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Anti-gender Campaigns in Contemporary Bulgaria

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Acknowledgments

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Abstract

Anti-gender campaigns are widespread in Bulgaria. Organisations and individuals who support gender rights are called "liberals", "tolerants" and "eurogays". Mass media and social networks amplify those voices that incite intolerance, misogyny and homophobia, and suppress their opponents. From 2018 onwards, social media, has played a key role in the propaganda wave of negative reactions towards the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (known as the Istanbul Convention) and the National Child Strategy (2019-2030). Social media, and in particular Facebook, have been used as the main channel for attacks on activists and civil society organisations who support women's rights and the LGBTI community. This thesis aims to present possible approaches to the wave of negative reactions against gender rights in Bulgaria by analysing the main discourses and types of attitudes on social media opposing women's rights and LGBTIQ rights in times of anti-gender campaigns.

Keywords: anti-gender campaigns; gender ideology; politics of fear, global right; Facebook

Introduction

Since 2018, the Bulgarian government failed to adopt three important documents upholding fundamental human rights: the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (henceforth: the Istanbul Convention), the National Child Strategy (2019-2030) (henceforth: the Child Strategy) for improving children's welfare in Bulgaria, and the Social Service Act, which aim is to improve access to social services and enhance their efficiency. All three documents were rejected for seemingly different reasons, but I argue that behind them lied the same fear – that of the so-called "gender ideology" which, according to opponents, threatens traditional family values and encourages homosexuality. This fear was fueled for months in both mass and social media and eventually led to successive public pressure on activists and civil organisations; and the rise of so-called anti-gender movements emerging in Bulgaria. In the end, none of these documents were adopted by the Bulgarian government and this served as an example of how obviously misleading campaigns could gain so much publicity that it would be accepted as true and cause serious political consequences.

Although these anti-gender movements have existed for decades around the world, this was certainly something new for Bulgaria. Normally, those movements are targeting gender equality, advocating for exclusion of LGBTIQ people, and extreme restrictions on sexual education and sexual and reproductive rights. They are spread from Latin America, through Europe to East Asia and operate according to a similar scheme known as "fear, uncertainty and doubt" (FUD). FUD is actually the name of a disinformation strategy used in sales, marketing, public relations, politics, sects, and psychological warfare. It was first used in the technological world by the computer architect Gene Amdahl in 1975, but with the advent of social media, its implementation has become easier and more precise. In the late 1990s the term gained more publicity and became very popular as a propaganda tool (Erbschloe, 2017). Years later, this strategy continues to be used particularly successfully in online marketing and social media. When this is combined with a lack of independent and objective media and critically low trust in national institutions, as is the case of Bulgaria, then spreading fake news and propaganda

campaigns becomes an even more effective tool. As this thesis could not be too extensive, I focus my attention on two of these documents and the campaigns surrounding them – the Istanbul Convention and the Child Strategy for improving children's welfare in Bulgaria.

To shed light on these matters, and by paying special attention to the role of social media in the development of such movements and discussions, and Facebook in particular, this thesis explores discourses and notions on social media that reject the concepts of gender rights in Bulgaria, leading to the emergence of a specific "family of mobilisations that we can call anti-gender campaigns" (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). Therefore, the research question that leads this study is as follows, how does Facebook favour the spread and reproduction of anti-gender campaigns in the case of Bulgaria.

To try to answer this question I first give a broad overview on anti-gender campaigns happening around the globe and most precisely in Europe. Interestingly, this is not a phenomenon that is observed mainly in the developing countries of Eastern Europe, which are considered to have less developed democracies and corrupted media, but also has its manifestations in countries such as France and Germany. The reasons, of course, are different and range from the presence of far-right groups or parties represented in parliament, religious conservatism typical for the Catholic or Protestant societies, or strong propaganda coming from Russia. Sometimes these factors intertwine. After giving an overview, I focus on Bulgaria and provide two cases from the recent years that show typical examples of anti-gender, anti-LGBTIQ and anti-women campaigning hiding behind the agenda that they want to preserve traditional Christian values and the Bulgarian family. These campaigns happen on Facebook and this is why I focus my attention on social media's probabilities and why the presumed freedom that social media might bring (especially in the context of developing countries with facade democracies as it is the case of Bulgaria) is often non-sufficient and can be exploited by corrupted political interests.

Then I proceed on the analysis part when I look into anti-gender discourses and try to organise them into thematic groups. I look into a popular open Facebook group which is considered by many to be one of the leading voices in the above-mentioned campaigns. Finally, I summarise my findings and highlight the weaknesses and strengths of the study that I would like to further develop.

Theoretical Framework

Anti-gender campaigns in contemporary Europe

Although anti-gender campaigns only became widely visible in recent years, they started in the mid-1990s. Their common goal is to fight against "gender ideology". This is a term that has no academic or theoretical basis, nor a clear and coherent definition. It is used within conservative religious circles to vaguely denote policies or activism aimed at improving gender equality and upholding the rights of women and the LGBTIQ community. This discourse was initiated for the first time by the Vatican in the late 1990s as a reaction to the growing mass and insistent campaigns of activists for reproductive rights and sex education. Then the idea of a "gender" conspiracy or an agenda which aims to undermine family and religious values and promote immorality quickly spread throughout the world after the mid-1990s. Since 2005, anti-'gender ideology' discourse and mobilisations have been observed in a number of countries, not only in Europe, but also in Latin America and East Asia, usually targeting LGBTI rights, reproductive rights, sex and gender education, gender studies and democracy (Kuhar & Paternotte 2017, 300). According to Grzebalska (2016), anti- 'gender ideology' campaigns are challenging the post-war human rights consensus and have a broader aim of changing the values underlying European liberal democracy. Instead of simply a conservative 'backlash' against women's and LGBTIQ rights, she views the campaigns as a symptom of a broader crisis of neoliberal democracy:

> 'Gender ideology'... has come to signify the failure of democratic representation, and opposition to this ideology has become a means of rejecting different facets of the current socioeconomic order from the prioritization of identity politics over material issues, and the weakening of people's social, cultural and political security, to the detachment of social and political elites and the influence of transnational institutions and the global economy on nation states. (Grzebalska et al. 2017, 5)

This passage clearly illustrates not only the fact that gender ideology exists as an umbrella term (which, depending on the case, easily prefurmulates its enemies and goals) but also that it normally fights a threat framed as essentially foreign and coming "from the outside." In 2016, during a meeting with Polish bishops preceding the World Youth Day, Pope Francis was the first to use the notion of 'ideological colonisation' to refer to 'gender' as a threatening foreign import (Bracke and Paternotte 2016, 143). Referring to a question asked by a Polish bishop about the current migration situation of refugees, the Roman Pontiff declared:

> In Europe, America, Latin America, Africa, and in some countries of Asia, there are genuine forms of ideological colonization taking place. And one of these – I will call it clearly by its name – is [the ideology of] gender'. Today children – children! – are taught in school that everyone can choose his or her sex. Why are they teaching this? Because the books are provided by the persons and institutions that give you money. These forms of ideological colonization are also supported by influential countries. And this [is] terrible!

This is a turning point for the ways in which gender ideology will subsequently find the ground and develop in Central and Eastern Europe countries like Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, Poland and Croatia (Kuhar & Paternotte 2017) and Bulgaria. According to Kuhar & Paternotte, we should understand 'ideological colonisation' as it follows: "'gender ideology'… often understood as a symptom of the deprivation of Euro-America… can be read as a neocolonial project through which Western activists and their governments try to export their decadent values and secularise non-Western societies" (2017, 20). Deriving from this understanding, in this thesis I analyse the effects of anti-'gender ideology' discourse and campaigns in the context of Bulgaria.

Depending on the context, anti-gender campaigners started instrumentalising the word "gender" to come after different "enemies" at different times: LGBT rights, reproductive rights, sex and gender education in schools, as well as mobilized in defence of religious freedom and a

certain understanding of democracy (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). Because of this lack of knowledge and since the term "gender" is used as an "empty signifier" (Mayer & Sauer, 2017), various and sometimes contradictory meanings can be easily assigned to it. Thus the term can be used for political opportunism and creation of a negative political image of different political and societal actors.

Between 2012 and 2015, the efforts of conservative activists led to referendums in Croatia, Slovenia and Slovakia in an attempt to explicitly define marriage as a union between a man and a woman in the basic laws of those countries. The vote in Croatia was a success. Slovenians rejected gay marriage in the referendum before politicians later legalised it. And in Slovakia, turnout did not reach the required threshold of 50%. In Poland, a petition to tighten the already strict abortion law forced parliament to address the issue in 2016, until a wave of protests sparked its rejection. More to that, in June 2020 Polish president Andrzej Duda accused the LGBT rights movement of promoting a viewpoint more harmful than communism and said he agreed with another conservative politician who stated that "LGBT is not people, it's an ideology." This, however, is not a phenomenon typical only of Eastern Europe. Since 2012, the French movement "La Manif pour tous" ("Protest for All") has united opponents of gay marriage and assisted reproduction and inspired similar organisations in Italy, Germany and Finland. In Spain, HazteOir ("Hear Our Voice") has been fighting against abortion, same-sex marriage and sex education in schools since 2013.

According to Paternotte & Kuhar (2018), anti-gender campaigns resonate with right-wing populism in four different ways. First, in some countries as Germany and Austria right-wing populists are among the main drivers of anti-gender campaigns (Kemper, 2016; Mayer & Sauer, 2017; Villa, 2017). Similarly, in countries like Russia, Poland, Hungary or Italy, actors behind anti-gender campaigns are closely connected to the political parties in power (which are often considered as populists), turning to some extent the struggle against "gender ideology" into a state policy (Graff & Korolczuk, 2018; Kováts & Pető, 2017; Moss, 2017).

Second, central elements of anti-gender and rightwing populist discourses look alike. They are mainly focused on topics such as scepticism towards European integration, national and racial anxieties, and resistances to globalisation. These discussions often focus on how corrupt the European Union is and how it is heading for disintegration. In the case of Bulgaria, this contrasts with the idealisation of the country's communist past and the notion of how life was better then – there was no poverty, no homeless people, and of course, no gay people. Similarly, opposition to specific forms of parenting, kinship and reproduction partly ensue from worries about the (re)production of the nation (Fassin, 2014; Perreau, 2016). In some cases, these are not only debates about national identities, but also about the collective destiny of Europe, understood as the standard-bearer of civilisation, often in opposition to Islam.

Third, these discourses often employ also the construction of conspiracy theories. They rely heavily on the so called 'politics of fear':

"Politics of fear", which seeks to instil the fear of real or imagined dangers while instrumentalizing minorities or other social groups to create scapegoats, and play on emotional registers "to raise the affects of the people and arouse their immediate feelings". (Benveniste, Campani, & Lazaridis, 2016, p. 12)

Fourth, repertoires of tools and actions resemble each other. Some studies suggest that anti-gender activists and right-wing populists make skillful use of social media, which they also employ as a critique of traditional media, often denounced as being kidnapped by "corrupt elites" and as such unworthy and fake (Pajnik & Sauer, 2017). They rely heavily (and rather successfully) on the use of referenda (e.g., Slovenia, Croatia, Slovakia), and petition political authorities to initiate a referendum in other countries (e.g., France). By doing so they claim that in this way they bring the voice back to the people.

Anti-gender campaigns in Bulgaria

According to Darakchi (2019), the term "gender ideology" was first introduced in Bulgaria by the informal civic organisation Society and Values Association (SVA) („Асоциация общество и ценности"). They were the first opponents of the ratification of the Istanbul Convention (in 2018) and subsequently (in 2019) one of the leading opponents and organisers of protests against the Child Strategy. It is important to mention that since 2012 SVA is a member of the World Congress of Families – a Christian non-governmental organisation known for its anti-LGBT activities and listed among the organisations spreading hate speech.

If we look closely at the activities of the SVA, we will see that they act very consistently. In 2017 SVA declared itself against the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, starting a petition against it on the grounds that the adoption of the convention in the Bulgarian legislation will introduce legal definitions of the terms "gender" and "gender identity", which is undesirable, as it was interpreted that everyone would have the right to change their biological sex. According to SVA, the ratification of the Istanbul Convention would also make it possible for a biological men to self-identify as a woman and thus marry another biological man, which would be a step towards the legalisation of same-sex marriage in the country. The petition was signed by 34 organisations and more than 11 434 people. Numerous street protests followed. The story repeats itself again in 2019 when SVA launched a similar petition, this time opposing the Child Strategy. It was supported by 8098 people and 35 organisations and later submitted to the National Assembly. The petition opposes sex education, including sexual experimentation, abortion, gender reassignment and gender policies imposed by countries such as the UK, where the petitioners say the number of children wanting to change their sex through hormones has surgically increased 40 times for the last ten years. In the following lines I will pay attention to what exactly are the two documents against which there was so much public discontent.

The Istanbul Convention

The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence is the most comprehensive international treaty on combating and preventing violence against women and domestic violence. It was presented and opened for signing in 2011 in Istanbul, Turkey, and entered into force in August 2014. As of March 2019, it has been signed by 45 countries and the European Union.[1] Although in April, 2016 the Convention was signed by the then Minister of Justice in Bulgaria – Ekaterina Zaharieva with the intention that it will be ratified by the end of 2017, two years later – on 27 July 2018 the Bulgarian Constitutional Court pronounced Resolution No 13 on Constitutional Case No. 3/2018 stating that "the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, does not comply with the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria"[2]. So the country remained the only one on the Balkan Peninsula that has not ratified the Convention.

According to the Court's decision, the Convention "offers a binary interpretation of gender as both a biological and social category, which contradicts the constitution of Bulgaria, where humans are irrevocably defined as biologically male or female, with equal standing as citizens". The Convention therefore lays formal ground to promote non-biological definitions of gender, which are deemed unconstitutional." Human rights activists called the court decision "the worst human rights decision in the court's history, and by a large measure" (BHC, 2018), and civic protests followed.

This political decision was reached due to concerns and misconceptions over the term "gender" caused as a result of a strong online anti-gender campaign. Despite the efforts of academics, politicians and activists who tried to explain the proper use of the term *gender*, its meaning remained misunderstood for the majority of Bulgarians. The opponents of the

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[1] Council of Europe. Full list: Chart of signatures and ratifications of Treaty 210. Retrieved 25 July 2020:
https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/210/signatures
[2] Full text Constitutional Court's decision: Retrieved 25 July 2020:
http://www.constcourt.bg/bg/Acts/GetHtmlContent/f278a156-9d25-412d-a064-6ffd6f997310

document believe that its ratification would eventually lead to a formal recognition of a "third gender", "gender ideology" and "same-sex marriages" being recognised by the Bulgarian constitution.

The National Child Strategy

In the beginning of 2019, the Bulgarian society witnessed a new hysteria, for which social media proved to be a favorable environment for growth – the one against the adoption of the National Child Strategy (2019-2030). In the well established manner, the propaganda has started on social media and targeted NGOs, arguing that if the law is passed, they would be able to carry out the functions of social workers and "abduct children from their parents and send them for adoption to Norway". The arguments against the Child Strategy were similar, the fake news and distribution channels – too, and even the people who spread them were the same.

According to the official statement of the Holy Synod (which opposed to the ratification of the Istanbul Convention as well), "the Child Strategy gives too much power to the social workers and the state, seises the functions of parents and family, opens too many doors for abusing children on the basis of unjustified reports of parental violence".[3] This campaign was being conducted in the name of "the traditional Bulgarian values", but in fact it was against the introduction of effective mechanisms for protecting children from violence, sexual abuse, neglect and obstruction of their personal development. The negative campaign has escalated to overtly propaganda techniques. Posters depicting the faces of human rights activists began to circulate on social media with captions insinuating that the organisations they represent "are launching a campaign to abduct children from Bulgarian families". There were numerous calls for protests stating that: "If you do not come to protest today, they will come to pick up your child tomorrow." Nevertheless, as a result in April 2019 Prime Minister Boyko Borisov ordered

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[3] Official Statement of the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church—Bulgarian Patriarchate on the Draft of the National Child Strategy (2019–2030). Retrieved 25 July 2020: https://www.daspasimdecatanabulgaria.org/opinion-of-the-holy-synod-of-the-bulgarian-orthodox-church-bulgarian-patriarch-about-a-draft-of-the-national-children-strategy/

the Child Strategy to be withdrawn from the Social Ministry and revised. The reasons: the document calls for the introduction of "highly contradictory practices and has strong public discontent against it".

Although all of these narratives have been based on completely false news, they have managed to involve many supporters online and to cause real political reaction on behalf of the state. What makes Bulgaria a truly interesting case, however, is the fact that those anti-gender campaigns are quite openly supported by right-wing fascist parties which are part of the ruling government – the Bulgarian nationalistic coalition United Patriots, which currently has 21 parliament seats (out of 240) and governs in a coalition with the centrist ruling party Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria GERB (Г ЕР Б).

More to that, they often join efforts with religious organisations, media groups and civic organisations, which have all been spreading misinformation consistently on social media. Researchers have noted significant resonances between right-wing populism and anti-gender mobilisations (Grzebalska & Soós, 2016; Kemper, 2016; Kováts & Põim, 2015), as well as right-wing populist attacks on gender and the role of gender in right-wing populism more generally (Norocel, 2013; Scrinzi, 2014; Spierings, Zaslove, Mugge, & de Lange, 2015). However, Paternotte and Kuhar (2018) have pointed out that the automatic connection of anti-gender campaigns to the far-right populism might miss certain regional and national specificities. On another note, while popular topics normally used by right wing voter mobilisation such as migration, poverty, abortion, and others might not directly touch everyone, the topic of gender roles, gender identity, sexuality and sexual education is very "productive" in the anti-gender mobilization because these characteristics, being very sensitive and intrinsically human, concern every single human being directly (Darakchi, 2019).

New media optimism in the context of facade democracies

The Internet has been believed to be a powerful way to reach people and promote democracies worldwide, but especially so in Central and Eastern Europe, "where democracies

often fall short of the universal goals of pluralism, rule of law, freedom, and accountability" (Seizov 2015). Although in its first decade as a member of the EU (2007-2017) Bulgaria registered a significant number of changes after a troubled transition from authoritarianism, the condition of press freedom is still among the most concerning signs of a façade democracy. Despite the constitutional and legislative guarantees, media pluralism and independence have suffered significant restrictions over the last ten years: according to the annual reports of Reporters Without Borders, the country has been dropping consistently from 35th in 2006 to 111th place in 2020. Their latest report states that "corruption and collusion between media, politicians and oligarchs is widespread" in Bulgaria which is also being described as "the black sheep of the EU".[4]

In this environment, social media are considered to be a breath of fresh air for the electorate, parts of which feel increasingly underrepresented or downright harassed (Freedom House, 2015b). Given the corruption and collusion between media outlets and politician figures, and the resulting and the high levels of self-censorship in professional media outlets (Freedom House, 2015a), journalists are also likely to take to social media where their voices can be more freely heard, with less fear of prosecution under Bulgaria's relatively stringent liberal laws (Spirova, 2015).

According to Marinov and Schimmelfennig (2015), in the context of Eastern Europe politicians and agencies are often corrupt and ineffective. There is a danger that citizens' initiatives may be blocked due to personal interests. The authors speak of the "façade" character of Bulgarian democracy meaning that façade democracies take the form but lack the democratic substance. Problems with corruption and media control stifle the free disclosure of social injustice. Therefore, organisational forms emerge to compensate for the malfeasance of official institutions (Marinov & Schimmelfennig, 2015). Social networks are a platform for functioning alternative organisations of power. For example, Stoykova (2013) predicts that

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[4] Reporters Without Borders's 2019 Report. See: https://rsf.org/en/bulgaria

digital technologies are the key to overcoming frustration with the way democracy in Bulgaria is happening.

However, political activism is normally considered highest in the well-established democracies of Western/Northern Europe and lowest in the young democracies in Eastern Europe. Accordingly, the importance of social media for civic causes may vary in different countries. In established democracies, traditional civic associations, well-functioning party networks and working state institutions together better ensure that political choices broadly reflect grassroots social preferences. Many Eastern European countries feature weak civil society associations, which make social media more relevant to civil activism. This political context is not only restricted to Bulgaria though. There are many parallels to other European countries with a façade democracy profile. Shortly after the Bulgarian court's decision in 2018 concerning the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, Slovakia followed suit and Poland's ruling party has threatened to withdraw from the Convention on the grounds that it endangers traditional Polish culture and values, including women's natural role in society. On this occasion Císař (2013) writes that "in post-communist settings, this concerns especially radical left organisations, which are unable to get any resonance for their anti-capitalist demands discredited by the former communist regimes. On the other hand, radical Right associations, especially racist and nationalist ones, seem to have greater resonance in the postcommunist world (e.g., Hungary, Poland, but also other states)" but for both strains "their demands usually fall outside what is generally regarded as socially acceptable" (Císař, 2013).

Despite initial enthusiasm and hope that digital media could be used as a means of democratisation, more and more researchers have recently begun to question and criticise this optimism. Many expected to see a new era of democratisation coming, "characterized by increased participation among groups who previously struggled to make their voices heard, with barriers to engagement eased through online organizing" (Schradie, 2019). In reality, the opposite has happened. The Internet reinforces participation inequalities, and it might prove insufficient for sustained collective action participation and the maintenance of future social movement organisations. Schradie also points out something very important that often is

missed in discussions – that the "digital" is built on "analogues" factors such as class, infrastructure, and ideology, and that these factors, of course, provide and distribute knowledge and power, which shape political and social life. Although Schradie's research is based on the American context I think it poses interesting questions regarding the neutrality of social media and the initial enthusiasm that they could be used as a tool for democratisation.

The factors for this are not only external and political, but also rooted in technology itself. According to André Brock, any technological platform is highly influenced by its technological and cultural context, and the way it is used through social conventions. This is why the technology cannot really be seen as being 'neutral,' as this point of view neglects the pre-existing social hierarchies that influence the production of technologies, and in doing so, maintain their prevalence (Brock 2012, 531-532). Brock also explains that the Internet could be seen as a social structure which conveys dominant Western ideology in both its practice and design (Brock 2012, 531-532). Adding to this discussion Lev Manovich addresses the conventions of social network sites that produce discourses, and refers to this phenomenon as 'probabilities' (Manovich 2017, 53). He uses the term probabilities to describe that it is more likely for a social media platform to be used in one specific manner rather than other manners, as it is influenced by social, cultural and aesthetic conventions and values (Manovich 2017, 53). This conventional use does not exist outside of signs and codes, but rather often convey existing, dominant discourses. One might even question the role of the infrastructure embedded in these social media platforms on the creation of this online culture of conventions. These conventions are not so much concrete rules, but rather unspoken, established notions of steps on how to use social media: "rather than using the term "rules" which implies only two possible behaviours – follow the rule or go against the rules—we may instead think of probabilities.

These probabilities then determine what is worth sharing on social media, and how it is to be shared (Manovich 2017). Manovich's analysis assesses Instagram in particular, but each social media platform has its own probabilities, depending on the technology and software the

platform is based on, and how cultural conventions on usage develop from that. Based on this, he outlines several platforms on their different conventions, differentiating Twitter as a platform for news exchange, Facebook for social communication, and Instagram for aesthetic visual communication (Manovich 2017, 41). Since the largest anti-gender campaigns in Bulgaria took place mainly on Facebook, I will focus my attention on this media which happens to be the most popular one.

Methodology

In order to analyse the discourses conveyed in the anti-gender campaigns on Bulgarian Facebook, and the effects of the probabilities of those social media platforms on their posts, I will be using a mix of affordance and critical discourse analysis. I believe these methods work efficient together as they can offer a comprehensive interpretive analysis based on a certain theoretical framework. I will focus my attention on the so-called anti-gender campaigns followed in response to both the ratification of the Istanbul Convention and the Child Strategy and their visual communication and discourses.

Although social media platforms are not representative for those who do not have access to the web (Shradie, 2019) they can be still used to outline certain patterns of behaviour, public attitudes or phenomenon, including violence against women and anti-LGBTIQ rhetorics (Jovanovski and Tyler 2018). Generally, even though affordance and discourse analysis cannot give much insight on user-generated qualitative results, they allow for dynamic analysis of the user-platform relations.

Critical discourse analysis

According to Fairclough (1995) the aim of critical discourse analysis (CDA) is "to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; (c) to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power (Fairclough 1995: 93)." More importantly, as Van Dijk argues, CDA is fundamentally "interested in the way discourse (re)produces social domination, that is, the power abuse of one group over others" (van Dijk 2015: 63). Within this methodological framework, reality is understood as constructed by means of discourse, which is, in turn, shaped by social forces. Language, interaction and visual and verbal communication belong to the micro-level of social order. Power, dominance and inequality between social groups are typically terms that belong to a macro level of social order

(van Dijk 2001: 355). Therefore, the aim of CDA is to bridge the gap between micro and macro approaches to show how discourse is implicated in relations of power to produce and reproduce inequality (van Dijk 2001: 356).

The first part of CDA therefore is in my case a discourse analysis of the Facebook platform. I look on the FB groups and public pages in order to reveal what discourses are conveyed in the anti-gender campaigns's social media posts, how they subvert or repressive discourses, and how these discourses are produced by the platforms' probabilities. I find this particularly relevant to my case, as at the heart of this public debate lays a linguistic misunderstanding – what does the term *gender* mean in Bulgarian and how can it be used in different contexts and for different political purposes.

The second part of CDA focuses on the discursive practices, that is, a step-by-step observation and documentation of a Facebook page, their most active members' activity and description of how posts disseminate and go viral. Since the largest anti-gender campaigns in Bulgaria took place mainly on Facebook, I will focus my attention on this media which happens to be the most popular social media platform. For the purpose of my research I focus my attention on the Child Strategy case and the Facebook public group called "National Group of Parents United for Children".

Finally, the analysis touches upon a wider debate on new media optimism in the context of facade democracies and what are the challenges for a country like Bulgaria. This will allow to draw connections between the case of Bulgaria and the impact that social media platforms might have on democratic processes. By using critical discourse analysis, I will not only be able to disclose both the conservative and subversive discourses presented in posts, but also to acknowledge the signifying role of these social media platforms as the technologies mediating these discourses.

Limitations of critical discourse analysis

One of the major limitations of CDA is its interpretive nature. This method cannot offer reliable quantitative data and this could always leave the door open for interpretations. More to that, according to Morgan, "discourse analysis may disrupt longstanding notions of selfhood, gender, autonomy, identity, choice, and such disruption can be very disturbing (2010: 4). The lack of explicit research techniques is often cited as an obstacle to this type of research, but an in-depth explanation of concepts and their relationship to a particular context can provide valuable knowledge about a particular phenomenon or an issue. Finally, for richer and comprehensive conclusions to come, critical discourse analysis should be complemented by qualitative methods such as focus groups, in-depth interviews, etc. However, the limited nature of this thesis in terms of content and time prevents me from doing this. This would be the next step for further research on the topic.

Affordance analysis

As social media interventions constitute a growing area of internet research, affordance analysis is becoming an increasingly used method in the field of new media studies. The term is used, in a variety of ways, to describe people's relationships with technologies. However, this poses some challenges since term affordance is considered to be "multivalent" (Bucher and Helmond 3) and has a long history of usage in various scientific fields – among which stand out these of psychology, design and communications. For my thesis I refer mainly to the study of Bucher and Helmond, "The Affordances of Social Media Platforms" (2017), as it is quite comprehensive and gives a rich context of usage within which contemporary examples can be easily positioned and discussed.

The term was first introduced in the field of ecological psychology as a way to understand what an object can afford, i.e., "what the object is good for" (Gibson 1986), referring to a specific kind of relationship between an animal and the environment. As Gibson suggests, the material properties of artifacts exist apart from the people who use them, but

artifacts have meaning "relative to the posture and behaviour of the animal being considered" (1986: 127–128). Later the term was broadly adopted in design studies and the field of Human–Computer Interaction (HCI) through the writings of Donald Norman. He describes affordances as 'the perceived and actual properties of the thing, primarily those fundamental properties that determine just how the thing could possibly be used' (1988: 9) or in brief – to describe what material artifacts such as media technologies allow people to do (Norman, 1988).

What I find particularly relevant to my case is that affordance analysis considers features as 'communicational actors' in the sense that they 'produce meanings and meaningfulness' (Langlois, 2014: 52). More to that, I think it is quite useful to my research "as a concept that captures the relationship between the materiality of media and human agency, affordance continues to play an important role in media studies and social media research specifically" (Bucher and Helmond 11).

Limitations of affordance analysis

Similarly to CDA, affordance analysis is often criticised because of its interpretive nature. According to Bucher and Helmond (2018), it "arguably makes a difference which conception of affordance is used–as it puts certain epistemological limits on what can be known about affordances and where to find them in the first place" (16). Therefore, it deprives us of the opportunity to make generalisations. This is especially relevant if we consider the rapidly changing nature of social media and their unreliability to store information for long periods of time. Another weakness of this type of analysis is that it cannot provide qualitative results that are universally applicable to other cases.

Analysis

What is meant by "gender ideology" and what is fought against

Weronika Grzebalska, Andrea Petö and Eszter Kováts (2017) describe the term 'gender ideology' as 'symbolic glue', for it functions as an umbrella term that unites heterogeneous conservative and religious forces against a supposedly homogenous (but equally diverse) group of progressive actors, or 'gender ideologists'. Depending on the country and the political context, anti-gender campaigners have opposed a wide range of public issues, including "LGBTIQ rights, reproductive rights, sex and gender education in schools, gender itself (as meant in gender violence, gender studies and gender mainstreaming), as well as mobilized in defence of religious freedom and a certain understanding of democracy" (Paternotte & Kuhar 2018: 9). Because of this lack of knowledge and since the term "gender" is used as an "empty signifier" (Mayer & Sauer, 2017), various and sometimes contradictory meanings can be easily assigned to it. Thus the term can be used for political opportunism and all sorts of offensive discourses.

In my analysis I intend to introduce a systematic order in the big variety of expressive means of the anti-gender discourses on social media and precisely on Facebook being the most popular social platform in Bulgaria. My research focuses on two seemingly different cases – the anti-gender campaign against the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2018 and the subsequent campaign for the rejection of the Child Strategy in 2019. Although these campaigns opposed the adoption of two substantively different documents, their anti-rhetorics drew energy from the same source – the so-called gender ideology and the threat it posed to the traditional Bulgarian family and Christian values. I argue that although these discourses might arise as a counteraction to two different cases, the narratives, the visual communication and most importantly – the main core of people behind these campaigns (affiliated or supporting Society and Values Association /„Асоциация общество и ценности") are the same.

Deriving from Paternotte & Kuhar's definition, I selected key themes against which anti-gender campaigners focus their discourses on. In order to support this classification with data and to show the similar narratives used in the two campaigns, I offer one or two examples of Facebook discussions on each topic. I have selected the comments carefully and checked to see if the profiles belong to real people (for example, by making sure they have real photos or providing personal information about themselves, whether they have posted in the last year, etc). The reason for this is that I wanted to avoid the so-called trolls or paid users. However, I have not included personal information about anyone, but have only used comments or photos that are publicly available, while maintaining users' anonymity in this research. Therefore, the topics that stand out and are most opposed by the campaigners are the following:

(1) the legalisation of LGBTIQ rights and especially the legalisation of same-sex marriages and gender reassignment;
(2) modern-day feminism, women's (reproductive) rights and gender-based violence;
(3) gender itself (as meant in gender violence, gender studies and gender mainstreaming);
(4) introduction of compulsory sex education in schools;
(5) the deteriorating image of the European Union and the threatening influence of the Western liberal values opposed to the Bulgarian traditional family;
(6) the role of NGOs as a conductor of foreign influences in the Bulgarian political scene.

LGBTIQ rights

One of the biggest fears of opponents of the Istanbul Convention is that the term gender signifies rethinking the roles of men and women in society: 1) invariably leads to the destruction of public morality, the ability to determine one's own biological sex and choose a new one (third sex); 2) promotes "homosexuality and transgenderism" in schools by introducing compulsory sex education in schools; 3) is a step towards the legalisation of same-sex marriages and cohabitation, as people of the same sex will have the opportunity to identify with the opposite sex and thus threaten the traditional Bulgarian family and the

sanctity of marriage, which according to the Bulgarian constitution is explicit union "between a man and a woman".

No matter what advertising slogans they are wrapped in, in essence, anti-gender campaigns emerge as attacks *on LGBTIQ and women's rights* as it is believed that through these topics a system of beliefs might be imposed. One which threatens "Christian values" and corrupts the traditional family and society. These sentiments most often overlap with hatred towards the LGBTIQ community and LGBTIQ activism. Although homosexuality is legal in Bulgaria, same-sex marriages or civil unions between same-sex couples are illegal. The country, like most countries in transition in Central and Eastern Europe, is socially conservative and homosexuality is often considered taboo. In 2019, a survey was published, according to which over 65% of Bulgarians do not want homosexual people as their neighbours. For comparison – these results are more negative since 1999 when the share of Bulgarians who do not feel comfortable having gay people as neighbours was 54%. In a recent case from July 2020, a Pride flag hung on the building of a climbing site and business company Walltopia, a corporate Sofia Pride supporter, was burnt by unknown perpetrators. The news quickly spread on social media and Facebook and was quickly met with approval in certain groups.

> [I]'m not a homophobe! I have nothing against them when it comes to their sexual behavior. But from then on, they become extremely aggressive and intrusive - do we heterosexuals march through the streets naked and adorned with artificial genitals? Are these the rights they are fighting for – to corrupt children from an early age? Otherwise, I emphasize again – I'm not homophobic if it concerns only their sex life, but we talk about much more here!

More to that, according to Darakchi (2019) in Bulgaria, the pejorative connotation of the old term for "faggot" has now changed towards the term "gender", either when it comes to jokes or to reference to LGBTIQ people, feminist and queer activists, or anyone in favour of the Instanbul Convention. I would add that this also applies to the National Child Strategy or any

other of the so-called Western European values that contradict the traditional Christian family. Therefore, Western-European values are a source of debauchery.

> *[G]ender – this is a cheap trick for naive people, which has nothing to do with the fight for women's equality. The aim is to present homosexual behaviour as EQUIVALENT to natural sexual intercourse and to hide the negative social consequences of it. That is all.*

Protest in Sofia against the ratification of the Istanbul convention. The inscriptions read "Bulgaria – a pure and holy republic", "No third sex", "The Gender Convention = violence against the normal person", "The Istanbul convention OUT". Photo Credit: BGNES

It is also interesting in this context to mention the position of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church which has always held deeply conservative views in regard to LGBTIQ rights and especially the annual Sofia Pride parade in the capital. This case was no exception. The Church joined the anti-gender rhetoric in both campaigns. In January it published its official position[5] regarding the Istanbul Convention emphasizing that the Orthodox Church is:

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[5] Official Statement of the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church—Bulgarian Patriarchate on the Istanbul convention: https://bg-patriarshia.bg/news.php?id=254101

[A]gainst the introduction, using the Istanbul Convention, of terms incompatible with the Bulgarian civic order, previously unknown in the national legislative system, as well as against the imposition of ideas incompatible with the faith of the Holy Orthodox Church.

Although over the years the church has expressed its negative position on the Sofia Pride parade, so far it has never debated the meaning of the term gender. Based on the Bulgarian translation of the Istanbul Convention, where the term gender is translated as social sex, the church notes that:

[S]ex can be only biologically defined because the man and the woman are God's creation.

In 2019 the Bulgarian Orthodox Church took a stand against the Child Strategy too. According to the official statement of the Holy Synod, "the National Child Strategy gives too much power to the social workers and the state, seizes the functions of parents and family, opens too many doors for abusing children on the basis of unjustified reports of parental violence" (Holy Synod's Statement, 2019).

Feminism and gender-based violence

One of the most shared opinions on Facebook discussions concerning women's rights is the idea that women's movements and modern-day feminism are dangerous for the future of Bulgarian nation as women might insist to be independent and thus to choose a career path instead of motherhood and housekeeping. This, on the other hand, might be considered as a threat to birth-rate and to lead to the disappearance of the Bulgarian nation. In that sense feminism is considered as a "Western weapon" and organisations such as the UN, the WHO or the USA and Europe in general have been identified as the leading executors of this global agenda. What is interesting, however, that often such anti-gender sentiments are not only restricted to a male-patriarchal perspective but also many women adopt them because

otherwise they would be deprived of their dependence roles in which they prefer to be for a number of reasons (financial stability, comfort, unwillingness for professional development, belief that above all the role of a woman is to be a loving mother and housewife). All three comments below belong to women.

> [F]eminism is one of the tentacles of the octopus, called gender ideology.

> [F]eminism has at least two goals. One is to distance the woman from the children and create a gap between the man and the woman, which leads to a reduced birth rate.

> [A] true Woman knows that she is such and does not need additional rights that humiliate and put down the man. The real Woman does not need to prove herself as such and respects the power of the man. Feminist movements could only be degrading and dangerous to society.

Meanwhile, the main demands of the Istanbul Convention – to protect women from gender-based violence remained misunderstood by the majority of society. According to a survey by Gallup International, conducted in March 2018, more than 55% of the Bulgarian population was against the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. Despite the efforts of academics, politicians and activists who tried to explain the proper use of the term *gender* and its relation to feminism and gender-based violence remained misunderstood for the majority of Bulgarians. Unfortunately, however, the problem has not disappeared. Two years after the rejection of the Istanbul Convention, the Bulgarian government continues to ignore the problem of domestic and gender-based violence, which reached extreme proportions in 2018 and 2019 (with over 35 deaths being reported for each year alone[6] and no alternatives for its

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[6] The number of deaths is likely to be higher. The official statistics in Bulgaria do not contain data on cases of domestic violence and other forms of violence against women. Homicide, as the most serious form of attack on the individual, is also not documented and analysed through the prism of the victim's gender-specific characteristics. The information cited here is based on data that me and other volunteers collect regularly, based on media publications and journalistic materials. See: https://ubita.org/bg/english

resolution has yet been proposed. Meanwhile, the majority of society still does not understand the need for prevention or what does feminism stand for.

The gender itself

In a press release in November 2018, the Council of Europe stated that Bulgaria does not understand what the term gender means. The message states that "despite its clearly stated aims, several religious and ultra-conservative groups have been spreading false narratives about the Istanbul Convention" and that the Convention does not seek to impose a certain lifestyle or interfere with the personal organisation of private life; instead, it only seeks to prevent violence against women and domestic violence: "the Convention is certainly *not* about ending sexual differences between women and men. Nowhere does the Convention ever imply that women and men are or should be "the same" and that "the Convention does not seek to regulate family life and/or family structures: it neither contains a definition of "family" nor does it promote a particular type of family setting" (Council of Europe, 2019).

Furthermore, according to Darakchi (2019), as the majority of people have never studied the difference between sex and gender, "the term gender was immediately used as a "political weapon" and the understanding of gender in the social sciences was totally rejected as "unnatural". This could be easily seen in the discussions on Facebook.

> *"Gender" is a cunning, perverted, satanic word. When it gets rid of someone, it means "social sex" and in no way refers to anything outside the biological male and female sex (as they try to deceive us in the IC); and when it escapes, it means 58 kinds of completely random and finger-sucked "gender" (sexualities).*

> *[G]ender means social sex (социален пол), Judith Butler has created a whole science about it, so it's not what you have between your legs, it's what you have in your head. That is, sex is only a fantasy, your true self is what*

you decide, so more than 60 types of sex are known, according to the degree of perversion and your madness.

[T]his is a misanthropic ideology that originates from Norway and threatens to destroy families. In my opinion, in Bulgaria, this ideology is still in its infancy and we must not take a step back.

In October 2019, the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, its causes and consequences, Ms Dubravka Simonovic, called on Bulgaria to comply with its international and regional obligations in the field of violence against women and to reopen the ratification process of the Istanbul Convention. According to her, the campaign against the ratification of the Istanbul Convention has led to the creation of an "anti-gender movement" and, as a result, to attacks on women and all those who provide services to victims of violence. This is partly due to the misinterpretation and misinterpretation in Bulgarian of the term "gender" contained in the Convention, which is translated as "social sex" (с о ц и а л е н п о л), inconsistent with the translation of the same term in other regional and international instruments, including EU Victims' Rights Directive.

"Man", "Woman", "Third sex"
Source: Facebook group National group "Children of Bulgaria"

Sexual education in schools

Although all of these narratives have been based on completely false news, they have managed to involve many supporters online, followed by street protests, and surprising public actions in the country. In February 2020, panic broke out in another small town of Bulgaria, Pernik. A parent protested against a sex education programme at a local school, although her child didn't attend them at first place and the other parents were supportive of the initiative. The action got quickly overblown with the help of the deeply conservative and far-right VMRO party, part of the United Patriots for Bulgaria coalition, stating in an interview that "militant genderism has no place in the Bulgarian school. Children's sex education, bordering on debauchery, must be prosecuted, not tolerated."

These two waves of misinformation, validated by the far-right movements and parties in Bulgaria, show similar practices and shockwave reactions through social media, eventually infiltrating the media itself. We see a paranoid mentality inspired by conspiracy theories, a desire for simple explanation of complex topics and a group feeling of being helpless and irrelevant amid world events and cultural shifts. The moral conservatism around the communities of these social media groups overlaps with Christian conservatism – a rather new phenomena in Bulgaria, a predominantly Orthodox country.

> [T]hey want to teach children nonsense. Instead of sex education, children should have classes in religion at school. Children need to be taught that they should remain virgins until marriage and after the marriage they should not be unfaithful. They should also learn that to be gay or a lesbian it is not something normal. A girl should know that her main adornments are chastity and modesty, not thoughts of masturbation, contraception, gender and early sex education.

"No to the gender ideology at school!!!"
Photo: Facebook group National group "Children of Bulgaria"

The role of NGOs and social workers

Public figures and organisations are often pointed out to be "fueling" the global processes of "gender ideology". One example of this is the link between billionaire and philanthropist George Soros and the implementation of both the Istanbul Convention and the Child Strategy. This is not a new phenomenon, however. Soros' philanthropy and support for progressive causes have made him a target of a large number of conspiracy theories, most of them originating from the political right (Soskis, 2017) which "have seen him as a kind of puppet master secretly controlling the global economy and politics" (Bondarenko, 2017)." Moreover, those who support such causes and hold liberal views are often called "sorosoids" (с о р о с о и д и). This term may be used in different contexts, but always with a negative connotation. Just as the term "gender" has become an insult and replaced the term "faggot".

> [O]fficially, they failed to accept the Istanbul Convention, but unofficially, through
>
> the NGOs, they still will try to force it on us. The gay lobby in the EU is very

strong. This is a lobby of mentally handicapped people. We must give firm resistance and beat their activists.

Collage of billionaire and philanthropist George Soros.
Source: Facebook group National group "Children of Bulgaria"

Another fear of anti-gender campaigners is that NGOs and more precisely social workers will be given great powers that will allow them to abduct children from their families in case of established violations by the parents and send them for adoption abroad. In October 2019, in just a few minutes, two schools in Roma districts of Sliven, a town in east-central Bulgaria, emptied in a mass panic. Parents dragged their children out of class, fearing that if they stayed, they would be abducted by social workers, and possibly send for adoption abroad. Later, the parents told the reporters[7] that they had heard about what had happened on Facebook, but could not clearly name who had published the information and why they had decided it was credible.

Europe's values as opposition to the traditional family's values

The role of NGOs is often linked to that of the European Union, as the former are believed to rely on foreign funding and therefore seek to promote foreign political interests in Bulgaria disguised as early sex education, legalisation of same-sex marriages, etc. These are often seen as an opposition to the Christian values and traditional Bulgarian family.

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[7] BBC. The Documentary Podcast. "Panic in Bulgaria": https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p082gwn8

*[T]hey are pressuring us to accept their European values, which for me personally
are worthless! Corrupt, degraded and ossified Western societies are long gone
with their values! They will hardly understand from the position of their Brussels
arrogance that we in the East do not need their corrupted valuables, because we
believe we believe in the sanctity of the traditional family.*

This opposition is easily proven to be false and unfounded, as religion (and Christianity
in particular) has been a major influence on today's society, art, culture, philosophy and law in
Western Europe. However, anti-gender campaigners tend to use religion in a manipulative way
that aims to intimidate and demarcate people.

"No" to European pederasty, "Yes" to Orthodoxy.
Photo: Facebook group National group "Children of Bulgaria"

Discussion: Facebook's take at spreading misinformation

Researchers believe that anti-gender movements are possible mainly due to social
media and the Internet as their main ways of communicating and organising (Trottier & Fuchs,
2014). In the case of Bulgaria, I find this to be relevant due to several reasons.

1) Everyone has a platform – Although Facebook stubbornly denies its media identity, the social network is an indisputable and unfailing communication channel that allows absolutely everyone to disseminate and select information, comment and share opinions - and, most importantly, in front of an audience. Moreover, without a doubt, Facebook is the most popular social media platform in the country with 3,858,000 subscribers in January 2020 or nearly 80 per cent of the online population (Internet World Stats, 2020).[8]

2) Loss of authority – the philosophy of social networks, whose mantra is to build a community of "friends" and "followers", shortens the distance between "ordinary people" and "elite". In social networks, communication between authorities - whether politicians, journalists or world-class stars – is already horizontal and, more importantly, without the obligatory media mediation of the "analogue era";

3) The politicisation of space – contrary to Manovich's definition, Facebook and not Twitter is used as a platform for news exchange in Bulgaria as the majority of Bulgarian politicians themselves use it as an official channel of communication and political campaigning.

4) Traditional media vs. "new media – Traditional media is losing credibility especially in the context of Bulgaria which is believed to be the country with the most corrupted media within the EU. Therefore, the media no longer have exclusive rights on disseminating news and imposing opinions; and is gradually being displaced by social media. We shouldn't forget, however, that newsfeed algorithms on social media play a crucial role in what we would see and read according to our consumer habits and history. Eventually, this leads to the spread of misinformation, the creation of the so-called echo chambers and the radicalisation of the opinions of its users as is the case of the Facebook group I look at for this research.

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[8] Internet World Stats, 2020. Retrieved 25 July, 2020, from
https://www.internetworldstats.com/europa.htm#bg

While the campaign against the Istanbul Convention was more chaotically organised without a clear structure or channels of communication, the campaigners against the Child Strategy quickly managed to brand themselves and organised their main messages in a Facebook public group initially called ""NO" to the Strategy for the Child 2019-2030!". The group was created on 16 February 2019, roughly a year after the heated discussions around the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. Since then the group has changed its name several times – first to "National Group "NO" to the Strategy for the Child 2019-2030!" (5 May 2020), then to "National Group of Parents United for Children" (9 September 2019) and lastly to National group "Children of Bulgaria" (30 June 2020). At the time of writing this analysis (July, 2020) the group has 213,287 members.

I choose to analyse this particular group as it has received a great deal of publicity and has been cited numerous times as the main source of misinformation and false news. To give a more complete picture of the dynamics and processes in the group, in addition to the discussions I selected above, I refer to an analysis by Boyan Yurukov, a media data analyst, from September 2019. At that moment the group had 158 thousand members. A key finding from Yurukov's analysis is the fact that although the group has thousands of members "23.4% of all publications are due to less than 1% of the users. 16% of all publications are published by only 10 people. One of them – Hristina Runtova, who is as well a founder and admin of the group – has the most and as many as the next five users combined. In terms of comments, the results are similar. There are 280493 comments from 22961 people. 8306 people posted only one comment in the group. Again, 27.8% of the comments are due to 1% of the commenters, and 18% of the comments are due to 100 people. Seven people wrote over 1000 comments in just a few months.

When we look at discourses, we see quite frequent use of certain keywords. For example, the word "parent" (in 43.8% of the publications), "mother" (33.8%), "father" (in only 19.6%). The word "strategy" is mentioned quite often in 43.5% and the word "convention" – in 13.1%. "Value" is mentioned in 16% of publications and "family" – in 39%. Variations of "god"

are foamed in more than 1/3 of the texts. The Evangelical Church is mentioned only 284 times in all tens of thousands of comments, and the Orthodox Church – over 3200.

All of this comes to show that despite the thousands of users, the group cannot be representative of public opinion, as the main conversations in it are initiated by a group of people – most often its moderators, whose profiles have turned off the option to offer them a friend request and often do not have personal photos or recent activities. If they do, those are most likely shared posts from compromised media targeting LGBTIQ rights or sex education or photos of religious symbols and texts.

This so-called effect of the echo chamber is largely determined by the rules on Facebook. The algorithm by which the social media "chooses" what to show us from the whole stream shared by all our 300+ friends is not completely transparent. For instance, if one has not recently interacted with any of their friends, the algorithm hides their posts from. In the context of public groups, it often happens that we do not see people whose agenda is different from generally accepted discourse or are just more "quieter" than the rest. Above all, we hear the voices of the "loudest users" and even if they are not numerous in reality, this might create a deceptive sense of mass and popularity. If this is combined with the presence of paid profiles, the so-called "trolls" who follow the agenda to write the same keywords in discussions, this could distort the credibility of the whole picture even more.

Conclusion

This thesis has sought to explore the main discourses and types of attitudes in Facebook's discussions opposing women's rights and LGBTIQ rights in times of anti-gender campaigns. The previous chapters have collected a broad overview of anti-gender campaigns happening around the globe and then compared them to two major examples from Bulgaria's context. This comparison showed some interesting conclusions. First, anti-gender movements and campaigns are not unique or a new phenomenon. Similar campaigns have taken place in many European countries and across the globe. In the general case, they draw strength from contexts such as those of "gender ideology", "gender theory", or "genderism" referring to women's and LGBTQ rights and policies (Kováts 2018) as a threat to the traditional (Christian) family values. Second, although these campaigns might differ in some local features, they share similar features and have a transnational character (Kováts 2018; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017) meaning they build their campaign on the following elements 1) translation and promotion of anti-gender Christian authors; 2) translation and promotion and false information and misleading news; 3) affiliation with international organisations such as The World Congress of Families; 4) strong presence in social media pages and groups. What is really unique in the case of Bulgaria, is that these campaigns managed to spread quite rapidly and received large publicity within weeks, without previous debates on topics such as abortion, reprodcutive rights or same-marriages legislation which were the cases in Hungary, Poland or Germany. Another difference is that while in some of the listed countries, supporters of anti-gender campaigns do not completely deny gender studies and women's rights, in Bulgaria such a debate was absent and the topic was quickly adopted as a "political weapon" (Darakchi, 2018) by parties such as United Patriots for Bulgaria professing the same anti-gender rhetorics in their political campaigns. A possible explanation for this could be the fact that a large part of Bulgarian society has never studied gender studies and thus is not familiar with the difference between sex and gender. This, as I mentioned earlier, makes it extremely easy to use the term gender as

an "empty signifier" (Mayer and Sauer 2017) and to assign various and sometimes even contradictory meanings to it.

Then I proceed on the analysis part when I look into anti-gender discourses on a Facebook public group and try to organise them into thematic groups. Lastly, in the discussion part I examine the impact Facebook has as a social media in forming opinion and disseminating news on topics of strong public interest. Answering my research question, how does Facebook favour the spread and reproduction of anti-gender campaigns in the case of Bulgaria, I would say that Facebook's algorithms might be extremely powerful in shaping reality and creating echo chambers, which can have detrimental effects on democracy, especially in countries with low trust in institutions and high levels of corruption, as is the case with Bulgaria. Fake news campaigns become more and more popular precisely because of the ability of Facebook to be a handy tool for their distribution. "In such public spaces isolated from external influences, the frequent repetition of untruths and half-truths convinces their producers/consumers of their indisputable truth" (Smilova, 2011: 264-265). When these "truths" are used by the power of politicians and their conservative agenda, these discourses can very easily leave the online space and cause real consequences and harm resulting in hate speech, gender-based violence and homophobia.

As mentioned before this research has been limited because of its thesis's format. In further research, it would be interesting to explore other examples and conduct deeper studies including interviews with campaign supporters that could lead to more accurate results. This would help to create different research questions and generate new insights not yet explored by comparing different cases. Moreover, it would be convenient to study traditional media and to compare how these anti gender discourses are spread there as well. In addition, further research could focus on the growing connections between anti-gender campaigns and far-right politics in the context of post-socialist countries.

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