecting women. When Bulgaria ratified the other legislation, however, it was striving to become a member of the elite European Union, which provided powerful political incentives to pass legislation (Spendzharova and Vachudova, 2011:46). 11 years into the European Union, by the time that the Istanbul Convention came around and both Society and Values and the Orthodox Church mentioned 'gender ideology' in relation to LGBTQIA+ rights, those rights already had "the flavour of a European project" for better or worse (O'Dwyer, 2012:334), in part because of their alignment of the Council of Europe, as Ammaturo argues. Bulgaria had nothing to lose by not ratifying the document, but what about those that did?

The Forgotten Victim and the Battered Scapegoat

Within the past few years years, the verbatim 'gender' in Bulgarian has become "a semiotically efficient expression of a legitimised collective ignorance" (Bankov, 2020:347). When the Bulgarian National Radio stopped people in the street to interview them, asking them what they understood 'gender' to mean during the peak of Istanbul Convention debates, people mostly claimed that it either meant someone with a different sexual orientation to that of heterosexuality, someone who is intersex (a "he/she"), someone who is transgender, or someone who supports the Europe in its attempts to ruin traditional Bulgarian society (a supporter of "Gayropa") (Slavova, 2019:230-231). Now, 'gender' has more or less replaced the word 'faggot' in the mass psyche (Darakchi, 2019:1210).

The ruling of the Istanbul Convention has made it clear that in Bulgaria, no matter if inclusion into the nation is based on ethnic/religious terms (Stanoeva, 2018:718) or based on legal citizenship, the LGBTQIA+ individual is still consistently excluded. Where the National Resistance and the Orthodox Church tell supporters of Pride that they are ruining the morality of the country by parading what should be considered a parade of shame, the Bulgarian government, including politicians, has effectively said that in Bulgaria, it is illegal to be anything other than heterosexual. Or, to put it differently, those who receive the benefit of full sexual citizenship are those who exist peacefully in the confines of the heterosexist nation. The moral panic surrounding same-sex marriage in Bulgaria should absolutely be viewed as an attempt to legally exclude LGBTQIA+ people from the nation, especially if we follow Mayer's sexual citizenship = nation = gender matrix mentioned in the Introduction. If the places where sexual 'others' are excluded are where heterosexual identities are reproduced through the very act of 'othering' (Richardson, 2004:402), then both the debates around and the outcome of the Istanbul Convention have directly contributed to reproducing the sexual 'other' by affirming exactly what heterosexual Bulgarians are *not:* genders. Defined almost solely by their sexuality, LGBTQIA+ are therefore still not given a legal right to be sexual beings (Kuhar, 2011:152).

LGBTQIA+ persons are not the only characters in this story, however. Behind the shadows of debates around the Convention there lie the forgotten victim of domestic abuse, whose mention did not creep up during my research. According to the European Institute of Gender Equality, Bulgaria holds the worst score in the EU in terms of measures against violence against women due to lack of proper legislative changes (Vassileva, 2018:2; Darakchi, 2019:1213). What is more, within just two years, between 2017 and 2019, over 50 women were murdered in cases of domestic violence in the country (Darakchi, 2019:35). To better

understand this situation and the ways in which the Istanbul Convention affected it, I held an interview with an important member of Emprove Bulgaria, who for the sake of anonymity will be referred to as Mary.

Emprove Bulgaria, currently a foundation, began as an ERASMUS+ project funded by the European Union. Mary, who was working at CATRO at the time (a focus in my next chapter), wrote a project proposal for Emprove and pitched it, on behalf of the company, to ERASMUS+ as one of that year's social projects. Upon receiving approval, Emprove turned into an international initiative that existed in multiple countries, all dedicated to combating domestic violence on a local level. Keeping in mind the goal of a long-term approach, once Mary's ERASMUS+ funding ended after the project began in 2016, she decided that she would work towards making Emprove a foundation.

Emprove's current goal is to offer free professional support to survivors of domestic violence, including free group therapy sessions. The foundation also created a campaign called #WideAwake [РаноБудна; literally: to be awake early] which involves hosting talks and sharing pamphlets online that help women identity the first signs of a toxic relationship patter. According to Mary, the best thing that Emprove can do is to provide women with such resources at early stages of their relationships so that they can leave as unscathed as possible. When asked about the target group of their policies, Mary admitted that the group they focus the most on is women, working only with women for the therapy sessions.

Entering into discussions around the Istanbul Convention, Mary told me that the Istanbul Convention brought "a huge level of hope" in the field of organisations working with domestic abuse victims, since many saw it as something that would get the ball rolling for legislative changes to current domestic abuse (or lack thereof) laws. The opposite happened, however, and debates around the Istanbul Convention actually slowed down government-level changes related to domestic abuse. Mary went on to say that their foundation deals mainly with women who are survivors of domestic abuse simply because they do not have the required financial resources to open a crisis centre. According to her, there are only 13 crisis centres in the country; the Istanbul Convention would have required just Sofia to have 12 based on population size. With lack of crisis centres and legislative support, Mary comments that many women lose the desire to leave the situations they find themselves in, especially due to societal pressure. The situation, however, is looking more positive. Thanks in part to Emprove, there is now an EU-level policy report on the situation of domestic violence in Bulgaria which can be used to make legislative claims. What is more, Mary told me that their sessions have good turnouts, meaning their style of 'guerrilla marketing' is working.

When thinking about the Istanbul Convention and the impact it has had on LGBTQIA+ individuals and victims of domestic abuse alike, some parallels can be drawn. For example, both are victims of the heteronormative nation; whereas LGBTQIA+ individuals are effectively removed from the national picture, victims of domestic abuse, in being ostracised from central conversations around the Istanbul Convention, remain in the stronghold of heteronormative taboos that, as Mary told me, delegitimise concerns as overreacting, despite serious issues such as constant psychological trauma arising from them. Given these taboos, the act of leaving domestic violence situations can be perceived as feminist (which Mary considers her foundation to be), which marginalises women from the nation in the same way LGBTQIA+ persons are (Peterson, 1999:53).

The Istanbul Convention, in its association with the Council of Europe, the European Union, LGBTQIA+ rights and Turkey, became symbolic of a colonising mission that was fought with historically sharpened tools that Balkan ideologies have kept in the reservoir for the sake of history not repeating itself: nationalism and resistance (Sampson, 2002:41). The broader picture illuminates that homophobic conversation is never really about LGBTQIA+ rights all, but rather the notion that political independence, and alongside it economic stability, was being threatened (Graff, 2010:585). In this climate, tolerance becomes more thinly defined than ever, ready to rupture against anyone who does not follow national, heterosexual interests, so defined by politicians using "patriotic pragmatism" as a way to violate human rights for the nation's sake (Waitt, 2005:17; Kuhar and Švab, 2013:34; Kuhar, 2011:153). This makes the work of those who see the strategic benefits of being in the European Union all the more difficult, despite not impossible.

Chapter Four:
CATRO: A Practical Application of Theoretical Work

"Privileges under one economic system could be readily converted into privileges under new economic systems without regard to changing institutional imperatives" (Ghodsee, 2004:729)

"We have a new type of ideological praise for a system that seems similar to that promised land described by communist propaganda" (Buchowski, 2006:472)

Throughout this thesis, I have portrayed current trends around sexual citizenship in Bulgaria by looking at debates around both Sofia Pride and the Istanbul Convention as key areas in which sexual citizenship rights are not only contested, but in many ways defined as well. There is one thing missing: practicality. During the summer of 2020, I was given the opportunity to better understand how some of the key arguments I engage with take hold on a practical level by interning at CATRO Bulgaria. There, I used an ethnographical approach to analyse both the work that CATRO does and the ways in which my colleagues, through open-ended interviews, feel about it. An Austrian-based company, the doors of CATRO opened in Bulgaria in 2017 when my former boss, Anelia, decided to return from Germany and take on the journey of improving her homeland - something I will go into more depth about later in the chapter.

Focusing on two aspects: social projects funded by the European Union and business development via recruitment, training and consultancy, CATRO manages to maintain its work in one of the "most turbulent and nationalistic" parts of Europe (Mylonas, 2012:53) by balancing the fine line between being just European enough to be trusted and just Bulgarian enough to make real changes at the local level. In this way, CATRO sidesteps the benevolent colonialist project of most post-1989 private companies that entered the region (Sampson, 2002:31) by adding the flavour of care. In other words, CATRO, and many of its colleagues, care about the work that they do at the local level. CATRO is not a company without critique, however. In its attempts to change the Bulgarian private sector towards something more transparent and honest, it leaves behind some forgotten members of society who, in line with neoliberalist times, might not have the capacity to 'change.'

I will begin this chapter by first discussing the post-socialist context that CATRO finds itself in, existing in a legacy built around Western Europe's neoliberal project for integrating Eastern Europe into the ranks of the 'West.' I will continue by elaborating a bit more about what it is that CATRO does and how the company explains its work itself through its main marketing video and colleague interviews. Finally, I will draw on three main factors that I have

discovered to be important traits to CATRO for the people that they choose to build a brighter Bulgaria with: responsibility, happiness, and goodness - all crucial aspects of the neoliberal citizen. To conclude, I will bring CATRO back into the context of antigender backlash by discussing some of the struggles that members of the company themselves have faced in Bulgaria given recent trends.

Bulgaria's European Companies - Propagating Europe's Civilising Agenda?

After the fall of socialism in both Bulgaria and abroad, many post-socialist countries in Eastern Europe did not have a choice to say no to the adoption of certain neoliberal reforms that Western Europe felt would be necessary for Eastern Europe to 'catch up' to the economic pace Western Europe already kept (Appel and Orenstein, 2016:317-318). The "New Policy Agenda" went forward at full pace, setting up institutions in the region that would promote neoliberal economics in such a way that not only would Eastern Europe flourish, but Western Europe would have a new market to sell things to as well (Ghodsee, 2004:742). The most important factor to all of this was that the question of Eastern European economic integration was, above all, tied to the question of morality - the assumption was that Eastern Europe would adopt neoliberal reforms on the basis of liberal democratic ones as well and in this way provide the grounds for effective democracy and, by extension, civil society, or the space that exists between the public and the private (Mandel, 2002:282; Einhorn and Sever, 2003:166).

A seemingly decent idea on paper, the reality of the situation was much different due to the post-socialist realities of many countries in the region. In an attempt to join Western Europe's economy, post-socialist Eastern Europe was hit by a debt crisis and recession in the late 1990s that caused not only high unemployment and lowered life expectancy, but the creation of what became known as an NGO mafia as well (Sampson, 2002:29; Dale and Fabry, 2018:234, 239; Demmers, Jilberto, and Hogenboom, 2004:18). Driven by the incentive of joining the European Union (Appel and Orenstein, 2016:320), civil society in Bulgaria was seemingly flourishing. Below this, however, the European Union funding that was going to NGOs in the region as a way to encourage the growth of civil society was actually being taken by politicians who would strategically become heads of NGOs so as to control the money that the NGOs received (Spendzharova and Vachudova, 2011:49). Due to this, many people began to view civil society as a whole as manipulative and ineffective which, when paired with the

socialist legacy of the public sector also being ineffective and corrupt (Mikuš, 2016:216), ultimately meant that people were left with no trust for any type of institution.

In the midst of this and back to the key factor of moral politics, the European Union requested countries to change their minority policies in addition to their economic ones (Johns, 2003:683), as we have seen Bulgaria do with passing legislation like PADA. In other words, the European Union made countries applying for it remove all legislation that protected national culture and identity at the cost of harming minority rights (ibid.:685) - a predicament for newly liberated countries. Eastern European countries thus began developing a new goal: to find a way to join the EU whilst protecting their culture and society (ibid.:696). In Bulgaria, one way this has happened is through having the power to say no, once in the European Union, to legislation such as the Istanbul Convention. CATRO provides the less extreme version of this, by marketing itself as both Bulgarian *and* European, using one or the other whenever it becomes more beneficial. Thus, CATRO is both one of *us* and one of *them.*

Who is CATRO, Who is Bulgarian?

Adam Harmes in "The Rise of Neoliberal Nationalism" writes that despite its history, neoliberal policies can be very much compatible with nationalist values (Harmes, 2012:60). Applying this to CATRO, I would argue that CATRO's specific type of neoliberal projects and approach are key to the values that it hopes to transfer to Bulgarian society at large. In other words, the neoliberal policies it introduces are the changes it wishes to see in Bulgaria and, consequentially, the Bulgarian nation. This is not an isolated process; the very transnational nature of the company itself indicates that it is apart of an infrastructure that spans far outside of Bulgaria (Adkins, 2018:469). Yet, CATRO's approach is different from the trajectories of other neoliberalist institutions. Founded by a woman with four women and only one man on the team, CATRO turns the assumption that capitalist institutions are "masculine and aggressive" on its head (Ghodsee, 2004:745). Anelia also provides an example of the ways in which both civil society and the private sector, although far from being gender-neutral (Einhorn and Sever, 2003:167), are in the very least not always dominated by unequal male > female ratios.

Key Marketing Message: CATRO as the Bulgarian Way Forward

During my time interning at CATRO, I was able to both witness and participate in the creation of the single most expensive marketing attempt the company had done for itself until then: the creation of a video in which CATRO and its members sold itself to potential partners. The

concept of the video was simple: every permanent member of the team would get an interview through which they explain why they cherish working at CATRO and why others should invest in the company. Aspects of the film were shot both in the park and the office and strict guidelines were used to implement dress codes: women would be in pastel colours and dresses, the single male member in dress pants and a dress shirt. Days before the video was to be shot, my colleagues and I worked on the appearance of the conference room that would serve as the main space the video would be shot in the office. On the wall, we spent hours putting up names of clients in a strategic way, so that those with whom CATRO was most proud of working were placed in the centre for everyone to see - both Bulgarian and European clients alike. Absolutely everything was tailored in such a way that it would fit the mould of presenting a great company run, for the most part, by strong-minded women.

The video itself can be divided into two parts: visuals and audio. Audibly, we are taken on a journey into the creation of CATRO that turns into a heart-felt story about how Anelia, after having studied in Germany, decided to come back to Bulgaria to open CATRO in 2010 "from the standpoint of patriotism and internal ideology," wanting to help her country "change…towards something more positive," which she claims "doesn't happen just from politicians, but from the people who work here and develop things here." With a goal of helping people develop themselves and get the best out of their company and teams, Anelia presents CATRO as a company run by those that Ruth Mandel coins as "indigenous development professionals" (Mandel, 2002:292.) Yet, whereas Mandel argues that this indigenous class is encouraged by Western development personnel (in this case by CATRO's mother company in Austria) to leave the region, Anelia notes that she is happy staying where she is - a sentiment that will be elaborated on further down. She also can be said to have taken the role of what Mandel considers a Western job to create development professionals, saying in the video that her happiness comes in part due to her creation of "a cohesive team of inspired and inspiring professionals" that can carry CATROs main values of courage, creativity and commitment forward. A colleague of Anelia's lived up to this message in the video, stating that the reason that she joined the company was because CATRO had at its forefront the goal of professional growth. Through the implementation of a heartfelt message alongside the constant reiteration of the importance of values and the ways in which, thanks to real-life examples of colleagues, CATRO has managed to instil its values and have a true impact, the video paints the company in a similar light to other Western development projects that Steven Sampson writes aim to replace "loyalty to persons with a Western model of loyalty to an institution and its principles" (Sampson, 2002:30).

The visual impacts of the video make broader connections between Anelia and her goal of changing Bulgarian society in what she considers to be a more positive way. The video opens with the image of a plant sprouting in the early morning and then cuts into Anelia walking into the office, giving all of us watering plants to choose from. From the office, all of us arrange to meet at the park nearby, where everyone brings one thing that they are associated with and enjoy (one colleague brought a book because they like reading, another a bike, and so on). Anelia, however, carries a small tree, which, with all of our help, she plants in the ground. We then use our watering plants together and water the plant, showing that together, we are all contributing to building a brighter future. Given Anelia returned from Western Europe, according to her, to build a better Bulgaria, and given that her contribution in this is to create like-minded Bulgarian professionals who are trained in a Western-European company that holds to its standard a set of goals that would allow for honesty and transparency within the politics of the private-sector, in some ways Anelia has become the mother of her own microcosm of the Bulgarian nation. By planting the tree with the help of what can be considered her company's 'offspring,' Anelia is symbolically reproducing the nation in a public space where others can see. What is more, the use of the tree implies that there is something inherently organic about the whole process. What CATRO is doing is not forced; instead, it is portrayed as a *natural* way forward. This representation of CATRO as run by a caring mother who has come back to take care of her nation removes its semi-colonialist edge as a Western European company in Eastern Europe by placing Anelia into broader constructions of belonging through performativity. Anelia is thus able to enter into conversations around her company exactly by not destabilising societal notions of heteronormativity by embodying the nation's gendered performance (Militz and Schurr, 2016:55) through both dress and action.

Socially Responsible Projects and Programmes

At one point during the video, two colleagues agree that what distinguishes CATRO from other companies in both the Bulgarian and Western European market is not only its focus on the client and personal development, but also its focus on promoting what they call "socially responsible" projects and business initiatives that have yet to be implemented in the Bulgarian, Austrian, and, according to a colleague named Vessy who has lived in Denmark, even Danish markets. For Vessy, through working in part with such projects, CATRO shows the humanitarian side of business that many people come to forget when working in the field.

Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to go into depth about all of the projects that CATRO has worked on, I will provide information on the projects that my colleagues, in personal interviews, deemed some of the most important. The projects that CATRO chooses to work on are designed to help various disadvantaged groups develop their potential as a way "to receive an equal opportunity to join the work force." In the past eleven years that CATRO has existed, it has focused its efforts on helping through social projects domestic abuse victims, refugees, people with disabilities, the elderly, and so on. According to my former colleague Yvette, all of the projects that are chosen by CATRO are in one way or another connected to the labour market. They are also almost all funded by the European Union. The projects should be read, therefore, as a neoliberal approach to social problems through aiding people to become entrepreneurs by learning how to sell themselves as a potential investment through the development of various skills and attributes (Sugarman, 2015:104).

In terms of project importance, my colleagues were split. Yvette believed that the project "No Alternative Facts," whose goal is for young people to tell the difference between real and fake news and use those tools going forward, was the most important, as anyone can become victim to fake news. Vessy, however, believed that more business-targeted programmes held a higher rank. In her eyes, the Employee Assistance Programme, which works with company leaders to provide mental health services to workers in difficult situations, and the "Neuro-Agility" programme, which helps leaders and their employees learn how to develop all parts of their brain through various exercises, hold equal ranking in importance, since they recognise the worker and their personal success as an important part of company success. Stefi took a different approach, arguing that Emprove has been the most important in terms of impact because of the nature of the people with whom the programme worked, whereas Anelia argued something similar about an older project involving helping mothers with children with cancer's employment prospects. For the only male colleague, here written under the pseudonym Dima, all social projects have been important in terms of impact, although he also sees "No Alternative Facts" as one of the most important project ideas.

All of the projects that CATRO has worked on are commendable in some ways, whether because of their impact on a local level (i.e. Emprove) or because of their attempt to bring groups that are normally ostracised as equal players in the workforce. Despite this, CATRO's projects cannot be viewed as solely good hearted intentions to help those lesser off. The importance of the cash nexus in neoliberal institutions is that it changes what are considered ethical demands and responsibilities, therefore leading to a "revaluation of normative human rights" (Crawshaw and Whitehead, 2014:29). CATRO, in being so engrained in neoliberalist

approaches to the market economy in Bulgaria, is not excluded from this, leading to the pinnacle of human rights in the company to become in some ways simply the equal opportunity to join the market. Once the funding ends and the goal is set, CATRO moves on to other projects. Yet, this is not done without creating what I would call the "(Almost) Perfect Balkan Neoliberal."

How to Make the (Almost) Perfect Balkan Neoliberal

The Subject Must Be Responsible

When discussing the 'neoliberal,' I am talking about someone who is inherently tied to the neoliberal economy, which is a transnational, competition-based free market system that stems into both the developed and developing world (Sugarman, 2015:104; Appel and Orenstein, 2016:317). However, referring back to the notion of morality, neoliberalism is more than just an economic system; it is also a way to reform personhood and ethical responsibility in such a way that the individual becomes at the centre of the whole system (Sugarman, 2015:104). Ironically, as of yet, no region has embraced neoliberalism as enthusiastically as Eastern Europe, who believed that by adopting neoliberal policies, it would shed its Communist legacy and become more investor-friendly (Appel and Orenstein, 2016:313-316). In many ways, CATRO maintains this tradition, inventing a Bulgaria out of not only Communist, but post-socialist legacies that have, as aforementioned, made people lose hope in all institutions alike.

An important aspect to creating the proper citizen under neoliberalism is responsibilisation, meaning that subjects are responsible for themselves and their happiness; in other words, that subjects govern themselves within the economy (Olssen, 2018:391; Josephson, 2016:169; Adkins, 2018:471). This is a double-edged sword: people are both taught that they hold the key to their future and should learn how to unlock the door, as well as, that if the door does not unlock, it is them, and not the system, that is the problem. To learn how to unlock the door to their more positive future, neoliberalism posits that people need the exact type of development professionals that CATRO has: young, anglophone, and ultimately forming the creation of a new elite that takes the place in an 'us'/'them' scheme (Sampson, 2002:38-39). In this scheme, however, everyone is welcome at the 'us' table as long as they put in the work to get there.

The effort to join the enlightened 'us' comes from the "missionaries of laissez-faire" (Buchowski, 2006:475) at CATRO who, through social projects, gather groups of people and teach them the new standards of neoliberalism, self-marketing and self-regulation. By the end

of the projects, Stefi notes, people are changed in such a way that "they are independent enough that they can continue forward on their path to professional development" without needing the company for help. This happens through, as Yvette says, a "change in the way of thinking" about certain issues within the target group and the encouragement to help people work on themselves. What is interesting is that given all of this, CATRO still does not manage to fully fit itself into the neoliberal ethical tradition of estranging the individual from anyone else (Crawshaw and Whitehead, 2014:24). The emphasis, albeit individual in terms of progress and self-realisation, is still on a community effort to better the country. In the video, Anelia directly states that CATRO's mission statement is that "the care that we put into ourselves, we give to our clients as well." In our personal interview, Yvette went on to tell me that CATRO is distinguished as a company in Bulgaria because it is not about fast results, but about doing things with high quality, since the company and its workers "really believe in the projects" and not just the funding that goes into them.

Not everyone can join the table of elites, unfortunately. In neoliberalist mentality, some people are just incapable of social change, unable to fit in with places where "civilisation is king" (Buchowski, 2006:470). This argument is easily recognisable by the Pink Agenda and those who it manages to case aside, but it was also recognisable in my colleagues' interviews. For Yvette, the unchangeable are those Bulgarian companies that hold bias on who can qualify for job positions based on gender, age and race; for Stefi, those are the people in her hometown who "aren't ready for similar expansion, because that means they have to be honest with themselves" about what they do and do not know; for Vessy, it is the negative mentality that Bulgarians have when they approach things; and for Dima, it is the ways in which project funding is stolen and fake news spreads in the country, leaving Bulgaria a sphere for "illegality and corruption." The most striking of these examples is what Stefi brought up around concerns over the 'provincial mind' (Blagojevic, 2011:33), which tends to exclude that which is different. By discussing how those in her hometown in Bulgaria are not as developed as her way of thinking about the future, does she not do exactly what she says they are doing?

The Subject Must Be Happy

To have a responsible citizen is not all that there is to creating the (almost) perfect Balkan neoliberal - happiness is also required. Happiness dominates almost all areas of neoliberal discourse on well-being and is one important part of the broader picture of the self-regulating citizen (Duffy, 2017:87). The "happiness project" reproduces neoliberal subjects in such a way

that their emotions are manipulated by what the economy deems as acceptable, all hidden under the idea that people are investing in themselves by investing into their mental health and, consequentially, their future (Duffy, 2017:87-90; Adkins, 2018:472). The backbone of this happiness lies in two things: the idea that one is moving into an enlightened way of thinking and the idea that happiness can be measured by employment and economic independence (Mandel, 2002:292; Duffy, 2017:98). For Anelia, it can: by starting off the video stating that she is happy because of her creation of "inspired and inspiring professionals," Anelia's happiness, in her eyes, is managed by the success of the fruits of her labour.

The "new discourse on happiness" posits that neoliberalism both encourages people to cultivate their interests for the sake of achieving happiness and exploit their happiness, once achieved, as a way to reach success (Sugarman, 2015:109). CATRO's social projects are wonderful examples of the ways in which this discourse applies to real-life scenarios. For example, one of the projects I worked on in the past summer - ARTEM - was designed to encourage story-telling among refugee groups in Bulgaria. Once the refugees learned more about themselves, each other, and our team, we organised a session in which the refugees could meet Bulgarians from the community and thus encourage an exchange between them so as to fight stereotypes around migrants. The goal of this did not stop there, however; once the connections had been made, the final part of the project was to get both Bulgarians and refugees alike to log onto an online system that would allow them to call on each other for jobs in the region and thus mutually help each other. In other words, the short-term goal was happiness for the long-term goal that would lead to more happiness: economic success. Another example of the specific focus on happiness would be the aforementioned Employee Assistance Programme that, as Vessy argues, is chosen by companies because it makes them feel that they did "something good" for their employees by providing them mental-health support, which in return would lead to greater company success in the long-run.

Happiness and investing in ones future is one of CATRO's greatest marketing strategies, meaning that inadvertently, for CATRO as a neoliberal institution, happiness has become a crucial aspect of authenticity. This authenticity leads to a new form of agency that encourages others (here: companies and targets of social projects) to join in the conscious sense of moral good (McCarthy, 2009:241), since, according to Stefi, "every one of us…has the responsibility to be a meaningful person."

The Subject Must Be Good

The idea of the 'good' within neoliberalism arose in post-socialist Europe alongside calls for democratisation in the 1990s, making 'good governance' a human rights concern as much as an economic concern about transparency, equality, and fairness (Demmers, Jilberto, and Hogenboom, 2004:1-3). In CATRO's case, good governance is tied into working fairly and with high quality. Within this type of micro-level governance, there still exists a politics of belonging in which certain groups are included and excluded on the basis of this moral goodness, resulting in "winners and losers" of the economic game (Buchowski, 2006:470). Having already mentioned who some of my colleagues consider insufficient for change, in this section I want to discuss the broader picture of the ways in which my colleagues view the subjects that they work with and those who are excluded from its ranks in an effort to portray what Yuval-Davis argues is another version of the "chosen people of the nation" based on CATRO's own project of political belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2011:90).

Looking back to CATRO's video, it is evident that part of those who are included in this microcosm of Anelia's version of the Bulgarian nation are white, middle-class women who are young (between 25-45), aspirational, and willing to develop their skillset so as to become better suited for helping both the Bulgarian economy and others around them. This is unsurprising; women have been hailed as "ideal subjects of entrepreneurial reinvention" on the basis of neoliberalism by governments and corporations alike (Adkins, 2018:473). Not all women fit inside of this description, however; the video illustrates that it is the woman who economises her femininity that will be let into CATRO's sphere. In this way, CATRO does little to go against Bulgarian culture's standards for sexual respectability, which is normally the hardest change to make in a nation (Mosse, 1985:9).

Moreover, if economic incentives are a way to promote certain versions of desirable sexual citizenship (Josephson, 2016:9), and if CATRO's social projects are a form of economic incentive that the company supports, then the lack of any projects dealing with LGBTQIA+ individuals effectively excludes them from ideals of desirable citizenship in the company. Additionally, the strict dedication to pastel colours, dresses, and 'mothering' the company does little to counteract the heteronormativity that has become key in defining neoliberal sexual politics (Kulpa, 2011:55). Perhaps, though, who may be considered a 'good' citizen in CATRO's nation is not as negative as I am painting it out to be. When Yvette discussed with me the status of refugees in one of the projects that CATRO had done, she told me that despite what it might say on their documents, many of the people were not refugees anymore, and

instead fully integrated. The criteria was their knowledge of Bulgarian and their friends and partners, who were all Bulgarian. In this way, group belonging is defined by loyalty to the new country's culture and language (Yuval-Davis, 2011:20). By ignoring refugee status or sexuality, however, the problem of political inequality still stands.

The co-optation of backlash towards neoliberalism by right-wing populist parties (Dale and Fabry, 2018:243) means that despite the rhetoric of happiness and the emphasis on positive social change, CATRO still has a long way to go in convincing others to join its 'nation,' even at the expense of excluding some people, intentionally or otherwise. Members themselves are not susceptible to right-wing backlash no matter how in line with the sexual respectability of right-wing groups they remain, with Anelia informing me that she had a blood relative tell her, in learning about her success, that "women should know our place." Dima also shared with me his struggles with encountering prejudice based on his job, noting that people who work for private companies are becoming as attacked as people who fight for minority rights or work in the social services. In these conditions, CATRO's work should be commended in its attempt to create a better tomorrow. Perhaps with a bit of a push, there will be more room on the hill to watch the horizon together.

Conclusion

"You as an alive and functioning queer are a revolutionary….Feel some rage. If rage doesn't empower you, try fear. If that doesn't work, try panic. SHOUT IT! Be proud." (ACT UP, 1990)

"Genders for Queer Freedom!" (Sticker in Sofia Centre, 2020)

In this thesis, I have looked at how the concepts of sexual citizenship, nationalism and gender all work within Bulgaria through four main areas: Sofia Pride marches, anti-Pride marches, debates around the Istanbul Convention, and CATRO. By looking at these areas, I have attempted to paint a picture about the situation that LGBTQIA+ people currently face in Bulgaria, including the ways in which they are left out of neoliberal projects. In *Scaling the Balkans*, Maria Todorova warns that "we should not take the temperature of a given nationalism by measuring only the fever of the nationalist message" (Todorova, 2019:191-192). By adding CATRO and its hope for the future of Bulgaria to the broader discussions of my thesis, I hope to have broadened the point of view through which my research is being conducted as a way to illustrate that it is not only right-wing groups that argue for the 'death of faggots'; queer people's very exclusion from constitutional laws and social projects contributes to a fate in some ways worse: institutionalised invisibility.

Queerness is, above all, a political statement. Whether wanting to be or not, every LGBTQIA+ individual in Bulgaria is political based off of the fact that they are going against the prevailing norm of heteronormativity (Jackson, 1998:71). In this way, Bulgarian LGBTQIA+ individuals live as perpetual targets of right-wing nationalist groups who perceive their existence as an attempt at uprooting the norm through hand-holding or hugging. By defining social identity as a part of an individual's concept of the self that stems from their knowledge of membership within a social group (Latcheva, 2010:191), the constant repetition from political parties, private companies, and the government through actions that LGBTQIA+ people are not included in conversations around the nation leaves LGBTQIA+ individuals in Bulgaria to exist in a half-identity.

If the Bulgarian queer turns to embracing the sexual side of their identity fully, the result might be the creation of something akin to what Queer Nation was in the 1990s: a nation of queers who aim to destabilise heteronormativity through camp-style counter-politics that radicalises typical notions of citizenship (Berlant and Freeman, 1992:155-156; Puri, 2002:433; Valentine, 2002:151). This could share a lot of aspects with nationalism, including the sacrificial element of citizenship that relies on sacrificing personal well-being for a common cause (Allen, 2000:310), which LGBTQIA+ people already do in the region due to the

aforementioned political nature of their sexuality. This solution is not perfect, though. By embracing the ranks of queer nation, Bulgarian LGBTQIA+ people might ultimately fall into what Puri refers to as the "'Americanisation' of sexual politics" (Puri, 2002:437). Condoned from being 100% Bulgarian or 100% queer, Bulgarian LGBTQIA+ individuals are thus put in a position where they have to fight for their right to exist on either side.

What About the Future?

It is almost impossible to say that the Bulgarian state will completely uproot the heterosexist system that it has created for the sake of the lives of its LGBTQIA+ individuals. Nevertheless, there is some hope for the future. In the words of Foucault, where there is power, resistance is always possible (Kuhar, 2011:158). This can be achieved through LGBTQIA+ people continuing to publicly exist in Bulgaria and in this way continuing to fight the power of the performative nation by redefining what that performativity means. By breaking this cycle of performativity (Mayer, 2000a:4), LGBTQIA+ relationships will slowly become more normalised. What is more, Magda was right in her interview with me to point out the importance of organising round-table conversations with politicians discussing the value of LGBTQIA+ rights within Bulgarian politics - something that she said Gemini did in its early days of organising Sofia Pride. With increased political discussions in a professional setting that forces media visibility outside of the 'scandalous' representations of LGBTQIA+ people at Sofa Pride and their dreaded image encompassed by the word 'gender,' public consciousness has greater potential to change.

The goal, I would argue, is not to be accepted and loved by everyone - unfortunately, as many LGBTQIA+ individuals know, this is nearly impossible. Instead, the goal would be to reach a point of agonism, which is defined as a moment when two sides go from being enemies to recognising that despite the lack of a rational solution to a given conflict, their opponents are legitimate (Kováts, 2017:177). In Bulgaria's case in particular, this would take the form (in an ideal case) with the recognition by groups such as Society and Values and National Resistance that LGBTQIA+ people can neither be killed nor forced back into the closet within today's Western European climate that, for better or worse, Bulgaria is apart of. They would not lose their democratic rights to vote for right-wing parties in the parliament, but by recognising the legitimacy of LGBTQIA+ individuals as at least political opponents and not enemies, LGBTQIA+ individuals in Bulgaria would become more visible within the political sphere as legitimate actors than they currently are.

Perhaps I am too idealistic in my hopes that greater visibility of Bulgarian LGBTQIA+ people in the country would break down performative spaces enough so that finally LGBTQIA+ individuals could hold a proper, or at least not as taboo, place in the nation. Yet, in Bulgaria we have a saying: "hope dies last." When I go out of my apartment holding my partner's hand, I recognise that whether I want to or not, I become a target for political conversation and debate. Instead of focusing on all of the bad looks, the newspaper articles, and the hate crimes, I choose instead to look at the child that smiles at us when we walk by or the phone conversation I have with family asking me how 'we' are doing. It is moments like these that I remember that not all of queer existence should be painted in hues of black and grey.

The fight for freedom for equal rights is not easy, but it is far from over. I hope that this work has contributed to conversations around what is happening to LGBTQIA+ people in Bulgaria, because their struggle is a struggle that needs to be heard. May they never give up the good fight.

Appendix

Consent Form in English

"Are You A Gender?": [Homo]Sexual Belonging in Bulgaria

Anita Lekova, 2nd year MA student

Department of Gender Studies, Central European University

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

This is to state that I, _____, agree to participate in the research being conducted by Anita Lekova in the Department of Gender Studies at Central European University. The extent of my involvement in this project will be to participate in one interview with Anita Lekova in which I will be asked to speak about both my own experiences and understandings of certain topics. My participation in this project is voluntary and unpaid. I may refuse to participate, withdraw at any time, and/or decline to answer questions without any negative consequences.

A. PURPOSE

The interviewee has been informed that the purpose of the research is to understand how individual experiences of Bulgarians may contribute to understanding which factors have influenced them the most in conceptualising the term 'gender' in Bulgaria. The interview will be transcribed, translated, and then used alongside textual research in order to produce a final portfolio for the course Feminist Qualitative Methods.

B. PROCEDURES

The component of this research consists of an interview lasting about an hour and conducted between the researcher, Anita G. Lekova, and the interviewee. The audio from the interview will be recorded via iPhone. In the resulting final assignment portfolio, the interviewee will be identified by name, subject to their consent. If the interviewee wishes to remain anonymous, they will be identified using a pseudonym.

C. RISKS AND BENEFITS

There are no anticipated risks to participation in this interview. However, the interviewee can withdraw from the interview at any time without prejudice. During the interview the interviewee may request to stop the recording at any time to discuss or clarify how they wish to respond to a question or topic before proceedings. In the event that the interviewee chooses to withdraw during the interview, any tape made of the interview will be either given to them or destroyed, and no transcript will be made of the interview.

D. CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION (please initial to give consent)

_____ I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time without negative consequences.

_____ I agree to be quoted directly

OR _____ I agree to be quoted anonymously.

_____I agree for the transcription and translation of my interview to be submitted as apart of this project.

E. INTERVIEWEE'S COMMENTS

Please identify below any desired restrictions related to the collection and publication of information from your interview(s).

I HAVE CAREFULLY READ THE ABOVE AND UNDERSTAND THIS AGREEMENT. I FREELY CONSENT AND VOLUNTARILY AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

Interviewee Name:

_____

Interviewee Signature: _____ Date: _____

Should you have any questions about this project or your rights as a participant, please contact Anita Lekova (anita.lekova@student.ceu.edu).

Consent Form in Bulgarian[1]

"Вие 'джендър' ли сте?" [Хомо]сексуално присъствие в България

Анита Лекова, магистър втори курс

ФОРМУЛЯР ЗА СЪГЛАСИЕ

Подписвайки този формуляр, аз, _____, давам съгласието си да участвам в изследването на Анита Лекова от Факултета на Gender Studies в Централноевропейски университет. Начина, по който ще участвам в този проект, е да бъда интервюиран(а)(и)(о) от Анита Лекова, в които интервюта ще отговарям на въпроси за собствения ми опит и мненията ми по различни теми. Моето участие е доброволно и неплатено. Аз мога да реша да не участвам, да спра да участвам по всяко време, и/или да реша да не отговорям на въпросите без това да има негативни последствия.

А. ЦЕЛ

Интервюираният е информиран, че целта на изследването е да се разбере как личните преживявания на българите могат да доведат до по-добро разбиране на това, кои фактори влияят най-много за това, какво се подразбира под думата 'джендър' в България. Интервютата ще се записват, транскрибират, превеждат и използват заедно с други академични текстове за написването на дипломна работа.

Б. МЕТОДОЛОГИЯ

Изследването включва в себе си интервю, което ще трае около час и ще бъде проведено между изследователката Анита Г. Лекова и участника. Интервюто ще е записано на iPhone или компютър. В дипломата работа, която ще бъде написана в последствие, участникът в интервюто ще бъде идентифициран по име, при тяхно съгласие. Ако те желаят да останат анонимни, те ще бъдат идентифицирани с псевдоним.

[1] The thesis has undergone name-changes throughout the writing process, which is reflected in the titles of the consent forms. Other titles include: ""Вие 'джендър' ли сте?" Как хетеронационализма разделя в България" (Are you a '*gender*'? How Heteronationalism 'Others' in Bulgaria) and ""Вие 'джендър' ли сте?" Фактори зад културното разбиране на думата 'джендър' в България" (Are you a '*gender*'? Factors Behind Cultural Understandings of the word 'Gender' in Bulgaria).

В. РИСКОВЕ И ПОЛЗИ

Няма очаквани рискове от участието в това интервю. Независимо от това, интервюираният може да избере да спре участието си по всякое време без последствия. По време на интервюто, интервюираният може да поиска да се спре записа по всякое време, за да обсъди или изясни как иска да отговори на въпроса преди да започне да отговаря. В случай, че интервюираният реши да напусне по време на интервюто, записът направен по време на интервюто ще бъде унищожен или ще бъде предаден на интервюираният по тяхно желание.

Г. УСЛОВИЯ ЗА УЧАСТИЕ (моля напишете си инициалите за да дадете съгласие)

_____ Разбирам, че съм свободен(а)(и)(о) да прекратя участието си по всяко време без негативни последствия.

_____ Съгласен(а)(и)(о) съм да бъда цитиран(а)(и)(о) със собственото си име

_____ ***или*** съгласен(а)(и)(о) съм да бъда цитиран(а)(и)(о) с псевдоним

_____ Съгласен(а)(и)(о) съм, че транскрипцията и преводът на интервюто ще бъдат представени като част от този проект.

Д. КОМЕНТАРИ НА ИНТЕРВЮИРАНИЯТ

Моля, използвайте това място, за да напишете ограничения (ако има такива), които бихте искали да обсъдите с Анита Лекова, свързани със събирането и публикуването на информацията от вашето интервю.

ПРОЧЕЛ(А)(И)(О) СЪМ ВНИМАТЕЛНО И РАЗБИРАМ НАПИСАНОТО В ТОЗИ ФОРМУЛЯР. СЪГЛАСЕН(А)(И)(О) СЪМ ДА УЧАСТВАМ ДОБРОВОЛНО И ПО СВОЯ ВОЛЯ В ТОВА ИНТЕРВЮ.

Името на участника:_____

Подпис: _____ Дата: _____

Ако имате някакви въпроси, свързани с този проект или правата Ви като участник, моля пишете на Анита Лекова (anita.lekova@student.ceu.edu).

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