

# When populism met gender: stories of manipulation and denial

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## Abstract

The paper explores the (mis)use of gender as a concept by populist right-wing parties in Bulgaria and Italy. Beginning with a discussion of hegemonic masculinity, misogyny, gendered language, and the manipulation of gender stereotypes, it highlights two major ways in which gender is exploited by right-leaning populist parties for political gains. Firstly, such parties might disseminate harmful misogynistic narratives, often supported by gendered misinformation and disinformation and facilitated by the weaknesses of social media and digital technologies. The second way in which some parties exploit gender is through embedding in political discourse archaic and stereotypical representations of women. The paper concentrates on the last five years (2018-2022) in the two studied countries. In Bulgaria, this period was marked by vicious disinformation campaigns against the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention, which remains unratified. With respect to Italy, I touch upon the gains of right-wing populist parties, the attacks against women politicians and activists, and the risk of discrimination and abuse that women migrants and asylum-seekers often face. The research is based on qualitative content analysis of political declarations and in-depth semi-structured interviews with experts on gender, disinformation, and human rights.

**Keywords:** gender, populism, Bulgaria, Italy, right-wing.

## Introduction

The paper<sup>1</sup> explores the portrayal of women and the (mis)use of the concept of gender by populist radical parties in Bulgaria and Italy. Beginning with a discussion of hegemonic masculinity, misogyny, gendered language, and the manipulation of gender stereotypes, it considers two major ways in which gender could be exploited by right-leaning populist parties for political gains. Firstly, such parties might disseminate harmful misogynistic narratives, often triggered by gendered misinformation and disinformation and facilitated by weaknesses associated with social media and digital technologies, such as imperfect content moderation policies and reporting tools. Populist radical parties might engage in spreading vitriol online and hate speech not only to attract supporters but also to discredit women politicians and activists and discourage them from participating in political life. The second way in which some parties might exploit gender is through embedding stereotypical and outdated representations of women in political discourse.

Thus, our research question is how right-wing populist parties employ gender, often relying on stereotypical notions of women's role in society, to formulate and express their political priorities. We explore whether and how these positions might extend into online communities where abusive content and misogynistic views are often spread. The paper covers events in the studied countries in the last five years (2018-2023). In Bulgaria, this period was marked by vicious disinformation campaigns against the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (commonly known as the Istanbul Convention, here also IC), which remains unratified. Concerning Italy, I touch upon the political gains of right-wing populist parties, the attacks against women politicians and activists, and the risk of intersectional discrimination born out of the conflation of misogyny with phenomena like racism and nativism. I pay specific attention to two right-wing populist parties: Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia) in Italy and Revival (Възраждане) in Bulgaria. I analyze how the two parties participated in key debates on issues related to gender equality and violence against women (VAW), as well as how they and their supporters reacted to two recent incidences of violence that occurred in Bulgaria and Italy.

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<sup>1</sup> DISCLAIMER: The quotations from political figures are included in this paper to assist the research effort and answer the research questions by illustrating the discourse on right-wing populism. It is important to note that the inclusion of these quotes does not imply an endorsement of the views expressed by the quoted individuals. The researcher analyzes them in the context of this study and maintains neutrality, without endorsing any political stance. The researcher condemns all forms of violence, gender-based violence, violence against women, and abuse. Mentions of these phenomena are included here for analytical and illustrative purposes and to contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges they pose. A draft version of this paper, in the format of a conference paper, was presented at the 16th European International Studies Association (EISA) Pan-European Conference on International Relations (PEC) in Potsdam, Germany in September 2023.

The study is based on desk research, qualitative content analysis of political declarations, official party platforms and positions, and in-depth semi-structured interviews with experts on gender, disinformation, and human rights. Finally, I offer several avenues for future research, which might be needed to stimulate and design policies to combat gender-based VAW, cyber violence, and pernicious gender stereotypes.

## **Conceptual Framework**

In recent years, particularly during COVID-19, the alarming rise of VAW has been so undeniable that the expression “the silent pandemic” used to describe it has become an enduring term within the vocabulary of scholars and practitioners alike. Regrettably, the rapid technological progress, the growing popularity of online social platforms, and the constant emergence of sophisticated digital tools and AI-driven solutions have also brought about negative consequences, namely escalating cyber violence and technology-facilitated VAW (TFVAW). These are intricately connected to acts of violence happening offline and can occur at various places, such as social media, web pages and forums, messaging apps, dating websites and apps, media comment sections, chat rooms, etc. (van der Wilk 2021, 9).

There is also a growing body of literature on the links between VAW, the digital dimension of VAW, and TFVAW and concepts such as hegemonic masculinity, toxic masculinity, and misogyny, where topics of particular interest have been the ‘incel’ community and the manosphere. Hegemonic masculinity is closely linked to the concept of gender, gender roles, and gender relations. This is acknowledged by Connell (2005, 76), who theorizes it as not “a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same,” but as “the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations.” Co-existing with other types of masculinities like subordinated and marginalized masculinities, it is “a dominant form of masculinity that embodies, organizes and legitimates men’s domination in the world gender order as a whole” (ibidem, 261). Messerschmidt (2018, 157-158) also talks about the presence of rationally constructed multifarious hegemonic masculinities that “constitute a social structure that legitimates unequal gender relations between men and women, masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities” but also bear local, regional, and global specificities.

The manosphere is a loose network of communities (Ging 2019) and a collection of digital spaces (Vallerga and Zurbriggen 2022) where antifeminism, hegemonic masculinity, and extreme misogyny proliferate. The Red Pill philosophy unites many communities forming the manosphere - deriving from the movie *The Matrix*, it “purports to awaken men to feminism’s misandry and

brainwashing” when they take the Red Pill, which makes them “enlightened to life’s ugly truths” (Ging 2022, 640). Besides the Red Pill community, the group of incels (‘involuntary celibates’) is another significant community in the manosphere, whose members “view themselves as unsuccessful in obtaining sex and romantic relationships with those they desire” (Sugiura 2021). Their discussions are characterized by provocation, ironic humor but also by incitement to hate and violence (ibidem). Other communities have been labeled as Men’s Rights Associations (MRA), Antifeminist countermovements, Men Going Their Own Way, Pick Up Artists, NoFap who center on their personal growth and achievement (Han & Yin 2023).

Zimmermann (2022, 10) considers the incels to be the most extreme of the manosphere communities and argues that they can move on to build a dangerous political movement with a sexual alienation-grounded ideology “rooted in a unique form of misogyny based on a counternarrative to hegemonic masculinity”. Discussing a more wide-encompassing phenomenon, which they call networked misogyny, Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2016, 173) warn that it might soon spillover from the online to the physical dimension, noting that some men feel economically threatened by women migrating to ‘male spaces’ and threatening their jobs. Elsewhere, Banet-Weiser (2018, 34) explains that popular misogyny has a deeply networked aspect, “emerging in different spaces, with varied manifestations as it constantly moves from one node to another, and that it finds expression in various ideas”. Thus, the author highlights the persistent insertion of popular misogyny in policy and legal discourse in anti-abortion bills in the United States (US), the disparity between men and women in the technology industry, the treatment of Hillary Clinton as the first woman to be a major party’s nominee for US president, and the election of Donald Trump as a US President (ibidem, 33).

How do such phenomena and these communities’ grievances, often including calls for dominance and aggression, relate to right-wing populism? Moreover, what is the place of gender and gender equality in its ideas and messages? At the beginning, we should revisit one of the most frequently referenced definitions of populism, which characterizes it as “a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’” (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2015, 18). The authors also assert that “populist actors combine their populism with other ideologies, such as other thin-centred ideologies like nationalism or thick ideologies like socialism” (ibidem, 19).

In the context of the US, Sugiura (2021) discusses how the misogynistic messages of former President Trump<sup>2</sup>, welcomed by a large segment of the manosphere communities, fueled objections to gender equality and the support for people associated with the manosphere and/or the alt-right in the country. Dietze and Roth (2020, 7) accurately argue that the ‘obsession with

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<sup>2</sup> At the time this paper was written, Donald Trump was a former US President. As of February 2025, he has been elected as the 47th US President.

gender' and sexuality is a common feature for all current versions of right-wing populism, as these actors "conjure up the heteronormative nuclear family as the model of social organization, attack reproductive rights, question sex education, criticize a so-called 'gender ideology,' reject same-sex marriage and seek to re-install biologically understood binary gender differences". Right-wing populist movements are also known for employing gendered narratives and stereotypical gender roles when communicating their political objectives and priorities or during debates with opponents, whilst their followers might utilize gendered language to express support and affection for their leaders (Sanders and Dudley Jenkins 2023; Geva 2020).

The intense attacks against the IC in most Central and Eastern European countries demonstrate the possible intersection between typically populist tropes and themes and the intentions and agendas of movements with a more profound interest in gender. When studying the opposition to the document, Krizsán and Roggeband (2021, 104) rightly observe that those who attacked it "not only engage with combatting VAW but also select the terrain of populist contestation of liberal democracy, by linking the IC to migration dangers, to foreign interventions, to elite conspiracies and using it for corroborating their respective collective enemy images". With respect to Italy, when analyzing the discourse of Pro Vita and Manif pour Tous - Italy (two groups, which participated in anti-gender campaigns), Bellè and Poggio find that their techniques bear certain resemblance to populism - "opposition between 'them and us', an insistence on naturalness, and the production of moral panic" (2018, 120).

Hence, of great pertinence are the ongoing investigations into a larger, even global, anti-gender movement, whose postulates, narratives, and activities often overlap with both the political priorities of some right-wing populist parties and the ideas of some of the manosphere's communities. For instance, the 2018 report "Restoring the Natural Order" focused on the elusive but influential Vatican-inspired network of advocacy professionals that was described as anti-human rights, anti-women's rights, and anti-LGBTI+ (Datta 2018). The activities of a similar organization, called Tradition, Family and Property (TFP), inspired by Catholicism and social conservatism, and aimed at rolling back sexual and reproductive rights with satellites in over 40 countries in the world were reported in another report two years later (Datta 2020). A recent report authored by Neil Datta (2022) uncovered a large amount of funding (over 700 million USD in the period 2009-2018), that the transnational anti-gender funding has received from NGOs, think tanks, and individuals from the US, the Russian Federation, and Europe. The last report demonstrates that the masterminds of the global anti-gender movement are already trying to infiltrate alt-right and far-right political parties - for instance, the World Congress of Families (WCF), an initiative of Russian and US civil society actors, has come to include European far-right and populist actors as well (ibidem). We return to the findings of these reports when discussing the cases of Bulgaria and Italy.

This paper should be seen as a modest contribution to the emergent field of research on the link between right-wing populism and gender, which remains understudied and underestimated (Dietze and Roth 2020, 7).

## **Methodology**

The selection of these two European Union (EU) countries, namely Bulgaria and Italy, as case studies is partially driven by their inclusion in a broader research project implemented by the author of this paper. The project examines political discussions about and public perceptions of the Istanbul Convention and the impact of disinformation surrounding the Convention's objectives on its ratification (in the case of Bulgaria) or subsequent implementation (in the case of Italy). These countries were also selected due to the notable presence of right-wing populist parties in their political life - specifically, Brothers of Italy in Italy and Revival in Bulgaria. As of January 2024, the former party is part of Italy's ruling coalition and its leader, Giorgia Meloni, serves as the country's Prime Minister. During recent parliamentary elections, the Revival party in Bulgaria has seen a surge in the number of its voters.

To work on the case studies, I combine desk research, qualitative content analysis, and nine semi-structured interviews with experts in gender-based violence against women and women's rights in both countries (5 in Italy and 4 in Bulgaria). An appendix at the end of the paper lists the anonymized interviews, which concentrated on several key topics: the importance of the IC for combatting gender-based VAW and domestic violence, offline and online forms of gender-based VAW, as well as legislation and policies adopted to combat these on regional and national levels. The interviews with experts serve two main purposes, the first of which is to provide further context for the studied cases, phenomena, documents, etc. This is especially applicable to those interviewees who for years have been following and sometimes actively participating in the creation, promotion, adoption, and implementation of the Istanbul Convention and similar documents. Secondly, the interviewees' insights are valuable because they largely enrich and support the growing literature on the anti-gender movement, gendered disinformation, and their impact on women's rights. Thus, we believe that sharing authentic viewpoints and expert opinions as much as possible is crucial, especially considering how aggressive some anti-feminist campaigns are and how quickly false information spreads online.

Firstly, through desk research, I examine if and how particular actors in Bulgaria and Italy were mentioned in the investigations of the anti-gender and anti-rights movements in Europe. Secondly, I scrutinize the official party positions regarding the adoption of legislation aiming at

eradicating gender-based VAW and domestic violence. In Bulgaria, I concentrate on Revival's stance on the (failed) ratification of the IC in 2018 and the proposed amendments to the Protection against Domestic Violence Act (PDVA) in 2023. For Italy, where the Istanbul Convention was ratified in 2013, I focus on the Brothers of Italy's position concerning the European Union's accession to the Convention and two legislative texts related to hate speech and VAW. This is performed through qualitative content analysis of transcripts of debates within the national parliaments and the European Parliament. Thirdly, I explore the responses and reactions of the two studied parties following two recent incidents of gender-based VAW - one in Bulgaria and another one in Italy. This entails examining party statements, posts on official social media channels, and any subsequent legislative and policy actions. Lastly, I analyze content derived from Telegram channels associated with the two parties, prioritizing the search for an unofficial supporters' channel. In selecting content for analysis, I employ key terms and phrases (in Bulgarian and Italian) "gender," "feminist"/"feminism," and "Istanbul Convention." However, I also look for content generated in the immediate aftermath (five days) of the two incidents of violence mentioned above.

## Findings and Analysis

### *Bulgaria: The Specter of the Gender*

In 2018, the Bulgarian Constitutional Court ruled that certain IC provisions contradicted Bulgaria's constitution: "the Istanbul Convention, by defining 'gender'<sup>3</sup> as a social construct, actually relativizes the boundaries of the two sexes, male and female, as biologically determined. However, if society loses the ability to distinguish between women and men, the fight against violence against women remains only a formal but unfulfillable commitment" (Constitutional Court 2018). The Court's decision was the culmination of an aggressive and manipulative campaign, which placed the fear of the 'gender ideology', as the newly discovered nemesis of the traditional family and Christian values, at the heart of both the public and the political debate. The 2018 report on Agenda Europe mentioned above states that one of the successful campaigns of the networks was the one against the IC in Bulgaria (Datta 2018, 33). The Bulgarian Orthodox Church had a prominent role in negating the IC. Despite condemning VAW, it decried the treaty as threatening the European Christian civilization and a conduit of moral decay ("Bulgarian Church

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<sup>3</sup> The text in quotation marks is a translation of an excerpt from the original decision, which is in Bulgarian. It has to be noted that in Bulgarian, there is no separate word for 'gender'. Hence, the word used in the text is 'пол', which also means "sex".

Taking,” 2018). Some of the evangelical churches in the country also attacked the document through frequent references to the need to preserve traditional values and the traditional family - a message that is now widely associated with anti-gender campaigns (Graff & Korolczuk 2022; Krizsán & Roggeband 2021, Interview 6). In the Bulgarian case, this is important because of the prominent role these churches have in Roma communities, which in some cases, resulted in the rapid spread of unfounded and erroneous information about the contents and aims of the IC (Interview 9). Another noteworthy observation is that Bulgarian evangelical churches are positioned closer to their American counterparts than to European ones, which makes them more conservative, less secular and more stringent in opposing initiatives and ideas, which they view as ‘anti-traditional’ (Interview 8). In the last years, numerous domestic and international actors have urged Bulgaria to ratify the IC - an act that could have supported and channeled efforts to coin legislation and policies aimed at protecting women from violence and ensuring prevention, prosecution, and reporting (Interview 7, Interview 9).

At the time of the Constitutional Court’s decision, Revival was not represented in the National Parliament. However, a 2017 open letter addressed to the Bulgarian government, National Assembly, and the Ombudsman and supported by over 50 organizations, was signed by the Association “Revival Movement” (Сдружение „Движение Възраждане“), represented by Nikolay Drenchev, who as of January 2023, is a Member of Parliament (MP) from Revival. After stating, among other things, that the IC aims to abolish any “tradition based on stereotyped gender<sup>4</sup> roles and allow boys and men who consider themselves women to use toilets, bathrooms and locker rooms for women, including in public schools,” the authors of the text highlight the following: “If the society loses the ability to distinguish between a woman and a man, the fight against violence against women remains only a formal commitment” (SVA 2017). The latter sentence reappears almost mot à mot in the decision of the Bulgarian Constitutional Court quoted above.

In the last few years, Revival saw a voter increase and as of January 2024 is represented in the Bulgarian National Assembly. The platform published on the party’s website at the time of the writing of this paper repeatedly emphasizes the risks for Bulgarian society arising from the expansion of gender ideology. The preservation of Bulgarian ethnicity and national identity is conditional on resistance to hedonism and genderism and promotion of traditional family values, love, respect within families, kinship, and intergenerational bonds (Vazrazhdane.bg 2023, 30). Addressing the demographic crisis is crucial and should rely on supporting the ‘normal’ family, defined as one with three or more children, alongside a reinforcement of traditional family values, ethics, and morals (Ibid). The party platform does not contain any reference to the necessity of tackling VAW and domestic violence (DV) and championing equality.

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<sup>4</sup> See previous note.



Highlighting the rights of women who are at risk or victims of domestic and other types of violence was not an objective of Revival's MPs during more recent parliamentary discussions as well. Their decision to vote against changes to PDVA, which aimed to improve counter-domestic violence legislation, but was proposed by the party's political opponents, was motivated by the wish to protect Bulgarian society, and children in particular, from foreign influence seeping through 'malevolent' non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and foreign (Western) ideologies. During the January 2023 parliamentary debate, Nikolay Drenchev<sup>5</sup> warned about the existence of a huge "NGO machine" with a vested interest in families having problems (the logic being that since NGOs would provide services to victims, more cases of abuse would mean more funding) and stated that problems should not be solved by separating the family, but within the family (NA of RB 2023c). Another Revival MP accused the proponents of the draft changes to PDVA of attempts to spread ideologies that, although alien to the Bulgarian family, are implemented by and through foreign NGOs - such as the gender ideology embedded in the IC (ibidem).

During a later plenary, dedicated to yet another attempt to adopt amendments to PDVA, Revival was accused by the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) of joining the fight against gender ideology only recently, while it was BSP that has been leading the battle for the last six years (NA of RB 2023b). This is an interesting development of the anti-gender campaign in Bulgaria, which comes to support arguments that resorting to the manipulation of gender-related concepts is not characteristic of right-wing parties only but could be closely associated with populism.

The Bulgarian Parliament finally adopted an Act amending and supplementing PDVA on July 21, 2023. However, in less than three weeks, the MPs had to pause their summer recess and reconvene for another debate centered on domestic violence and, more specifically, on intimate partner violence. This was triggered by a distressing case of an 18-year-old woman who suffered a brutal attack. Since the suspect was her boyfriend, but they were not married or living together, she could not benefit from any protective provisions pertaining to domestic violence in force at that time. At the end of the extraordinary session, the parliamentary majority adopted another change to PDVA, namely the inclusion of a definition of an intimate relationship, to facilitate access to protection by all victims of intimate partner violence. During the debate in question, Revival's MPs reiterated the traditional concerns about NGOs receiving foreign funding and acting to the detriment of families and about the ruling coalition's attempts to force on society more genders/sexes beyond the only two that exist - a man and a woman. One of Revival's representatives (a woman) condemned violence in all its forms and called for avoiding discrimination based on sex, as there is an "endless number" of cases of violence against men, which are never mentioned (NA of RB 2023a). This may be seen as the manifestation of a

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<sup>5</sup> One of the signatories of the 2017 letter against the IC.

phenomenon, which we could conditionally call misogyny-inspired whataboutism, where the attention directed to a specific concern related to women and women's rights (intimate partner violence) is intentionally diverted by pinpointing another sensitive issue (violence in general).

In the disturbing attack, which necessitated the most recent amendments to PDVA, a young woman was physically assaulted, beaten, and disfigured with a knife, and her hair was cut ("Thousands Rally in Bulgaria," 2023). This case led to nationwide protests with thousands of participants. Many parties, organizations, institutions, and public figures condemned the violent act and called for justice and prosecution. Neither an explicit and direct denunciation of the violent act nor a call for eradicating VAW could be found on Revival's official party website or Facebook page in the attack's immediate aftermath.

On July 31, 2023, the leader of the party, Kostadin Kostadinov, was interviewed by Peter Volgin, a controversial Bulgarian journalist suspected of disseminating disinformation and pro-Russian propaganda (BHC 2023, 61). When asked to comment on the assault against the young woman, Kostadinov shared several viewpoints: firstly, he saw an attempt to tarnish Revival's reputation in reports suggesting that the alleged perpetrator is a party supporter; secondly, he accused the ruling parties of politicizing the case and exploiting suffering for political gain; thirdly, he questioned the lack of attention towards another grave crime: the recent murder of a young man in Tsalapitsa (Vazrazhdane 2023c). While this crime is, indisputably, serious and should not be overlooked, we may interpret referring to it, in this particular context, as whataboutism, because the fact that another crime has occurred does not diminish the importance of the previous one. We recognize that the social media post, which accompanied the audio file with the interview, acknowledged the attack's viciousness and the victim's trauma. However, again, no reference was made to the need to stop VAW. One of our interviewees also pointed out that this particular case of VAW was exploited by populist actors in Bulgaria, which, in a way, watered down subsequent political and public debates and the attempts to amend the legislation (Interview 8).

In the days after the interview, Kostadinov's arguments were used for several related posts on the party's official Facebook page. For instance, one of the posts, supposedly directed at the governing coalition, read: "Stop politicizing human grief and tragedy, you abominations! #rock bottom" (Vazrazhdane 2023b). Another post stated: "All violence must be punished according to its severity, no matter where it was perpetrated, what were the motives or who was the victim" (Vazrazhdane 2023a). While it is indisputable that every act of violence must be condemned and prosecuted, this statement overlooks that VAW is a distinct phenomenon where the motives and methods of the perpetrators are intertwined with gender and a victim's vulnerability. The violent act in question involved cutting the woman's hair, which in many cultures is a symbol of femininity and beauty.

A swift review of the posts on the Telegram channel<sup>6</sup> of Revival's followers in the days after the assault became public reveals how rapidly the official party stance infiltrated the users' perspectives. A synthesis of key viewpoints follows: (a) Calls for justice and prosecuting the perpetrator are present but limited; (b) There are concerns that the case will be manipulated for political purposes, especially to enforce the IC; (c) The ultimate responsibility for the incident lays with the authorities; (d) Violence is violence, and there is no need to specify if it happens in an intimate relationship or involves multiple individuals; the existing Criminal code suffices, no additional conventions are needed; (e) Protests against violence are staged and organized by Revival's political opponents; (f) The case of the murdered man in Tsalapitsa did not receive the same publicity as the one of the assaulted young woman.

### ***Italy: It Stays in the Family***

There are two facts regarding the legislation against gender-based violence and domestic violence in Italy that distinguish it from Bulgaria, and that need to be mentioned at the very beginning. Firstly, the IC was ratified in Italy relatively quickly in 2013, and the ratification was not characterized by the political and social turmoil that occurred in Bulgaria. At that time, Italy's commitment, including political one, to adopt the Convention was very high, and the question of gender ideology was not raised at all (Interview 5). The ratification of the IC was crucial because it raised awareness about gender-based violence and domestic violence and still serves as a solid legal reference point for legislators, policy-makers, and practitioners (social workers, lawyers, psychologists, doctors, law enforcement, etc.) when they need to motivate their actions, proposals, and demands or introduce new legislation and policies (Interview 3, Interview 4, Interview 5).

Secondly, in 2019, the two chambers of the Italian Parliament adopted legislation No. 69/ July 19, 2023, known as Codice Rosso (or the Red Code), aiming to guarantee better protection of women and vulnerable people who experience violence and abuse. It has been described as a good instrument - for instance, it covers revenge porn, which is not included in the IC, and adds aggravating circumstances concerning gender-based violence - although it is yet to be fully implemented due to insufficiency of allocated funds (Interview 1). Codice Rosso was adopted with an overwhelming majority, and the representatives of Brothers of Italy in both chambers<sup>7</sup> unanimously approved it (Openparlamento 2019a, Openparlamento 2018b).

<sup>6</sup> The research covered the channel of Revival's followers and not the official Telegram channel of the party. Some posts are not clear or specific enough and this makes interpretation difficult. The author does not wish to promote these posts or amplify the opinions voiced in them; therefore, the author deliberately does not reference them. However, if the reviewers need evidence of their existence, the author will provide screenshots and translations.

<sup>7</sup> Chamber of Deputies and Senate of the Republic.

According to one of the interviewees, the strong political momentum to counter VAW, which was present at the time of the IC ratification, remained in place after 2013, but started to weaken during and after the government co-led by Matteo Salvini, leader of Lega (another right-wing populist party) and Luigi di Maio, at that time leader of the populist Movimento 5 Stelle (Interview 5). It has to be noted that Matteo Salvini is, as of January 2024, Deputy Prime Minister of Italy in Meloni's government. Three developments prove this decline in political will and the gradual infiltration of different arguments and topics in the general discussion on women's rights.

In reverse chronological order and most recently, in May 2023, the European Parliament supported the ratification of the IC by the European Union. During the voting, MEPs from Brothers of Italy and Lega abstained, and some even voted against it, thus, in a way, siding with those EU member states from Central and East Europe, which have still not ratified the Convention. Representatives from Brothers of Italy provided two explanations for their stance - firstly, the decision that qualified majority, and not unanimity, would be sufficient to ratify the IC presented a problematic precedent for future international agreements; and secondly, the abstention reflected their general concern about topics related to gender and the blurring of the difference between men and women (Santi 2023).

These concerns were straightforwardly expressed during a plenary at the European Parliament in February 2023. Vincenzo Sofo from Brothers of Italy saw an attempt to instrumentalize a "serious and sacrosanct" issue as VAW to turn the IC into a ddl Zan, namely into a document that will solidify gender ideology, impose its dissemination in schools, censor any opposition, and override national sovereignty to achieve this goal (European Parliament 2023). Sofo added that the consequence of this would be the destruction of identity and diversion from what is essential - ending gender wars and making the most of the complementarity between men and women (ibidem).

Thus, we come to the second development, namely the rejection of ddl Zan by the Italian Parliament and the discussions accompanying it. The parliamentary debates of the draft legislation, officially titled "Measures to Prevent and Combat Discrimination and Violence on the Basis of Sex, Gender, Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Disability"<sup>8</sup> include numerous mentions of gender ideology, primarily by Brothers of Italy and Lega<sup>9</sup>. Their primary concerns revolve around the dangers of introducing gender training in schools, the possibility of having organizations less qualified than families to address related aspects of education, as well as the erosion of the family. For example, Brothers of Italy's Senator Balboni describes the draft bill as a

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<sup>8</sup> In Italian: "Misure di prevenzione e contrasto della discriminazione e della violenza per motivi fondati sul sesso, sul genere, sull'orientamento sessuale, sull'identità di genere e sulla disabilità".

<sup>9</sup> The parliamentary group was constituted as Lega-Salvini Premier (L-SP) on 27 March 2018, but from 30 July 2018 assumed the name Lega-Salvini Premier-Partito Sardo d'Azione (L-SP-PSd'Az).

carrier of censorious and liberticidal tendencies, which pushes gender culture into the classrooms while depriving parents of the main responsibility for their children's sexual education (Senato della Repubblica 2022a, 328). His colleague, Senator La Pietra, stresses that Brothers of Italy opposes the attack on the traditional family as strongly as it opposes adoption by same-sex couples because the "natural" family is the foundational unit of society and the sole bearer of the right to teach sexual education to children (ibidem, 704-705). However, there is no insinuation of a direct link between the Istanbul Convention and the spread of gender ideology.

During Senate debates on the adoption of the Codice Rosso or "Amendments to the Criminal Code, the Code of Criminal Procedure and other provisions on the protection of victims of domestic and gender-based violence"<sup>10</sup>, gender ideology is not explicitly mentioned by Brothers of Italy Senators. Senator Rauti argues that VAW results from the abuse of power in dominant positions and that for it to disappear, legislation should be accompanied by a change of culture and traditions, education, and prevention (Senato della Repubblica 2022b, 565). She further refers to the main pillars of the IC - punishment, prevention, and protection - to assert that Codice Rosso does not encompass all necessary measures (Ibid). The importance attached by certain parties to the need to preserve the traditional, natural family also did not take center stage in the discourse, as was the situation with ddl Zan.

On the contrary, it was the main topic of the speech given by the leader of the Brothers of Italy, Giorgia Meloni, during the World Congress of Families in Verona in 2019. Firstly, Meloni stands up to the critics of her party, saying that defending the natural family united in marriage, promoting educational freedom, and opposing gender ideology does not equal rejecting women's rights and confining women to their houses "to iron" (Discorso di Giorgia Meloni 2019). Secondly, Meloni asks why family is perceived as an enemy; the answer is that it defines us and bestows upon us our identity - if our national, religious, gender, and ancestral identities are taken away, we will become the perfect consumers, the perfect slaves of the financial system (ibidem). Brothers of Italy's leader also addresses women's rights - however, she is not looking inwards to archaic stereotypes in Italian society, culture, and sub-cultures but outwards to the perils at the country's border. Meloni calls on feminists to see that the greatest threat to women's rights is not the World Congress of Families but the extremist Islamic sub-culture where women are worth nothing (ibidem). We should not avoid establishing the connection between such declarations and the anti-immigration statements of politicians from the Brothers of Italy and Lega. In fact, we are reminded of the conceptualization and exploration of femonationalism, which is expressed in both "attempts of western European right-wing parties and neoliberals to advance xenophobic and racist politics through the touting of gender equality" and "the involvement of various

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<sup>10</sup> In Italian: Modifiche al codice penale, al codice di procedura penale e altre disposizioni in materia di tutela delle vittime di violenza domestica e di genere.

well-known and quite visible feminists and femocrats in the current framing of Islam as a quintessentially misogynistic religion and culture” (Farris 2017, 4). Indeed, Meloni’s (and her party’s stances) seem to appeal to certain groups of women’s rights defenders. In Italy, some feminist groups have a conservative agenda that often lines up with the agenda of the right-wing parties - for instance, they did not support ddl Zan because they did not wish to be seen as an ally of the LGBTIQ+ community (Interview 2). Such trends and patterns are examined in research as well - for instance, Gusmeroli demonstrates how long-existing fractures within Italian feminism became even more visible during ddl Zan discussions and “were exploited by the Catholic press and anti-gender groups” (2023, 393).

Supporting the family is the first point in the Brothers of Italy party platform, available as of 2023. The section on the family, which details the associated priorities and proposed policies, begins with a quote from Pope John Paul II: “The family is the foundational element of society and ‘what makes a truly sovereign and spiritually strong nation.’” (Fratelli d’Italia 2022, 5). The need to combat violence against women and children is referenced in the section titled “Halting illegal immigration and reinstating citizen security” (ibidem, 31). However, in a different section named “Championing the freedom and dignity of all”, a paragraph is dedicated to the necessity of combatting all forms of discrimination, striving for liberation from cultural stereotypes that put women in a subordinate position, and revising legislation on gender-based violence and domestic violence (ibidem, 21).

In 2023, the case of a pregnant Italian woman killed by her boyfriend angered society and prompted the Meloni government to do just the latter. Among the proposed amendments to Codice Rosso are a minimum distance of 500 meters in case of a restraining order, a pool of magistrates working on the issue of VAW, as well as faster trials (Violenza sulle donne 2023). However, these measures were described as insufficient and securitizing the phenomenon of VAW (Interview 5), as failing to address its roots and forsaking full prevention through education and elimination of stereotypes for the purpose of ‘riding an emotional wave’ (D.i.Re 2023).

Our search on Telegram did not yield any results like those in the Bulgarian case, in the sense that we did not find an unofficial channel of the Brothers of Italy’s supporters. The official channel of the party did not reference the specific case that triggered the proposal of additional measures to combat VAW. No references to gender ideology are made on the channel either. However, in harmony with Meloni and her colleagues’ statements, there are many mentions of the importance of preserving the Italian family and increasing birth rates.

## Discussion

Bulgarian right-wing populist party Revival's declarations and stances on key documents and important issues related to VAW and on a severe case of abuse have the following characteristics: 1) While not explicitly articulated and propagated, archaic gender stereotypes subtly underlie calls for preserving the traditional family and Christian values; 2) The focus on tackling VAW is diverted, intentionally or not, through references to misinformation-driven narratives about a perceived dangerous 'gender ideology' and foreign-funded NGOs, which separate children from their parents; 3) There are no attempts to grasp the complexity of VAW (in all its forms - psychological, sexual, physical, offline, online, intersectional, etc.), which is obscured through generic statements like 'all violence is bad' and 'all perpetrators should be punished'; 4) No concrete and explicit calls to counter VAW and promote women's rights are made and compassion for the trauma of victims is rare. Holding back from directly denouncing VAW could be viewed as an underestimation of women's experiences as victims and survivors.

Concerning Brothers of Italy, the interaction between gender, populism, and right-wing conservatism appears to be subtler and more complex in comparison to the case of Revival. Based on the studied material, the party's position appears to encompass several noteworthy components: 1) There is an attempt to distinguish opposition to gender ideology, same-sex marriage, sex education in schools, etc., from efforts to combat VAW and domestic violence; 2) In an apparent attempt to side with conservative feminist movements, there are calls to champion women's rights and fight VAW, although eliminating gender stereotypes and fostering equality is rarely explicitly mentioned as being part of the recipe; 3) The party's core principles and agenda revolve around the support for the traditional family, which is inextricably linked to the need to preserve and strengthen the Italian national identity, seen as deeply rooted in the family; 4) By identifying Islamic extremism as a primary enemy of equality and women's rights, an attempt is made to link VAW to other issues, such as anti-immigration positions. In a certain way, this diverts the focus from investigating the sources, origins, and causes of VAW in the Italian society itself.

The performed analysis demonstrates that appeals to preserve the threatened traditional family could serve as conduits for more sinister ideologies that often flourish online. The reason is that these appeals rarely contain unambiguous condemnation of VAW or calls to defend women's rights, safety, and well-being. Currently, with respect to gender-based violence, concepts and narratives centering on traditional values and roles frequently find resonance in the political priorities of right-wing populist parties. This occurs not only due to their conservative stances but also due to their populist leanings, as the latter help these parties expand the number of their supporters and voters.

It could be presumed that by shunning direct condemnation of cases of VAW and straightforward endorsement of gender equality and women's rights, right-wing parties are trying to attract new supporters and avoid alienating existing ones. Yet, the presence of a direct

connection between these parties and the most radical sections of the manosphere, such as the incels, is unclear. A connection to popular misogyny as elaborated on by Benet-Weiser is more prominent. The postulates of movements like Agenda Europe are frequently echoed by right-wing populist parties, which happen to oppose policies and legislation aimed at achieving gender equality or tackling offline and online hate speech, bullying, and gender-based VAW. This opposition is rooted in their wish to protect the traditional family, uphold traditional gender roles and a binary understanding of gender, etc. This approach, unconsciously or not, might lead to cementing patriarchal beliefs and notions and the reversing of the progress made in advancing women's rights.

Revisiting Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser definition of populism in light of the present analysis, we contemplate whether the anti-gender movement's assertions and claims, including the notion of a dangerous gender ideology, may constitute the building blocks of another thin-centered ideology that populist actors can potentially utilize to pursue their political, social, and economic goals. Furthermore, it appears that certain strains of feminism are increasingly targeted by right-wing populism as a perceived enemy, which they should combat to preserve national identity, conservative worldviews, and, ultimately, the very fabric of society<sup>11</sup>. It is essential to remain aware that some of the anti-gender movement's pillars and dominant narratives could be, or have already been, embraced and propagated by communities thriving in the manosphere.

## Conclusion

This paper's aim was to contribute to the growing literature on the connection between gender and right-wing populism. This was achieved by investigating the positions held by two right-wing populist actors and the opinions of their supporters in two EU countries - Bulgaria and Italy. Based on our study, we can outline several possible future research avenues.

Firstly, there is a need for even more studies, which could lead to a better understanding of the interplay between gender and populism - not only right-wing but also left-wing. Works mentioned above - like those of Graff and Korolzcuk (2022), Krizsán and Roggeband (2021), Gusmeroli (2023), Bellè and Poggio (2018), Paternotte and Kuhar (2018) among others - establish a solid foundation for future research. Exploring and comparing the situation in more countries and regions around the world could only benefit academic and policy debates, especially if such

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<sup>11</sup> At the time this paper was finalized, the new populist Argentine president Javier Milei attacked "radical feminism", progressive movements, and called abortion a tragedy during the World Economic Forum 2024 in Davos (Buenos Aires Times, 2024).



studies include insights from researchers of misinformation and disinformation, particularly identity-based disinformation.

Secondly, a deeper examination of the reach of misogynistic notions and ideas emanating from the manosphere (and its most radical factions) in different countries is crucial - this is especially pertinent for smaller, under-researched countries like Bulgaria. Furthermore, the utilization, if any, of misogynistic narratives and concepts by the adherents of radical right-wing and populist parties should be explored. Do some supporters of right-wing parties identify with the manosphere and its communities? Are these communities' members politically active, and if so, what are their political affiliations? Thirdly, it is vital to inquire into the viewpoints, predispositions, and attitudes of women in the parties' governing bodies, MPs representing these parties, or their followership. This is especially relevant to these women's stances on gender issues and the fight against VAW. Lastly, exploring the content and discourse on social media and messaging platforms popular among followers of right-wing populist parties could support efforts to comprehend the prevalence of online and offline VAW and hate speech, as well as the extent and nature of the resistance to everything related to gender and feminism. However, the success of the latter research exercise is closely linked to and contingent upon greater transparency, accountability, and commitment to counter these phenomena on the part of social media platforms.

Discourse associated with the anti-gender movement appears to be expanding by using as a conduit right-wing populist parties and their participation in legislative- and policy-making. Veiled as attempts to preserve the traditional family, combat an elusive gender ideology, preserve national identities, increase childbirth rates, or, paradoxically, protect women and children, anti-gender claims put at risk important achievements related to gender equality and women empowerment. Furthermore, these assertions and assumptions have the potential to reinforce antiquated patriarchal concepts, perpetuate gender stereotypes, and increase VAW in both the digital and the physical world.

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## Appendix 1 - List of Interviews

No	Professional occupation/Sector <sup>12</sup>	Date	Topic
1	Research and teaching (academia)	March 2023	Gender, GBV, VAW, and women's rights, with a focus on the Italian context
2	Civil society organization	April 2023	Gender, GBV, VAW, and women's rights, with a focus on the Italian context
3	Civil society organization	June 2023	VAW, including domestic violence, with a focus on the Italian context
4	Civil society organization	June 2023	VAW, including domestic violence, with a focus on the Italian context
5	Civil society organization	July 2023	Gender, GBV, VAW, women's rights, with a focus on the Italian context

<sup>12</sup> Where the affiliation of the interviewee is in italic, this means that it was determined by the author after the initial stakeholder mapping, because the interviewee did not complete the Google Form, which included a question about professional occupation/affiliation.

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6	Research and teaching (academia)	October 2023	Disinformation, with a focus on the Bulgarian context
7	Government and policy	November 2023	VAW, domestic violence, and women's rights, with a focus on the Bulgarian context
8	Media	December 2023	Gender-based violence, with a focus on the Bulgarian context
9	Civil society organization	January 2024	VAW, domestic violence, women's rights, with a focus on the Bulgarian context