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Sex, the Church and the EU presidency

A convention on preventing domestic violence is triggering a backlash in Bulgaria

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In January this year, Bulgaria took over the EU's rotating presidency. The eastern Balkan nation – Europe's poorest and 'most corrupt' member state according to Transparency International – hopes to use its time at the helm to improve its image and overcome resistance to the country joining the Schengen zone and the euro.

The plan was to focus on forward-looking issues like young people and the digital revolution, and establish the country as a regional player advocating the interests of Western Balkan states. Instead, a frenetic debate over national identity, sexual morality and the limits of tolerance has overshadowed the presidency.

The debate centres around the Istanbul Convention, which defence minister Krasimir Karakachanov has denounced as 'scandalous', claiming it promotes 'homosexuality and transvestitism in schools' and is being used by 'international lobbies' to force Bulgaria to recognise a third gender.

The (in reality rather dry) document, known in full as the 'Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence' was drawn up in 2011 and signed by Bulgaria in 2016 without much ado.

However, at a cabinet meeting this year, ministers from both Prime Minister Boyko Borisov's conservative GERB party and his junior coalition partner, the United Patriots, voted against submitting the convention to parliament for ratification.

The leader of Bulgaria's Socialist Party (BSP), Kornelia Ninova, has also distanced herself from the convention, perhaps in an attempt to appeal to her rural, socially-conservative voters. It's an about-turn for the BSP, which has a good record on women's rights. Indeed, the country's MEPs

voted in favour of the convention just last May. But in January, the BSP announced it too will no longer support ratification.

The Bulgarian Orthodox Church, which normally remains silent on political matters, has also called on parliament to reject the convention, claiming it supports 'the man without God who follows his desires and passions to such an extent that he can even determine his gender'.

The far-right Patriots have turned the Istanbul Convention into a public campaign. The document's use of the word 'gender', referring to a social construct rather than biological 'sex' has raised many citizen's hackles. This choice of wording is based on a debate that simply hasn't yet taken place in Bulgaria, where sex and gender are seen as synonymous.

The campaign has triggered a widespread, and long overdue, debate about homosexuality, transgender identity, adoption rights, equal marriage and heteronormativity in a country where public displays of homosexuality can still provoke a violent response.

But all this has little to do with the Istanbul Convention.

Although the treaty does state that gender equality must be enshrined in the constitutions of all signatory states, there is no mention of a third gender or equal marriage.

It is about domestic violence and violence against women, another problem that Bulgaria urgently needs to address. According to a study published by the Center for the Study of Democracy, a third of Bulgarians have been victims of domestic violence, with figures especially high among the Roma population.

The United Patriots' campaign is the party's first coup since coming into government, and it caught Prime Minister Borisov off-guard. The issue is likely to be particularly damaging for him: unlike many other heads of government in Eastern Europe, Borisov is a professed pro-European. Although the people of Bulgaria are looking towards Europe too, hoping that the EU will bring them economic growth, an end to corruption and higher living standards, many Bulgarians – especially the older generation – feel culturally closer to Putin's Russia.

Borisov has now postponed the ratification vote until the end of Bulgaria's EU presidency, but this hasn't stemmed public outrage. In a new volte-face, the GERB party has ordered the country's supreme court to review whether the convention is 'constitutional'.

Kornelia Ninova, meanwhile, has sensed an opportunity to drive a wedge into the governing coalition and is calling for a national referendum on ratification. She knows she has majority opinion behind her: according to a recent survey, 62 percent of Bulgarians now oppose ratifying the convention.

Neither the United Patriots nor the BSP seem concerned that efforts to combat domestic violence could fall victim to party-political manoeuvring. And neighbouring countries have learned from Borisov's experience too: the Croatian president Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, formerly a supporter of the convention, recently called for only those parts to be implemented that ‘do not cause public controversy’.

The controversy she has in mind is the one currently gripping Bulgaria. It may have come at the wrong time. And it has definitely come from the wrong place, with the tone and agenda set by far-right extremists. But Bulgarians are debating what place they want their country to have in Europe – and that's long overdue.



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