AFTER THE STORM

HOW TO RESTORE POLICY DIALOGUE AND SUPPORTIVE DISCOURSE AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE ONLINE IN BULGARIA

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Introduction

In 2018, there was a heated campaign across Bulgaria's public sphere against the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention for Prevention and Combating of Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (known as the Istanbul Convention). The campaign involved parliamentary political parties such as the nationalist United Patriots from the ruling coalition and opposition Bulgarian Socialist Party. Policy advisors, non-governmental organizations, religious and ultra-conservative groups, as well as media outlets further fuelled the agitation against the Convention. This resulted in a dominant public opinion against the adoption of the document. Public debates were furious and based on widespread disinformation on the meaning of the word "gender", a term that does not have an established equivalent in Bulgarian language.[1] In the core of the agitation was a potent negative discourse towards gender and sexual minorities' rights. Misogynist, homophobic and transphobic messages turned mainstream. Finally, the Bulgarian Constitutional Court ruled that the concepts "gender" and "gender identity" are irrelevant for the Bulgarian legal system and that the Convention is not compatible with the Constitution.[2]

The internet played a key role in the stormy anti-gender backlash. Gender-phobic hate speech was largely generated on social media, mostly on Facebook, as well as on some popular news sites. This has had a double negative effect. First, it crucially amplified negative public attitudes against gender rights. And second, the proliferation of hateful rhetoric produced gender-based violence online in itself.

As a whole, these developments in Bulgaria have largely confirmed the mechanisms in which present-day anti-gender campaigns are unfolding in Europe and other parts of the world.[3] Reactionary groups including conservative politicians, religious fundamentalists, and organizations in support of patriarchal values rally against what they call "gender ideology" in order to "protect traditional roles of men and women". Organized attacks, usually of transnational character, undermine gender equality, women's rights and rights of LGBTIQ people. In the course of instigating moral panic based on fears about the future of children and "traditional families" (or "natural families") the anti-gender movements persistently

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[1] For further information on the multiple translations and re-significations of the term "gender" in Bulgarian language leading to conceptual confusions see Slavova, K. (2018). Lost in Translation: Gender Heteroglossia in Bulgaria. *Sociological Problems, 50* (2), 495–514 [in Bulgarian].

[2] See Constitutional Court of the Republic of Bulgaria, Decision No 13, 27 July 2018 [in Bulgarian]. www.constcourt.bg/en/Acts/GetHtmlContent/f278a156-9d25-412d-a064-6ffd6f997310

[3] Among others, see: European Parliamentary Forum (2018). *Restoring the Natural Order: The religious extremists' vision to mobilize European societies against human rights on sexuality and reproduction.* Brussels: EPF. Kuhar, R. & Patternote, D. (Eds.) (2017). *Anti-gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against Equality.* Rowman & Littlefield Publishers; Molyneux, Maxine (2017). The battle over 'gender ideology' Religious conservatives are trying to thwart gender equality in Latin America. *International Politics and Society.* www.ips-journal.eu/regions/latin-america/article/show/the-battle-over-gender-ideology-2472/

disseminate their messages through both legacy media and online channels.[4] In this process, the internet and social media in particular prove especially prolific in spreading quasi-scientific information, manipulated data and scandalous stories in order to shape attitudes and mobilize people.

Taking these developments as the starting point, our research project focusses on the effects of the anti-gender campaign in Bulgaria in terms of gender-based violence. What we observe is that, since 2018, advocacy and policy-making against GBV have been seriously hampered. What is the role of the internet in this process? The research is designed to answer the questions of whether internet technologies (including social networks and online media) facilitate or prevent GBV in Bulgaria and how dominant anti-gender rights attitudes could be reversed with the help of internet communication. Our ultimate goal is to cultivate a perspective that could possibly restore policy dialogue and build up supportive discourse against GBV in the country.

Data collection methods

The research is based on a combination of several approaches that complement each other and allow data validation.

In the first part of the project, we put an emphasis on further revealing the structural factors affecting the current awareness and discourses on GBV in the country. In order to analyse the complexity of how the internet relates to GBV and anti-gender rights attitudes we surveyed publications in various areas: legislation and online regulation; public discourse and hate speech; feminism and gender issues; political environment and civic activism. The review included literature published in the last decade (2010–2019), which allowed us to trace the developments prior, during, and shortly after the burst of the 2018 Istanbul Convention debate.[5] It is worth noting that the present anti-gender reactions directly affect the most recent wave of publications. Some authors feel obliged to take a political stance and to defend their engagement with the subject matter as a response to existing public and institutional pressure against scholars and academic projects dealing with gender studies. As a whole, critical and gender-sensitive research in these fields is implemented by CSOs and individual researchers from academic institutions.[6] Based on the literature review we

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[4] Kuhar, R., interviewed by S. Darakchi and T. Kotzeva (2018). Anti-gender Campaigns, the Attack against Liberal Values and the Policies of Fear. *Sociological Problems, 50* (2), 736–753 [in Bulgarian].

[5] The thematic scope of the publications, though, covers a larger timeframe and problematizes relevant tendencies from earlier decades especially in relation to the feminist movement in the country.

[6] For recent reflections on the "gender" topic in Bulgaria see the "The Polyphonic Potential of Gender Studies", a special issue of the *Sociological Problems* journal, 2018, 50 (2).

identified a number of risk factors relevant to the issue of GBV and its online manifestations (see the section on research results).

The central part of the project was dedicated to data collection via qualitative methods:

- ▪ *Semi-structured interviews*

We conducted 20 in-depth interviews with two types of respondents: people who were facing (online) GBV and persons at high risk of exposure to it, on the one hand, and conservative-minded individuals with sexist, homophobic, transphobic, etc. online behaviour, on the other. The first type of participants were our main target. In the selection process, we took into account the intersection of multiple vulnerable identities, some of the respondents being of sexual and/or ethnic and/or religious minorities. It is namely their minority identity that constitutes their vulnerability. We combined purposive sampling and snowballing technique in selecting the participants. Our own engagement in gender rights activism helped us a lot in safely contacting appropriate participants. We decided not to advertise our search for respondents in public (online or via other channels) because that could have violated our and FIRN's ethical standards by putting both the participants and the research team at risk. The interview as the chosen research method allowed closer and empathic interaction with the participants. The real stories and personal reflections shared by the interviewees provided valuable insights into the subject matter.

As for the second type of respondents, we reached people who were either local opinion leaders spreading anti-gender messages on social media or internet users influenced by such people and being vocal online. The attitudes within this sample of respondents varied from banal sexism to radical intolerance, at least expressed verbally, towards feminists and LGBTIQ persons. We talked with people with anti-gender views in order to provide a broader and more nuanced picture on the matter. This implies leaving our own echo chamber and listening to the wider spectrum of motives and comprehension levels of GBV – a useful effort when it comes to cultivating a social change.

The profiles of the respondents in terms of professional engagement cover a wide range of areas: human rights activism, law, media and communications, science, education, corporate business, psychology and medical services, technology and engineering, and other.

Interviews – numbers and demography	
Gender, gender identity, sexual orientation[7]	Heterosexual women: 10 Heterosexual men: 5 Gay woman: 1 Bisexual man: 1 Hetero trans woman: 1 Queer man: 1 Intersex: 1
Ethnicity	Bulgarian: 17 Roma: 3
Religion	Christian Orthodox: 11 Christian Protestant: 1 Muslim: 2 Atheist: 4 Agnostic: 2
Age	20-29 years old: 4 30-39 years old: 10 40-49 years old: 3 50-59 years old: 3
Family status	Single / not married: 14 Cohabitation with a partner: 3 Married: 3
Completed education	Higher: 17 Secondary: 3

All conversations were negotiated and made in an environment suitable for the interviewees. Twelve of the respondents were available for face-to-face talk, and eight of them preferred online channels or communication by phone, provided that their anonymity was guaranteed.

On a few occasions, the team faced some challenges in recruiting representatives of the target groups. Some of the people who had experienced GBV were very cautious and reluctant to share their traumatic experiences for the purpose of the

[7] Description is based on the self-identification of the respondents.

research. That is why we invited them to reveal as much of their stories as they felt comfortable with. On the other hand, some of the respondents who had faced GBV were hesitant whether their experience could be described as violence, especially gender-based, when referring to cases, which had not escalated to physical attacks. These respondents would identify themselves neither as victims nor as survivors. They would simply not recognize non-physical manifestations of GBV as a form of abuse, labelling it instead "bad manners" or the like. This matches our observation as researchers and activists that to a large extent people in Bulgaria do not have the sensitivity to acknowledge GBV c especially psychological violence – as a serious issue and to react against it.

Some agreed-upon interviews did not take place because the respondents eventually decided not to participate. They explained it with the lack of time and too many professional and domestic engagements. It is noteworthy though that most of the persons we had contacted were willing to cooperate, trusting the team members that had contacted them and/or expressing a positive attitude towards the need to articulate the issues addressed by the project. Even the respondents with the strongest sexist and homophobic inclinations reacted positively when kindly asked to share their opinion and respected our research efforts. One reason could be that our approach to them did not fit the stereotype about feminists they had had in their heads – "militant", "aggressive", "anti-male", etc. In negotiating with them (as well as with the other participants) we had genuine research curiosity about their arguments and reflections. At the same time, in the position of researchers-as-supplicants we tried to deal with the asymmetrical power relations between researchers and researched[8] and not to treat them merely as sources of information but to value their views, no matter whether we agreed with them or not.

- ▪ *Focus groups*

We conducted three focus groups – with journalists and online communicators, with experts from institutions and NGOs, and with activists. Since some of the activists were NGO experts as well, we decided to invite them in the one or other group, carefully considering in which capacity they would be more helpful for the project's purposes and what would be the group in which they would feel more "at home". After all, each group discussion generated an unrepeated atmosphere and revealed different nuances compared to the other two discussions.

In general, focus group is a method that allows certain topics to be discussed from different sides and at the same time the technique provides a liberating

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[8] Supplication, as an approach often adopted by feminist researchers, lies in the "acceptance that the knowledge of the person being researched […] is greater than that of the researcher", which has the potential for "dealing with asymmetrical and potentially exploitative power relations by shifting a lot of power over to the researched". See England, Kim V. L. (1994). Getting personal: Reflexivity, positionality, and feminist research. *The Professional Geographer* 46(1): 80–89.
www.researchgate.net/publication/227706307_Getting_Personal_Reflexivity_Positionality_and_Feminist_Research

atmosphere for marginalized or silenced social groups.[9] In the concrete case, the conducting of three focus groups is a triangulation method, because the research questions were viewed from three different perspectives and this lead to a better understanding. On the other hand, this research method has its limits.[10] Some vulnerable individuals could be afraid to join a group discussion. That is why we did not include non-binary and non-cisgender persons in the group sessions and interviewed them individually instead. In search of a wider variety of viewpoints, we invited different persons to take part in the focus groups and in the interviews. When moderating the group discussions, we were careful to prevent a situation in which one or more members of the group influence the dialog.

We selected the participants based on our contacts among activists, NGOs and the media. Our own experience in the areas of human rights activism, protection of violence against women, journalism and media analysis was of significant help when inviting the relevant people to join the discussions in a trustworthy environment. Again, when recruiting participants, we relied on both purposive sampling and snowballing technique. We contacted people we already knew and asked some of them to suggest other people they new. We also sent invitation letters to the relevant institutions and they decided at their own discretion which experts to take part in the research.

Professional overload of experts from human rights organizations and media editors was one of the obstacles we faced. The importance of the topic and the sense of solidarity helped us a lot in persuading people from these fields to join. We consider another obstacle that we could not recruit enough men. In fact, the participants come from sectors that in Bulgaria are much feminized, such as journalism, NGOs, activism and public institutions at an expert level. In addition, almost all of the leading male LGBTIQ activists were not available at the time of the focus groups because of professional engagements abroad.

Focus groups	Gender			Capacity
	Female	Male	Other	
Communicators	4	3	-	6 journalists and one internet forum administrator
Institutions and experts	7	1	-	4 public institutions experts, 3 NGO expert, 1 lawyer
Activists and NGOs	7	1	-	4 activists from NGOs and 4 independent activists

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[9] See Aanand, L. (2013). Feminist Methodological Approach towards Focus Group Interview Research. *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, Vol. 3, Issue 9. http://www.ijsrp.org/research-paper-0913/ijsrp-p2154.pdf

[10] See Sim, J. (1998). Collecting and analyzing qualitative data: issues raised by the focus group. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, Vol. 28, No. 2, pp. 345–52.

Our overall impression from the focus groups is that each group had very different views on many issues from the other ones. Except for the fact that practically all of the participants were critical toward the anti-gender propaganda in Bulgaria, they had different views on whether and how would be possible to deal with such problems. Most of the journalists did not seem very aware of GBV and blamed the environment but not journalism itself, which in fact is a risk factor regarding GBV in the country. The institutional experts explained that they were trying to avoid confrontation in order to be able to do their work, especially on gender issues. Such a strategy, for example, was not to use the word "gender" in documents and official communication. The activists, on their turn, revealed they were facing threats and hate all the time, which has made them much more sensitive to the problem than the other groups.

The strongest in-group consensus and like-mindedness was among the activists. Albeit some traumatic personal examples were shared by the participants, none of the sessions turned into group therapy.

The focus groups were moderated by our research team member Svetla Encheva. Being an LGBTIQ activist herself, she admits that at some moments it was quite hard for her to remain calm and to look unbiased during the discussions. She found especially challenging not to interfere while, for example, some participants insisted, that it was not good to mention the word "gender" in Bulgaria anymore.

In addition to the viewpoints collected via personal interviews and group discussions, we implemented desktop analyses with two more research instruments:

- ***Tracing key words/narratives***

Through quality content analysis, we analysed the construction of important messages, relevant to the research topic, in online communication. Three main thematic areas have been investigated: representations of LGBTIQ people; domestic violence and GBV; a case study on a political scandal that took place during the implementation of the project and was caused by the non-consensual publication of porn pictures of the girlfriend of a mayoral candidate.[11] The scope of observation covered the leading news sites according to the Alexa ranking (as of September 2019) for the period of 1 January – 30 September 2019: nova.bg, vesti.bg, blitz.bg, dir.bg, bradva.bg, 24chasa.bg, dnevnik.bg, fakti.bg. These mainstream sites vary significantly in terms of journalistic and ethical standards – some of them practice quality journalism while others are tabloid or hybrid. We extracted a set of key narratives that frame the online media agenda on the subject of gender and

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[11]In September 2019, a popular news site revealed porn images of the girlfriend of a mayoral candidate in the capital city of Sofia. The publication has triggered strong reactions in the public sphere (among media professionals and political leaders in particular) as well as among internet users in general. See BBC Monitoring (2019, 13 September). Bulgaria outcry over political revenge porn. *BBC News*. www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-49694541.

GBV and juxtaposed the findings with the agenda of the online channels of particular risk in disseminating anti-gender rights messages as identified in the literature review (social networks, "yellow", and nationalistic online platforms).

In extracting the information we used an initial set of key words relevant to the respective thematic area with pre-supposed neutral or negative connotations – for example "LGBT", "(Sofia) Pride", "domestic violence" (neutral), "gay", "gender" (both neutral and negative), common pejorative labels for queer people (negative), etc. Then we expanded the search by adding additional key words extracted from the first set of findings. The qualitative thematic analysis combined criteria such as: news value and accumulation of news item, context, speakers (journalists/media, queer people and activists, politicians, etc.), key message and expressed attitudes. Finally, we identified the key narratives that framed and dominated the news coverage. In this exercise, we used critical media studies approaches, being aware of the subjective character of the decoding process. We had ethical dilemmas of whether our feminist perspective could lead to overly sensitive interpretations of the media construction of meaning. We reached a point of comfort by: a) using as guidelines the common principles of ethical journalism and pluralism[12], and b) purposively focusing on the crossing points between mainstream media messages and popular anti-gender discourse.

This approach provided additional validation of online communication practices. It brought to the front the media representation strategies which contribute to the legitimation of anti-gender public discourse on the internet and therefore to the stimulation of online GBV.

As expected, we registered online media examples of hate speech towards feminists, LGBTIQ people and defenders of their rights. Although as analysts and activists we are used to monitor and face injurious language, it remains painful to read hateful and degrading messages depicting groups we represent. In order not to expand the visibility of such speech and thus to reinvigorate it,[13] we decided not to quote and repeat it.

- ▪ *Review of documents and cases of domestic violence*

We monitored the cases of domestic violence registered by the partnering organization Gender Alternatives Foundation for the period January 2016 – August 2019. The organization provides support and consultation to people who have experienced domestic violence, no matter of their sex and gender. The purpose of the monitoring was to extract the cases in which ICTs and phone communication had been used by perpetrators of domestic violence. Out of 890 files of legal consultation and psycho-social counselling of adults affected by domestic violence,

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[12] See National Council of Journalists Ethics (2004). *Code of Ethics of the Bulgarian Media*. mediaethics-bg.org/етичен-кодекс-2/

[13] See Butler, J. (1997). *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. London & New York: Routledge Press.

there are 94 cases of use of phones, mobile devices, computers, etc. as channels of dissemination of threats, insults, humiliating messages and/or death threats. It should be noted that this information is not part of the files recording criteria, but mentioned by the affected persons at their own discretion. Therefore, the data are only indicative, the actual number of such practices could be higher. Nevertheless, the content analysis of these files illustrates the extent to which domestic violence in such cases is gender-based. The results, as described below, are unambiguous.

In the final part of the project, we organized an expert elicitation workshop with key stakeholders identified in the course of the research. The purpose of the discussion was twofold – external verification of the findings and stimulation of policy dialogue for prevention against online GBV.

The workshop was attended by women's and LGBTIQ rights organisations, state institutions (The Anti-Discrimination Commission, The Ministry of Education and Science, the Cybercrime Department at Ministry of Interior, The Ministry of Labor and Social Policy), activists, researchers, lawyers. There was a broad consensus on the validity of the research conclusions. Both government officials and CSO representatives agreed on the structural and legislative deficiencies impeding anti-GBV policy, especially in the online environment, as outlined by the research report.

As for potential policy measures, the discussion added some valuable recommendations to the ones extracted with the other research methods. What also matters are the nuances of the expectations of the CSOs, on the one hand, and the state officials, on the other. The former demand stricter interventions and reforms while the latter are more inclined to softer measures. Some of the activists strongly criticized the position of the government in the debates on the Istanbul Convention as not being supportive of the anti-GBV efforts that had been undertaken both by the civil society sector and the state. These discrepancies eventually caused tension between the two sides during the workshop. Nevertheless, the representatives of the state institutions were appreciative of the fieldwork done by the CSOs and referenced it as an important source of primary information on the issue of the offline and online manifestations of GBV.

Analytical framework and general ethical considerations

For the purpose of analyzing the collected data we applied a meta-triangulation strategy. First, the desktop analyses (literature review, analysis of domestic violence data, tracing key words and key narratives) helped us draw the context of (online) GBV in the country – current state of debate and leading discourses, policy deficiencies and structural injustices. The findings were not only valuable by themselves but also helped us prepare the questionnaires for the interviews and group discussions. The latter provided the main corpus of data in search of answers

to the leading research questions. Finally, the key conclusions accumulated to that moment were additionally validated and discussed in the expert elicitation workshop we organized in the final stage of the project. That workshop was also designed as a policy action measure – it brought together the main stakeholders in the field of policy-making and protection against online GBV. Along the process, we managed to collect and curate recommendations for prevention against GBV with the help of internet communication (presented in the last section of the paper).

We should admit that using such a rich set of methods was a challenge for the research team. Each method generated interesting and important findings, some of them going beyond the narrow scope of the concrete research questions but still related to GBV. Integrating and wrapping up all the data for the purpose of the current report inevitably means to present some conclusions too succinctly. What we are especially concerned about is that we have to drop out much of the personal stories, opinions and reflections we have accumulated. We feel indebted to all the respondents who have shared their experience on this sensitive topic with us. We would like their voices and original words to be heard as loud as possible. "Are we appropriating *their* stories, including personal traumas, for the purpose of *our* research?" is the difficult question we are facing.

Empathy and respect were the leading ethical principles we tried to adhere to in communicating with the respondents. We tried not to violate the participants – not just their privacy and safety, but also their emotions. We have taken into account the intersectionality of some of the participant's identities. We were respecting the participant's rights of self-identification. We have encoded our research data.

At the same time, in the light of reflexivity and standpoint awareness, we should say that our project is not unbiased. Although we promote dialogue among stakeholders, and even with proponents of anti-gender rights movements, we clearly stand for women's and queer persons' rights. That is why in analysing the results we are unevenly prioritising the sayings of the survivors of (online) GBV compared to the heteronormative masculinist arguments. After all, we are lead by the moral rationale that the GBV is unacceptable. To us, our research has some important political dimensions – our aim is that its results and further use could empower women and LGBTQ+ people to make their online environment more humanistic.

Research results

Bulgaria and online GBV: the general context

As a reflection of social values in the country, the Bulgarian internet environment is susceptible to practices of online violence, including GBV. What is more – the most aggressive and excessive expressions of hate speech, for instance, are on the

internet. A monitoring of online content indicates that far-right and anti-LGBT+ agitation reaches high levels of visibility because it is usually more open and pro-active compared to human rights activism.[14]

Among others, the main structural prerequisites for online GBV are related to:

Legislative gaps

Above all, there is a lack of legal definition of gender-based violence. There is no legal recognition and no criminalisation of the acts of gender-based violence online. There is also a lack of provisions on gender-based hate speech. The lack of recognition of LGBT+ people's rights in terms of relationship status[15] also has an effect on the overall picture. So has the legislation on domestic violence. In fact, domestic violence was not qualified as a crime under the Criminal Code until February 2019. Finally, according to new amendments in the Code, a victim of domestic violence has to prove systematic violence in order for the prosecution to initiate a criminal case against the perpetrator. This condition still makes the prosecution of this form of violence problematic. In addition, the existing legislation on gender equality as a whole does not contain efficient legal provisions for ensuring equal protection of gender rights. The overall situation has been made even more complicated by the Bulgarian Constitutional Court's decision on the unconstitutionality of the Istanbul Convention. Against this background, state officials, lawyers and NGO workers confirm cyber GBV is practically extremely difficult to detect, prove and react against because of the lack of legal basis for criminal investigation.

Still nascent and fragmented regulation of online communication at EU level

As a member of the EU, Bulgaria is influenced by the EU policies and regulations. It does matter, that the EU framework on hate speech is towards stricter regulation compared to other parts of the world, for instance. One such example is The European Court of Human Rights decision on the Delfi AS v. Estonia case.[16] The decision has confirmed liability of online news portals for offensive comments posted by their readers. This has had an effect on Bulgarian online media – some of them completely closed the readers' comments sections, others applied additional registration for their users in order to minimize anonymity. Another important measure is the Code of Conduct on countering illegal hate speech online launched by the European Commission "together with the four major IT companies (Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter and YouTube) and in an effort to respond to the

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[14] See Spassov, O., N. Daskalova and Y. Nikolova (2016). *Hate Speech in Bulgaria: Risk Areas, Vulnerable Subjects*. Sofia: Center for Policy Modernization Foundation, FMD [in Bulgarian].
www.fmd.bg/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/antihate_index.pdf
[15] See Popov, Arnaudov & Partners (2018). *Study of Bulgarian Legislation Currently in Force at Regulation Level with Regard to the Rights Granted to Married Couples and Different-Sex Couples Living in De Facto Cohabitation Compared to the Rights of Same-Sex Couples*. Sofia: Deystvie.
deystvie.org/files/Анализ на последици от брак и съжителство_EN_.pdf
[16] See European Court of Human Rights (2013). *Case of Delfi AC v. Estonia*. Strasbourg: ECHR.
hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-126635

proliferation of racist and xenophobic hate speech online."[17] In practice, though, efforts to remove hate speech from Bulgarian-language content on online social media have not been very effective. Such content is still easy to publish, share and find.

The situation is even more troublesome regarding hate speech against women and LGBTIQ people in particular. Such harmful language, as testified by our respondents, is widespread on social media. What is more, cyber violence against women and girls (CVAWG) "has not been fully conceptualised or legislated against at EU level."[18] There is still a need of common definitions within the EU of CVAWG and incorporation of these forms of violence into EU legislation.[19]

Hostile political environment and social stereotypes

In sum, the current social context in the country includes phenomena opposing gender rights policies in general such as: a rise of a neo-conservative nationalistic ideology unifying nationality with ethnicity and religiosity;[20] solid social prejudices against vulnerable groups (gender, sexual and ethnic minorities); social and economic insecurities (poverty, unemployment, marginalization) leading to threatened, subordinated masculinities and a symbolic construction of a hegemonic "traditional Bulgarian masculinity" based on neo-patriarchal values;[21] negative public perception of feminism per se.

Discriminatory public and media discourse

In the past few years, hate speech in public discourse has reached a high level, the central targets being ethnic and sexual minorities, and the main channels – social networks, online discussion forums, tabloid outlets and the media of far-right parties.[22] In addition, recent media campaigns for discrediting NGOs and human rights activists have expanded the aggressive rhetoric and have lead to a shrinking public space for the articulation of arguments in support of gender equality and gender rights.[23] In the last couple of decades, heteronormative and homophobic media representations have associated homosexuality, above all gay men, with

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[17] See European Commission (2019). Code of Conduct on countering illegal hate speech online: Questions and answers on the fourth evaluation. Brussels: EC.
ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_19_806

[18] See European Institute for Gender Equality (2017). *Cyber violence against women and girls*. Vilnius: EIGE. eige.europa.eu/publications/cyber-violence-against-women-and-girls

[19] Ibid.

[20] See Stanoeva, E. (2018). Hypochondriac Identities: Gender and Nationalism in Bulgaria. *Sociological Problems*, 50 (2), 715–735 [in Bulgarian].

[21] See Luleva, A. (2018). Men and Masculinities in Postsocialist Bulgaria. *Sociological Problems, 50* (2), 590–604 [in Bulgarian].

[22] See OSI (2018). *Public Attitudes towards Hate Speech in Bulgaria, 2018*. Sofia: Open Society Institute.
osis.bg/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/2018-Hate-speech-BG-final.pdf [in Bulgarian]; Spassov, O., N. Daskalova and Y. Nikolova (2016). Op. cit.

[23] See Spassov, O. & N. Daskalova (2018). *The Civic Sector in Bulgaria: Public Image and Media Representations*. Sofia: FMD [in Bulgarian].
www.fmd.bg/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/csos-in-bulgaria-public-image-media-representations.pdf

criminal inclinations, pedophilia, dirtiness and the like.[24] Our research on online media channels indicates the scope of demonized subjects have widened to include queer and transgender people as well as feminists. The current focus, as in the other anti-gender campaigns in Europe,[25] is on the "threats" brought by the LGBTIQ people to a universally and consensually vulnerable category – the children.

With few exceptions, the representation practices of the leading news sites in the country – as the content analysis shows – build, explicitly or indirectly, anti-gender narratives. In the most drastic cases, the media outlets demonstrate openly aggressive editorial policy against gender rights. The antipathy involves mockery, humiliation, shaming, repulsion, etc. The strategy of demonization of queer people uses significations of pathology, immorality, and desecration of Christian values. Messages of this kind are authored by the given news site itself and/or by politicians or other public figures. Also, the labelling "gender" is actively re-signified as a multivalent insult. All this is incorporated in the pursuit of commercial profits. The "gender" topic is being framed and sold as a scandal. What is especially disturbing is the media selling of GBV. Some of the leading news sites publish shocking pictures and evocative titles to depict victims or alleged perpetrators of gender-based violence. The media quoting abusers' threats and ways of committing a violent act also takes place. In some cases, the news sites themselves incite GBV.

Our content analysis also indicates certain risks arising from the online media that generally adhere to more serious, balanced and fact-based reporting. Although such news outlets are inclined to interview women's and LGBTIQ rights activists and to alarm on the cases of domestic and gender-based violence, the news editors would usually feel obliged "to keep the balance" and to give the microphone to the "two opposing viewpoints". Thus, homophobic public figures are opposed to gender rights activists in a distorted understanding of pluralism. As a result, human rights arguments are not only questioned but also undermined and even mingled with hate speech.

Finally, the analysis shows a high level of correspondence between the anti-gender messages transmitted by the mainstream news on the internet and the "gender ideology" rhetoric generated by opinion leaders and end-users on social media.[26] The ubiquity of such agenda inevitably reduces the sensitivity to GBV and opens the door to its online manifestations.

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[24] See Georgiev, A. (2018). Monitoring and analysis on the coverage of the LGBT community in the Dnevnik news site. *Media and Language. Online Journal of Media Language Research* [online]. December 22, 2018, No. 4. medialinguistics.com/2018/12/22/lgbt-community-log/

[25] See Kuhar, R., interviewed by S. Darakchi and T. Kotzeva (2018). Op. cit.

[26] For additional data on the common notions and beliefs on social media regarding "gender ideology" in the context of the discussions on the Istanbul Convention, see the analysis of Darakchi, S. (2019). "The Western Feminists Want to Make Us Gay": Nationalism, Heteronormativity, and Violence Against Women in Bulgaria in Times of "Anti-gender Campaigns". *Sexuality and Culture*. www.researchgate.net/publication/333002811_The_Western_Feminists_Want_to_Make_Us_Gay_Nationalism_Heteronormativity_and_Violence_Against_Women_in_Bulgaria_in_Times_of_Anti-gender_Campaigns/citation/download

Instability of the women's rights activism

Although one of the strongest in Europe in the early 20th century, the Bulgarian women's movement experienced ambiguous progress in the periods that followed, one of the results being the lack of continuous and sustainable feminist activism.[27] In the last three decades, the women's movement has been shaped mostly as a professionalized field of educated women occupied in NGOs financially dependent on foreign donors and the state. Since the mid-1990s, domestic violence and violence against women have been among the central issues addressed by such NGOs. Researchers argue, though, that these forms of violence have been prevailingly considered as an individual or social problem, and not as an economic or gender-based one.[28] In the present anti-gender situation the women's right activism is even more unstable, because the funding and the field work of the feminist NGOs have become much more problematic. Some NGOs have recently removed the word "gender" from their names in order to mitigate the negative attitudes they face.

Lack of coherence in feminist and gender policies within the EU

Addressing feminist policies in the country also depends on the wider EU context. The lack of commitment of EU governments to combat GBV, the incoherent approaches to gender issues within the Union, the discussion of gender equality primarily in a neoliberal economic reasoning and the uneven power relations between the richer West and the poorer Central and Eastern European states[29] cause turbulent social climate in countries like Bulgaria. The effects of neo-liberalism in the region stir protests and neoconservative responses, including the anti-gender movements. As E. Zacharenko argues, "In eastern and central Europe, 'gender ideology' has become a means of expressing a rejection of the European East-West hierarchy and the failed promises of capitalist transformation."[30] The patronizing import from the old member states of "correct" values, including in terms of gender equality and rights, in the context of economic dissatisfaction, causes rejection of these values "because of the strongly felt disingenuity of

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[27] See Ivancheva, M. (2014). Continuity in Rupture: The Paradoxical History of the Women's Movement in Bulgaria. In: A. Lisiak & N. Smolenski (ed.) *What Do Ideas Do?* Vienna: IWM Junior Visiting Fellows' Conferences, Vol. 33.
www.iwm.at/publications/5-junior-visiting-fellows-conferences/vol-xxxiii/continuity-in-rupture/

[28] See Ivancheva, M. (2015). "The Spirit of the Law": Mobilizing and/or Professionalizing the Women's Movement in Post-socialist Bulgaria. In: Krizsan, Andrea (ed.) *Mobilizing for Policy Change: Women's Movements in Central and Eastern European Domestic Violence Policy Struggles.* Budapest: CEU.
www.academia.edu/12642659

[29] See Zacharenko. E. (2009). The Neoliberal Fuel to the Anti-Gender Movement. *International Politics and Society.*
www.ips-journal.eu/regions/europe/article/show/the-neoliberal-fuel-to-the-anti-gender-movement-3747/;
Kovats, E. (ed.) (2017). *The Future of the European Union. Feminist Perspectives from East-Central Europe.* Budapest: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

[30] Op. cit.

neoliberal decision-makers' concerns for rights, as long as these rights are not social or economic in nature."[31]

Concerns over the import of values, agenda and terminology have been shared by our respondents as well. Some of the interviewed experts express criticism to the top-down regulation imposed by the EU institutions: "International organizations arrogantly enforce [East European countries] to adopt some terminology without caring that it leads to problems..." In other cases, conservative respondents imply that recent gender rights ideas are an import not fully adapted to the local context. "If you want to teach me what gender rights mean, you have to say it in a way that is consistent with my [Muslim] culture and [Roma] ethnicity," explains a respondent who is afraid "EU-related concepts as gender rights" are not properly communicated to ethnic minorities in the country and therefore sound distant.

All these structural factors intermingle, reinforce each other and simultaneously shape the status quo. Dealing with the current anti-feminist, anti-gender and anti-LGBTIQ movements therefore could hardly be successful if reforms are undertaken only in one direction. The complexity of the situation leads to the conclusion that in order to be effective, policymaking in the fields of gender rights and protection against GBV requires an intersectional approach.

The role of the internet on GBV: the respondents' reflections

The described structural deficiencies imply a rather pessimistic view on our leading research question of whether the internet prevents or stimulates GBV. The online environment provides a set of conditions for the incitement of GBV. The data collected via personal interviews and group discussions, on the other hand, does not necessarily confirm this statement. Actually, the question itself is questioned by most of the respondents. "The internet is just a tool and as such can be used both ways" is a leading argument shared by the persons we interviewed. There are some noteworthy nuances and controversies though.

According to some of the respondents, people have the freedom to create different (anonymous) identities online, which gives room to the manifestation of more aggressive behaviour. A journalist points to the fact that "everything written on the internet remains as an archive and this can lead to re-victimization" (not mentioning the right to be forgotten option).

"Yes, the internet is just a tool," admits another journalist, "but now we have forums, social networks, targeted feeds, much faster content consumption. It's different than it used to be. Everything is accelerating. Both the positive and the negative effects. Self-organization, self-help, but also negative attitudes are accelerated". A

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[31] Ibid.

third journalist goes a step further in articulating the dialectics of internet communication in terms of GBV: "This is a shortened field of communication where you do not need to show up to unleash all your psychopathy. But social networks also allow for the opposite effect. I am convinced that an honest post from a woman about the abuse she has experienced will become viral. You see, there is also the possibility of resistance. And all this can be documented. It's easier to prove cyberbullying than to prove abuse on the street with no witnesses."

An expert in gender studies has a positive evaluation on the role of the internet: "I met so many people I might not have known, if it had not been the mobilization against anti-gender rights campaigns. I have created so many new networks and groups online."

Another respondent is also rather optimistic but with a different touch on the issue: "Due to greater freedom of speech and less censorship on the internet, any type of verbal abuse is intensified. … People feel free to express politically incorrect opinions. But at the end of the day, this helps reduce physical abuse because a fist can't go through a monitor." Such a point of view is usually supported by interviewed individuals who favour, according to their own words, "as much freedom of speech online as possible" and reject "any form of political correctness". These respondents admit that they themselves produce and spread offensive or degrading messages on the internet targeted at groups they dislike. However, if there is a disrespectful discourse about core values that constitute their identity – their religion, for instance – they easily feel offended and are ready to censor freedom of expression.

On the other hand, other respondents, especially those who have experienced verbal attacks, share deeper concerns on the effects of aggressive online behaviour. A queer activist states that not all people are emotionally stable and phenomena such as hate speech on the internet can help them feel supported and encouraged to act: "This is the greatest danger. There is the so-called mob psychology and when the internet crowd is behind you, you are able to act in a way that would please the gang". The boundaries between online and offline behaviour can be easily passed, reflect other interviewees, and refer to this as the spot of vulnerability in online communications regarding incitement of violence: "Since making contacts on the internet is so easy you can trace somebody online and then meet and attack this person in real life."

The overall impression is that the respondents do not readily identify certain characteristics of the online environment as a determining factor for gender-based violence. Rather, they associate this type of violence with social or personal predispositions that do not necessarily depend on the channel of communication. At the same time, there is uneven level of sensitivity regarding the negative effects of the internet among different groups. Queer persons are more likely to emphasize the risks in the online environment and their own traumatic experience. Heterosexual cisgender individuals, on the other hand, are more prone to see the

double-sidedness of the internet as an instrument for communication, no matter whether they have been subject to any form of online discrimination or not. With all due reservations against over-generalization, we could interpret this as an interesting effect of internalized vulnerability in the digital environment, in the one case, or internalized heteronormativity in online culture, in the other, which supposedly depend on factors beyond the internet.

Perceptions of (online) GBV

Our findings indicate that GBV is ubiquitous, regardless of the social status of the perpetrators and the victims. Against this backdrop, here again we register different levels of sensitivity on the matter, even among victims of violence. Internalization of patriarchal values justifying or ignoring GBV is evident among respondents with different social background. The deficits in the awareness on GBV in general predetermine the limits in people's ability to recognize online GBV in particular.

"There's a weak awareness among women. A slap in the face or an insult – such things are not considered as violence by women themselves. It's considered normal [by women] to be called names which describe parts of your genital system," explains a participant in the focus groups. The in-depth interviews confirm this observation. Some of the respondents would not recognize as violence an act of physical abuse by a partner, or would not define as harassment the practice of repeatedly receiving insulting phone calls by a family member. Domestic GBV is sometimes interpreted as an escalation of the tension within a family or intimate relationship which is "common" and even "normal," as revealed by a few interviewees, no matter their social status or gender identity.

Among the media professionals who participated in a focus group, there is no common understanding on the nature of online violence, except that it happens online. According to one of them, it could be defined as something "that causes fatal harm to the human psyche." Another one claims: "I don't include in the definition of violence something that doesn't include a direct threat." "I never thought that I was attacked as a woman when someone was saying to me 'the poor woman'," "I've been told 'the poor woman, this is what she is able to produce, don't be angry at her.' I haven't considered this as violence. I've developed weaker awareness," participants in the media professionals' focus group eventually admit after initially claiming they had never experienced GBV.

Experts and representatives of institutions, on the other hand, find problematic that there is no clear legal definition of what GBV means, this is why people are being led by different criteria.

Activists, on their turn, demonstrate the highest level of awareness of the manifestations of GBV and the interconnection between online and offline practices: "Hate speech online could lead to other forms of violence especially if there are powerful groups and law enforcement is closing its eyes"; "online violence is a continuation of a real violence… normalized violence that turns in a virtual environment as discourse."

An important observation points to a correlation between the level of awareness of GBV and the attitude toward feminism. Those who would identify as feminists are most critical and alert in recognizing different forms of VAW and GBV. Familiarity with feminisms also gives them language to name and articulate what they are experiencing.

As a whole, physical GBV is more easily perceived as such than online GBV. While conducting the research activities we gathered numerous examples of witnessed or experienced gender-based discrimination and GBV "in real life": physical attacks; physical abuse (including rape) and psychological harassments by an intimate partner; domestic violence by parents or other family members; sexual harassment by strangers; forceful medical treatment of trans people in order to "get normal"; not getting a job at the military simply because you are a woman, etc.

Online trolling, flaming, stalking and threats, on the other side, are readily belittled simply as "rudeness", "annoyance" and "bad manners" both by victims and abusers. This is telling of under-acknowledgment of abusive rhetoric and therefore of a relatively high tolerance to abusive practices in general.

Despite the unequal importance attributed to the physical and the online forms of GBV, the research shows a clear link between the two. Domestic violence, for example, often involves threatening messages sent via e-mail, phone or other online channels. The perpetrators in such cases are usually male family members (typically a husband, a father or a brother), as evidenced by data collected from the in-depth interviews and the group discussions. The analysis on the monitored domestic violence files registered by Gender Alternatives Foundation (see the section on data collection methods) validates this conclusion. The percentage of women affected by GBV via phone or personal online communication is 94%, while men are only 6%. The abusers are predominantly men – 97%, while women are 3%. The manifestations of abuse in this context vary. Tracking personal correspondence is evident in 18% of the cases. Control over the access to e-mail, computer or cellphone is registered in 14% of the cases. Death threats are evident in 20% of the files containing information on GBV via phone and/or the internet. In such cases, technology is treated by the abusers both as a supplementary means of oppression and as an empowering tool that the target must be deprived of.

Physical stalking often transfers into the online space, as evidenced by NGO workers in the area of domestic violence and violence against women. A woman we interviewed testified a man had stalked her for years. Among other things, the

abuser had been trying to contact her via different phone numbers and had published misleading information about her being a drug dealer on social networks.

The highest sensitivity among our respondents in terms of online GBV is regarding the extreme forms of sexual assault and the non-consensual dissemination of homemade sex photos. In addition, according to some of the experts, GBV is central to online abuse of and among children, both boys and girls being affected. Dissemination of "dick pics" and homophobic content (verbal and visual) are typical in such cases. "[In Bulgaria] online violence is damn sexualized. The environment is 100% sexually toxic...," an expert in the focus group discussion sums up the situation.

As for the motives triggering the use of misogynist, homophobic or transphobic content on public channels on the internet, there is always a self-justifying explanation. Usually, it is a heteronormative "sense of justice", "protection of normality" or the like. A conservative-minded man states that he often writes comments and prepares memes in the 9gag platform[32] and other international sites ridiculing homosexual, women or trans people. He actively enters discussions regarding the "huge and different" influence of the woman in society, the topics of "faggots, transgenders and transgender children," the latter being a "frightening issue." He prefers international sites over Bulgarian ones because he thinks that the local sites have way fewer users and also he likes to hear various opinions and to know what the situation is abroad and what the level of the "degradation" of society is in different parts of the world.

Online GBV experiences of journalists, activists and queer people in Bulgaria

Media professionals and moderators of online content who try to adhere to non-discriminatory language face serious challenges in dealing with hate speech and GBV online. Very few media outlets can afford professional moderation of the postings generated by the users. What is more – such news sites can hardly administer the entire flow of readers' comment. An editor of one of the leading online media claims that they receive 3500 comments daily and have only one moderator. "We have a monstrous discussion forum and we are physically unable to control the situation there," she admits. Filtering of certain words does not always work because users can be very resourceful in bypassing the filter. "The idea to censor words is dumb. It produces creativity and a sense of dissidence [among media users]," says an experienced online journalist. As a result, the doors to uncensored speech of any kind are wide open.

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[32] 9gag: Go Fun The World is a popular online platform, based in Hong Kong, which allows users to re-post (from other sides) and share "funny" photos, memes, videos.

Journalists themselves are subject to GBV online. "I see that when internet users disagree with an author of a message or an article who is a man, they would blame him for being a [national] 'traitor' or the like, but when the author is a woman, they would brutally comment on her looks and sexual appearance – 'ugly', 'dissatisfied', 'whore'," says a female journalist who has been experiencing sexual harassment and gender-based hate speech herself. On the other side, many online media promote sexism and produce hate speech. "It is not only user-generated postings but media articles as well. Written by so-called analysts, usually male. But there is also auto-aggression by women. Mostly middle-aged, it seems. What is most disturbing is the expanding male conservatism, including in intellectual circles, and it is not being recognized as a problem," sums up a media professional and human rights activist. "I've wanted to speak publicly about situations that made me feel uncomfortable in my work as a journalist. And degraded. And subject to sexual harassment. … But I do not have the courage to do it right now because I am into so many battles that I don't have the strength to get into this one, to be a pioneer," she admits.

Women's and LGBTIQ rights activists and organisations have been exposed to serious pressure since the 2018 campaign against the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. Recently, they have been joined by child rights' organizations in the context of heated debates on the adoption of a National Strategy for the Child 2019-2030.[33] "Because of the Istanbul Convention issue, we couldn't do our job for a year," "We keep working, but not with this [gender-related] focus. Yes, the fight stopped somehow," "The decision about the unconstitutionality of the Istanbul Convention obstructs activism," "They broke the windows and the mailbox of the [LGBTI center]. We started getting paranoid," activists reflect on the situation. "We've been called 'sorosoid whores'[34] and received death threats online," explains a woman rights activist. "We've been threatened on Facebook that our office will be put on fire. And I was at the office at that moment, waiting…," says a woman working in an NGO for women and child protection.

In order to protect themselves, activists and victims of GBV have adopted "safe space" strategies both in their physical and online daily routines. Among others, the mechanisms include strategic outness, identity management, constant alertness and self-isolation.

Some of the respondents who had experienced violence based on prejudice earlier in their lives say they feel so traumatized and concerned about living in a safe space that they are very careful about who they communicate with on the internet. "It is very important who you become friends with on the social media. You need to check the person's profile first," says a woman who avoids communication with men due to traumatic relationships in the past. "Whenever I come across hate

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[33]See National Network for Children (2019, 31 May). *Child Rights under Attack in Bulgaria.* nmd.bg/en/child-rights-under-attack-in-bulgaria/.
[34]"Sorosoid" – a derogative neologism usually referring to grantees of George Soros's organizations.

speech or harassment online, I delete the message and block the offender" is a common explanation among the respondents.

Having your personal data not protected enough on the internet may easily turn you into a victim of online harassment: "They threatened my kid. They know where I work. They found and re-published a video with my daughter [in order to demonstrate that they know who she is]", complains an expert on gender issues. That is why managing your visibility and access to personal data on the web can be a means to control your susceptibility to online harassment. Those who use pseudonyms on Facebook, for example, do not receive offensive personal messages, although their organizations and professional activities are a target to aggressive rhetoric in media publications and discussion forums. "I had no profile pic on Facebook for many years. When I finally put one, it was uploaded on a skinhead website with a comment: Wanted dead or alive," an activist tells about his experience on changing his visibility status.

The way forward: how to talk about GBV, ways and strategies for prevention, recommendations

When being asked about ideas to counteract GBV online, many of the respondents express pessimism and treat the issue as *causa perduta*. It is telling that, with few exceptions, the interviewees do not believe a reasonable dialogue between women and LGBTIQ rights activists, on the one hand, and their opponents, on the other, is possible on the internet. Actually, both parties blame each other for being too rigid, stubborn and unresponsive. At the same time, each side feels threatened by the other.

"I do not believe in debate at all costs. The opponents are so extreme and so irrational, and so abusive through words or actions. There are so many misconceptions about the role of women. Talking with such people is a waste of time and energy," says a liberal-minded woman with undisguised annoyance. A conservative-minded man is also reluctant about a reasonable dialog with feminists and queer activists. Defiantly using offensive language, he states: "Conservative people are tired because the libtards are full of power. Every next political change is to the left and we are forced to accept more and more: first homosexual relations, then gay marriage, then transgenders, then transgender children." Instead, he wants referendums on LGBTIQ rights as he thinks liberals influence political decisions that the general public does not support.

Against the backdrop of the clash between progressive and conservative standpoints, the research still leads to several recommendations in terms of prevention against GBV and support for gender rights politics with the help of internet communication. A curated selection of recommendations proposed by respondents and stakeholders includes:

- **_Messages and discourse strategies_**

– Addressing GBV in a wider context with a focus on *violence* ("There is too much emphasis on violence against women. Focusing on violence in general would make things easier");

– Avoidance of generalisations ("When talking about GBV, it is referred to as an immanent characteristic of men. It annoys men who really aren't abusers. It is a matter of construction. No one is born an abuser");

– Use of popular and evocative discourse ("We don't use the right tools. They rely on emotions while we rely on rationality. No way to win like this." "Unfortunately, expert speaking does not win on these topics. People resist rationality, driven by fears");

– Telling of fact-based personal stories ("A real story is a strong message. And they are all around us. If one in four women is subject to domestic violence,[35] then one in one is sexually abused. People are influenced by honest stories and experiences");

– Dissemination of educational and awareness campaigns targeted at the "moderate middle" ("with respect and understanding to those who are not aware of the problems");

– References to human rights activism as a positive national feature, not anti-Bulgarian one;

– Construction of alternative discourses online ("not to respond to one's rhetoric, but to create one").

- **_Channels and instruments_**

– Being active in the channels used by young people ("Facebook is getting old, young people use different media – Instagram, YouTube, visual channels");

– Better use of visual formats (pictures, short educational videos, memes).

- **_Infrastructure_**

– Implementation of an online system for instant alerts in GBV cases ("Such a platform could serve the EU with sections and languages for all countries. The algorithm could show what is happening, how many people are signalling. It

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[35] The data cited by the respondent is based on unofficial statistics.

should be very user-friendly and could be integrated into governmental institutions").

- ▪ *Peer-to-peer support*

– Online safe spaces for people affected by GBV – such groups can provide legal advice, psychological counselling and emotional support ("It is very important to know that you are not alone... Being in this group saved my life");

- Peer and/or public support to people experiencing online GBV and public exposure of the abuser (if possible and appropriate) – such a tactic has proved effective in cases of online harassment of popular experts and activists.

- ▪ *Moderation and self-regulation*

– Improvement of content moderation by news sites and social media ("Facebook needs to provide much better administration in Bulgarian language. A moderator who is aware of the local context");

– Promotion of self-regulation and moderation of online content with the assistance of end users.

This list of proposals sums up the needs of activists and victims of online abuse based on their own reflections. Of course, these ideas need to be further refined in terms of practical, ethical and legal aspects. Among others, privacy protection measures, regulatory frameworks as well as vulnerability and safety of individuals and social groups affected by GBV should be carefully considered. Visibility through personal storytelling, for example, can have healing and empowering effects on the individual or can reinforce that person's traumas and excruciating pain. All possible risks should be thoroughly discussed.

Above all, however, it is the law that should be reformed in the first place in order to guarantee prosecution of GBV, including in the online environment. What experts suggest is amendments in the Penal Code as well as cross-sectoral adjustments in other relevant acts.

Also, there is a need for full and reliable data and statistics on the dimensions of GBV in the country. Currently, merely individual NGOs provide data based on their fieldwork and project surveys. Although indicative, these data provide only partial information on the big picture. This does not guarantee adequate policy-making.

Conclusions

Reversing anti-gender rights attitudes by the use of ICTs is challenging and problematic. The instruments of producing hate and violence are way too powerful and the efforts of activists, NGOs, experts, and journalists are under constant attack.

"They have been watching and profiling us," human rights defenders say about their ultraconservative opponents. It is like a chess game and each move needs to be part of an intricate strategy. If activists say what matters the most is education in tolerance, their "enemies" know that they should close any access of human rights NGOs to the school system. Or, when the term "gender" has been attributed with misleading and negative connotations, experts start questioning whether to keep on using it. Some NGOs which have the word "gender" in their names have already renamed after facing political pressure and blocking of projects. In the aftermath of the debates on the Istanbul Convention, civil activism against GBV is overwhelmed by the struggles to protect both its target groups and itself. In a situation of shrinking space for policy-making and even for implementation of basic activities, the civil society sector is at risk of self-censorship. The word "gender" and information on non-binary gender identities are being removed from public presentations and reports.

In the course of the research, members of our team have also been exposed to pressure of this kind. We believe that just avoiding the problems would not help. As some of the respondents say, "if we give up the word 'gender', this would make our spectre of speech collapsing" and "we should not escape terminology that is a part of scientific work."

State institutions, on their turn, comply with public opinion and adopt measures not to stir unfavourable reactions. This further impedes policy-making against GBV. There is also a common distrust in the ability of state organs to provide adequate protection in cases of cyber violence. It turns out people rarely know which organ should be contacted in cases of online violence. What is more – public institutions themselves are susceptible to online practices of gender-based abuse and sexual harassment, as pointed out by our research.

Then, what about the internet – should we give it up as a channel for dialogue and an instrument to change the anti-gender rights attitudes? The most important work, according to the research results, is to be done offline. In face-to-face communication. Lobbying, making allies, grassroots activism, providing support to victims of GBV, educating, debunking prejudices – internet could be a supplementary tool but not the only one. Our respondents tell numerous stories of how differently online haters behave when they meet the person in real. "A man on the internet threatened to break my head – he was very aggressive verbally, but when I met him, he was like a kitten", says an LGBTIQ activist. And another interviewee sums up, "Live communication makes people more humane. That's it."

Finally, if we have to outline the greatest risk identified by our research, we should say it is downplaying the problem of online GBV. As shown by the analysis, anti-gender rhetoric in public discourse in general opens up space for reduced sensitivity to GBV in online culture. The likelihood that practices of abuse are accepted as something normal, a banal part of digital daily life, is present. This state of affairs, we believe, needs to be changed. This means that, if "the internet is just a tool", as repeatedly outlined by our respondents, then we should pose the question "Who is in control of that tool?" Our research suggests that albeit diverse, the online environment is not "neutral". The internet is not evenly affecting or empowering different groups. A most recent concern points to the fact that during the current COVID-19 situation of physical isolation, when digital activities and uses of ICT have largely expanded, practices of domestic and gender-based violence have escalated[36] and social inequalities in access to digital tools have become more apparent.[37] As speculative as such correlations could be, they come to consolidate our conclusion that a more feminist internet requires not only intersectional cultural and legislative reforms but also a feminist research agenda, which actively questions and contextualizes the access to internet technologies.

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[36] See Todorov, S. (2020). Bulgaria Charity Warns Domestic Violence Worsening in Pandemic. *Balkan Insight*.
balkaninsight.com/2020/05/28/bulgaria-charity-warns-domestic-violence-worsening-in-pandemic/?fbclid=IwAR1mTdDFMu3Ynomh0CJPz01Sn2_2_-Vfop5yx607SKEtEwHVi5VspSX4k-U#gsc.tab=0
[37] See Spassov. O. (2020). It is not new to hear prophecies about the death of newspapers. *Marginalia*.
www.marginalia.bg/aktsent/47228/ [in Bulgarian].

ABOUT BLUELINK

BlueLink is a foundation, registered in public interest in Bulgaria with the mission to uphold civil society, democracy, shared European values and environmental sustainability. BlueLink strives to its purpose by supporting internet networking, public interest journalism, policy advocacy and research.

BlueLink's main fields of activity are in:
- maintaining the BlueLink Civic Action Network - a networking, coordination and information exchange hub at www.bluelink.net;
- supporting civil society participation, access to information and justice, and stakeholder engagement through strategic use of internet and other activities;
- operating a virtual newsroom to publish Evromegdan (in Bulgarian) and BlueLink Stories (in English, for Central and Eastern Europe) as e-magazines for ethical journalism in public interest; and
- fostering research and analysis of internet freedom, technological and social change, civil society, democracy and sustainable development, and shaping policies that foster them.

Since 2000 BlueLink has been a member of the Association for Progressive Communications (www.apc.org). From 2003 to 2010 BlueLink provided a portal for strategic information exchange on women's rights, minorities and youth.

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