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The Orthodox Church, Neosecularisation, and the Rise of Anti-Gender Politics in Bulgaria

Ina Merdjanova

Irish School of Ecumenics, Trinity College, University of Dublin, D02 PN40 Dublin, Ireland; merdjand@tcd.ie

Abstract: In a recent publication, I introduced the theoretical framework of neosecularisation with regard to the Orthodox Church and society in Bulgaria. I argued that neosecularisation, as a complex process of decline of religion's importance and the hold of religious authority over the social system, while genealogically different from communist secularisation, explicates patterns of continuity with the communist past. Important aspects of this continuity include the persistent grassroots feminisation of the Church and the co-optation of the Church by the state. Drawing on those theoretical insights, in this paper, I seek to understand the rise of anti-gender politics in Bulgaria since 2018 in relation to the condition of neosecularisation and its impact on the Church. I argue that (neo)secularisation remains a much feared "threat" for the Church and plays a role in ecclesiastical anti-gender mobilisation. However, the Church is not a major factor in anti-gender politics in Bulgaria; the roles of far-right nationalists and certain transnationally connected evangelical actors are to be seriously considered. Furthermore, anti-genderism cannot be understood merely as a religious or cultural backlash. It needs to be discussed as a larger protest movement against liberal democracy's failure to live up to its promises and against the pathologies of neoliberal globalisation, a movement in which the Orthodox Church is only tangentially involved.

Keywords: Orthodox Church; Bulgaria; secularisation; anti-gender politics



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1. Introduction

The grand narrative of religion in post-1989 Bulgaria emphasises that the newly established freedom of religion brought the revival and rehabilitation of Orthodox Christianity after four decades of oppression and marginalisation. It assumes that the communist secularisation has been reversed, whereby religion has emancipated itself from state tutelage and has restored its moral authority in society. This dominant explanatory framework focuses on a complete break with the totalitarian past and on a profound, multi-faceted transformation of the state and society, including the reshaping of church–state relations.

I argue that the emphasis on a radical discontinuity creates a distorted picture and hinders the understanding of the various ways in which past realities re-emerge in seemingly new configurations at the intersection of religion and the state. Heeding to Faulkner's famed observation (Faulkner 1975, p. 88), "The past is never dead. It's not even past," I suggest that we should beware of traces of continuities with certain experiences and realities from the communist past. In an earlier book of mine, I described the condition of post-communism in relation to religion and nationalism as a "palimpsest." In its figurative sense, "palimpsest" signifies something reused or altered but still bearing visible traces of its earlier writing, and I believe this metaphor fittingly points to the ambiguities and the various ways through which the communist past has continued to define and shape the present, including with regard to secularisation (see Merdjanova 2002, p. xi).

Secularisation¹ in this paper is interpreted as a process of social modernisation which renders the secular spheres (the modern state, the capitalist market economy and modern science) functionally differentiated and emancipated from the religious sphere (cf. Casanova 2006, p. 12), and by which religion "ceases to be significant in the working of the social

system" (Wilson 1982, p. 150). In a secularised world, religion is no longer the unifying system of meaning and ethical norms, or what Peter Berger called the "sacred canopy" of society (Berger 1967); it becomes one sphere among multiple other spheres of a differentiated social reality. The decline of religion as a meaning-organising system, which permeates and influences all spheres of life, often leads to religion's aligning with political and other secular forces, through which it seeks to regain its social impact. It "lends" its symbolic capital and functions to worldly ideologies and systems of social organisation, such as various political movements among which nationalism figures prominently². Neosecularisation³, in turn, is a complex process wherein after a period of desecularisation and a rise of religious authority at individual, social, and/or political levels, the significance of religion decreases, and the hold of religious authority over the social system declines (see Chaves 1994). A neosecular society does not mean a complete lack of religious beliefs and practices and/or religious institutions not interfering in the public domain; it rather means a limited impact of religion and its prescriptions on people's individual and collective lives. This is particularly evident in relation to church-endorsed norms about sexuality, abortion, and divorce, which the society at large see either as negotiable or outrightly neglectable.

In short, neo/secularisation here refers to a sociological description of specific processes in specific contexts related to the decline of religious authority, belonging, belief, and practice, as well as to the privatisation of religion (Casanova 1994). To my mind, instances of religion's resurgence post-1989 must be analysed contextually before pronouncing them a "reversal of secularisation." I want to particularly challenge the framework of "post-secularity" which gained certain tour de force in recent decades and which has been widely and indiscriminately deployed. It seems relevant to ask if there is a "postsecular turn" indeed, or, rather, if scholars started paying more attention to the public role of religion due to specific factors and experiences since the early 1990s. Certainly, the reinstatement of religion in Eastern Europe, and the massive Muslim immigration to Europe and the consequent visibility of Islam, including through a number of terror attacks in Western Europe, among others, have influenced the ways we perceive the world. In his illuminating discussion of the post-secular, James Beckford noted that the term was first used by Catholic theologians Andrew Creely in 1966 and Richard Neuhaus in 1982 in reference to the situation in the U.S. He identified different meanings of the post-secular such as denial of secularisation, re-enchantment of culture and public resurgence of religion, among others. He argued that the visibility of religion in Britain's public space does not make the country post-secular in any of those meanings of the term, but is instead associated with the state's "interpellation" of selected religions as partners in the delivery of public policies for managing diversity, combating inequality and promoting social enterprise. His conclusion that the notion is problematic and irrelevant in explaining public religions in Britain (Beckford 2012) seems pertinent well beyond the British context. Clearly, the theory of post-secularity provides an example of the epistemic and political power of academic discourses to impose interpretations of reality which then become frameworks through which this reality is perceived.

For those reasons, and also because post-secularisation implies the linearity of a process which is neither linear nor inevitable, I prefer to speak of desecularisation instead of post-secularisation when discussing periods of increased public presence of religion in the wake of 1989. Indeed, in the case of Bulgaria, it did not take long for the desecularisation of the 1990s to be reversed. Secularism and secularisation are here to stay, and we need to focus on the rethinking and redefinition of religion's relations with the secular in a way that takes into consideration the realities on the ground rather than give in to abstract theories of an imagined post-secular turn. Furthermore, we should beware of sharp disassociations of the religious and the secular, whether we choose to speak of neo-secularisation, or, with David Martin, of "a dialectic of the religious and the secular that more easily generates secular mutations of faith than straightforward replacements and displacements" (Martin 2006, p. 68), or, with Daniele Hervieu-Leger, of "religion as a chain of memory" (Hervieu-Leger 2000).

2. Bulgarian Orthodox Church and Neosecularisation

The collapse of the communist regime in Bulgaria in 1989 reversed the forced policies of secularisation in which the marginalisation and full co-optation of the Church by the state as well as the atheistic upbringing of citizens had been seen as integral to society's modernisation. The communist state had abolished religious education, confiscated church property, persecuted the clergy and banned faith-based activities. Religious rituals such as baptism, church weddings and religious funerals had been replaced by socialist (called "civil") rites of passage. The mandatory women's access to education and the labour market, in addition to generous family-friendly social services and women's control over their reproductive lives, had buttressed women's emancipation and rearranged inherited patriarchal orders. At the same time, the communist secularisation had inadvertently supported the feminisation of Orthodox Christianity since the crackdown on the Church and the domestication of religion had turned elderly women into custodians of religiosity who secretly performed religious rituals at home and had their grandchildren baptised (see [Merdjanova 2021](#), p. 59).

The newly established freedom of religion and the emergence of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church from years of oppression generated expectations for a religious revival and mass return to Orthodox Christianity. Indeed, the 1990s were marked by incipient desecularisation in the sense of the Church's growing social standing and public presence. The Church reopened its administrative, spiritual and educational structures. People flocked to it, seeking spiritual and moral guidance in a time of rapid and far-reaching economic, political and social transformation. The Church, however, failed to respond to people's demands and to retain their trust. The clergymen squabbled and split, aligning themselves behind two rival Synods, while the ecclesiastical leaders refused to repent for their cooperation with the secret services of the communist regime.

The 1991 Constitution reaffirmed the separation of church and state, but opted for an accommodationist approach by defining Orthodox Christianity as the nation's "traditional religion." Despite the constitutional separation, however, the state has continued to interfere in church affairs in sometimes contradictory ways: in the 1990s, for example, it registered a second Synod, and in 2004, it outlawed this Synod.

The church–state relations today resemble certain aspects of their communist-time configuration when the state co-opted, controlled and exploited the Church for its own political goals, e.g., to flaunt a non-existing religious freedom in Bulgaria at international forums such as the World Council of Churches, or to use the Orthodox link in order to bring the country closer to the "brotherly" Soviet Russia. In 2018, the Bulgarian Parliament adopted an amendment to the Act on Religious Denominations, and significantly increased the public subsidies for the Orthodox Church and the Islamic Community. Consequently, the state started to pay the clergy's salaries and allocated a larger budget for the upkeep of religious buildings. This has generated, in the words of Atanas Slavov, an expert on church–state relations, "a hazardous symbiosis between the Church and the state . . . The symphony between the two is an imperial vision of the state seeking to use the Church." A dissenting cleric described the overfunding of the Church as a "temptation" and "use of the Church like a jewelry on the state's lapel."⁴

The Church, seeking to boost its diminishing authority, re-emphasised its role as a "guardian" of national identity at the expense of its universal spiritual mission. This ecclesial linkage with the mundane agenda of nationalism can be read as another sign of neosecularisation. It is hardly surprising that most Bulgarians see the Orthodox Church as a sort of "community cult" (in the Weberian sense) linked to the national identity and history rather than as a Eucharistic religion of salvation. A 2017 study by the Pew Research Center on religiosity in Orthodox countries found that 22% of those who identify as Orthodox in Bulgaria do not believe in God, and only 5% attend church on a weekly basis ([Pew Research Center 2017](#)). In short, Orthodox Christianity gained presence and visibility as a marker of national identity, but it did not produce a substantial impact on the social norms, public

morality and individual behaviour of the people who identify as Orthodox (around 76% of the population).

Overall, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church displayed an ambiguous attitude toward the post-communist state. While it enthusiastically embraced the newly emerged opportunities to re-establish its institutions after 1989, it also sought to occupy a privileged position in society guaranteed by the state. It continuously accentuated its pivotal role in the nation-building process, very much along the lines of the communist regime's representation of the Church as a "custodian of Bulgarianness under the Turkish yoke" (the medieval Bulgarian kingdom was conquered and politically subjected to the Ottoman Empire between 1396 and 1878), and insisted on a strategic recognition and protection of Orthodox Christianity as the country's "traditional religion." In short, the Church sought both freedom from state control *and* the state's protection and support through a preferential legal treatment and allocation of substantial funds⁵. However, it ended up being co-opted and controlled by the state, even though the current regime of control can be described as soft-power favouritism as opposed to the harsh repressions and instrumentalisation under the communist regime.

While communist secularisation was imposed by the state, neosecularisation developed mostly as a result of the inability of the Church to overcome its spiritual stagnation and to formulate a prophetic critique of the neoliberal market globalisation and its devastating effects on considerable sections of the population, let alone to offer a moral alternative to the individualisation and commodification of societal life. To be sure, neoliberal regimes worldwide prompted the disappearance of clear boundaries not only between the left and the right (e.g., both the left and the right used austerity measures to handle the effects of the economic crisis post-2008), but also between the religious and the secular (as they co-opted, governed and transformed all spheres of social life in line with its market rationalities)⁶.

3. Religion and the Rise of Anti-Gender Politics in Bulgaria

Gender is a major principle of social, political and cultural organisation, and is therefore an important location for hegemonic struggles. In the observation of Connell, "Gender roles are a major component of social structure as a whole, and gender politics are among the main determinants of our collective fate" (Connell 2005, p. 76). As I have argued elsewhere, particularly in times of rapid transformation, "gender roles are propelled to the center stage of discursive struggles for the reinterpretation and redefinition of social norms and frames of reference" (Merdjanova 2013, p. 82). Importantly, debates on gender and sexualities have been a continuous source of controversy for gender-conservative religions, both Christian and non-Christian. Specifically, in Eastern Europe, gender-related issues have been central to the Orthodox and Catholic Churches' negotiation of their place in society, as those Churches have sought to establish their teachings of gender and sexuality as social and legal norms.

The past decade saw a rise of anti-gender campaigns across Eastern Europe, which mirrored developments worldwide. Terms such as "anti-genderism" and "anti-gender movement" entered the public vocabulary to describe a broad ideological and political mobilisation against gender equality, women's rights and emancipation, sexual and reproductive rights.

Generally, women's rights have been a work in progress, constantly renegotiated and redefined in a search to translate international norms into national practices by embedding those norms in specific cultural and political contexts. As gender equality norms and policies challenge and seek to reshape existing gender orders, they are invariably met with resistance both by conservative religious groups and illiberal nationalists. The anti-gender camp is ideologically and socially diverse, but its constituencies share views of men and women as having different and complementary roles in the family and in the public sphere, and of heterosexual marriage as a sacred or a secular-nationalist norm.

With David Paternotte, anti-genderism is genealogically tied to the Vatican's portrayal of "gender" and "gender ideology" as a strategy used by feminists and homosexual activists to destabilise the "natural family." It emerged in the wake of the 1994 Cairo Conference

on Population and Development and the 1995 World Conference on Women, and grew exponentially thereafter (see [Paternotte 2015](#)). From a central trope in the Vatican's counter-reaction to the recognition of sexual and reproductive rights in the UN system, the notions of gender and gender ideology gradually evolved into an ideologically malleable rhetorical and discursive tool for anti-gender mobilisation around the world.

Despite its anti-Catholicism and anti-ecumenism, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, arguably through its closed ties with the Russian Orthodox Church and under the influence of far-right nationalists, bought into a discursive strategy that originated in the Catholic struggles with feminism and gender equality, and has been extensively promoted by the Christian Right, particularly the evangelicals in the United States. In 2018, ecclesiastics, theologians, Orthodox-affiliated NGOs and online platforms formed open or covert alliances with local evangelical groups and far-right nationalists to lobby against government plans to ratify the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, also known as the Istanbul Convention. The loose anti-gender camp launched attacks on an alleged plot by the West to impose, through the notion of "gender" used in the convention, a "third gender" in society, to sexualise children with sex education in schools, and to destroy both the family as an institution and the traditional values and norms in Bulgarian society. They succeeded in blocking the ratification, despite efforts by liberal intellectuals, human rights defenders, feminist academics and NGOs to oppose the spreading of misinformation and blatant propaganda, and to focus on the document's aim to prevent and reduce violence against women (see [Merdjanova 2021](#), pp. 67–68).

In 2019, the draft National Strategy for the Child 2019–2030 (the Strategy) replaced the Istanbul Convention as a target of heated debates and a hostage of fake news and deliberate slander⁷. Various parents' associations, both recently registered NGOs and unofficial Facebook groups, led mostly by right-wing nationalists and evangelical activists, organised public meetings, protests, and media campaigns against the Strategy. Three theologians from Veliko Turnovo University wrote a letter to the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church calling it to take action against the Strategy. Consequently, the Synod issued an official statement claiming that parents have the right to slap their children in order to discipline them. After a public outcry, the Synod retracted its statement and came up with a more subtle position defending the children and their rights "from the moment of their conception," the rights of parents, and the "traditional values" of the Bulgarian nation⁸.

Alongside the Strategy, a new Social Services Act scheduled to come in force in January 2020 became a target of manipulative campaigns by the anti-gender camp. The campaigners claimed that the Act endangers the family, the rights and freedoms of Bulgarians, and the national sovereignty by providing funds to greedy and evil NGOs to perform social services. The Holy Synod requested the deferral of the Act under the pretext that private NGOs might overtake the functions of the state. The Synod averred that the Act curtails parents' rights, denies the connection between parents and children, and creates a precedent for unlawful intervention in the family. Rumors spread among the Roma population that social workers will be paid to take kids away from their families; this caused panic and led to the withdrawal of Roma children from the schools by their parents. According to some reports, certain evangelical Churches, which attract large numbers of Roma people, were instrumental in spreading those rumors⁹. Consequently, the Act was thwarted, to the detriment of many people in need who were supposed to receive improved and more accessible social support. It underwent significant revisions before coming into power in August 2020.

It can be argued that in the context of increasing neosecularisation since the early 2000s, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church grew both apprehensive of its declining authority and anxious about its continuous feminisation as women remained an absolute majority in its parish life. To counter those, the Church both reaffirmed masculine domination in the religious sphere and aligned with a gendered nationalism, restating its teachings about "natural differences" between the sexes, the discourse of "traditional values", and

the validation of women exclusively as mothers. It saw an opportunity during the debates on the Istanbul Convention and later on the Strategy and the Social Services Act to publicly reemphasise its gender-conservative positions and bolster its social impact, after several failed attempts to do so (e.g., its unsuccessful campaigns to introduce religious education in public schools and to influence the abortion and reproductive rights legislation).

Anti-gender politics, however, are not simply a consequence of an alleged strategy of the Orthodox Church to counter neosecularisation. The Church apparently reacts in a volatile manner to selected social and political issues rather than following a consistent strategy. For example, Church hierarchs publicly expressed support for the Istanbul Convention prior to the government's signature of the document in 2016¹⁰. However, the ecclesiastics changed their position when the state moved to ratifying the convention in 2018. They aligned with the far-right nationalist party IMRO—Bulgarian National Movement in the coalition government, which strongly opposed the document. At the same time, various evangelical actors and pressure groups were exceedingly active in assembling and coordinating a broader anti-gender camp. It did not take long for the newly emerged network to begin attacking gender equality activists and NGOs as well as feminist academics and gender studies programs, even though those programs are very few and not particularly visible.

To be sure, in addition to local religious and nationalist conservative actors and pressure groups, transnational connections and flows of funding, ideas, and strategies form key dimensions of anti-gender movements worldwide. Research on the ground has revealed that since 2007, Christian Right groups from the United States have spent USD 280 million globally—USD 90 million in Europe alone—to support and spread conservative values and programs in public matters. Leading organisations in the European spending are the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ) through its branch the European Center for Law and Justice (ECLJ), and the Alliance Defending Freedom Intl. (ADF), both of which focus on large-scale legal cases defending conservative social policies in various European countries (Provost and Archer 2020). By establishing European networks and headquarters in Brussels and Strasbourg to target EU institutions, those organisations seek to coordinate and create a pan-European anti-gender movement as part of a growing global movement (Paternotte and Kuhar 2017, pp. 270–71).

According to a 2018 report by the European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights, the campaign against the Istanbul Convention in Bulgaria was organised by local actors supported by Vienna-based European branch of ADF¹¹. ADF seems to be connected with the evangelical-affiliated Foundation “Preobrazhenie” (“Transformation”), established in 2002 and running a wide range of activities, spanning from a publishing program, to legal advocacy, to a web portal “Svoboda za vseki” (“Freedom for everyone”)¹². The group claims that its goal is to “defend the values of traditional family.” After its campaign against the Istanbul Convention, it denounced the National Strategy for the Child 2019–2030 as a “fruit of totalitarian thinking” and lobbied against the adoption of a new Social Services Act, under the pretext that the latter would marginalise the role of the parents and would allow disproportional intervention by the state in family life.

In October 2020, the “Freedom for everyone” portal published an open letter in response to a recent Resolution by the Commission on civil liberties, justice, and internal affairs of the European Parliament (LIBE) asking Bulgaria to reconsider its rejection of the Istanbul Convention. The letter was addressed to the Constitutional Court, Parents and Civil Association, Independent and Central Media, the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, evangelical Churches, and other faiths, and called on the Bulgarian authorities “to confirm their position regarding the Istanbul Convention and to support Poland’s effort to exit the Convention.” It was co-signed by “Freedom for everyone” and “ROD Intl.”, and supported by several associations: “March for the family”, “Society and Values”, “Unity for the Family and Children”, Association for Home Schooling, the “Light in the Balkans” foundation, and the Christian-Reformist Party¹³. It appears that the organisations that initiated and supported the letter are all evangelical-affiliated.

The anti-gender alignment of the Orthodox Church is embedded in the ecclesiastical support for conservative social norms and gender-distinct roles in the church, the family, and in the job market. The post-1989 reassertion of male domination in the Church mapped onto a rising masculine nationalism and an increasing focus on “traditional” gender roles, which typically imply male leadership and female domesticity. Importantly, as I have argued elsewhere, the Church has continuously used “traditional values” synonymously with patriarchal social and family norms (strictly defined gender differences and roles, a divinely ordained male–female hierarchy) in an ongoing effort to reframe patriarchal order as tradition (Merdjanova 2021, p. 67).

It is hardly surprising that the Orthodox theologians who joined anti-gender debates recycled obsolete arguments with little relevance to contemporary society. Particularly, issues related to women’s emancipation and gender equality have been continuously reduced to outdated platitudes presented as theological truths. To illustrate my point, here is an example from *Lectures on Religion*, published in 1992 and written by two of the leading theological professors at the time, which used to be a mandatory reading for theological students. The lengthy excerpt below is taken from the section on emancipation:

In the last decades, emancipation has been successfully developed and practically instilled in the family and society. Without clarifying the erroneous principles, on which it has been grounded, we will briefly describe the image of the emancipated woman. What did woman gain when she adopted the fallacious teaching of emancipation and gave herself to dreams of glory and social fame?

Women themselves neither created nor introduced emancipation in our society; they learned it from authors, who efficiently spread it through stories and novels as well as through multiple other means. Unfortunately for us all, women did not get anything good from emancipation, yet the behavior of many of them confirmed an ancient truth: those who exalt themselves, will be humiliated [. . .].

Inspired by emancipation, women strove to become equal with men. Some of them began to despise the behavior of the ‘ordinary’ woman, and turned their backs to their main duty, rushing into the realm of public affairs. Their achievements in this sphere gradually weakened their womanhood. Without noticing, they purposefully sought to become men.

And because a woman can never cease to be a woman, she transformed into a semi-woman-semi-man, without acquiring the natural characteristics of a man. In their new standing, women harbored animosity towards the Christian teaching of marriage, rejected the words of St Paul the Apostle: ‘Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord; husbands, love your wives’ (Ephesians 5: 22–25) . . . and rushed to acquire unconditional independence from the men [. . .].

Emancipation perplexed the woman; she succumbed to a state of homelessness and felt like a flower, which had been plucked from its natural environment and could not be planted anywhere. In her alleged advancement and imagined freedom, the woman began to long for a quiet life away from people’s eyes and for the fulfillment of her duty within the borders of her home and amidst her family. Today, thousands of women in Bulgaria do not wish to be emancipated, to walk shoulder to shoulder with men, and to overtake men’s tasks. They wish to be liked, respected and loved as true girlfriends, wives and mothers.

They understand clearly that the woman fulfills with dignity her duty in society only when she is a true woman.¹⁴

This kind of ludicrous theological writing by men explaining the “nature” and duties of women was recently replaced by efforts to introduce the public to the “dangers” of “gender ideology.” In 2019, the Orthodox Christian publishing house “Omophor” published and publicised widely the Bulgarian translation of the book *The Global Sexual Revolution: the Destruction of Freedom in the Name of Freedom* by German Catholic author Gabriele Kuby.

The book was written in 2012 and subsequently translated into several languages. Before arriving in Bulgaria, it gained popularity in other East European countries, which, according to Kuby, were quicker to discern the new global totalitarian “gender ideology” because of their experience with communism. “Gender ideology,” Kuby kept surmising in her tireless public appearances around Europe, including during the launch of her book in Bulgaria, is “a totalitarian ideology more dangerous than fascism and communism.”

In her speech in Sofia in October 2019, Kuby called on men to be soldiers and to defend women from the new totalitarianism that conquers the world so that women can fulfill their primary roles as mothers. She vilified feminism for “taking away the powers of the men” and went as far as to compare the new Bulgarian Strategy for the Child to the much loathed Ottoman practice of forcibly recruiting soldiers among Christian children in the Balkans. Kuby complained of being “attacked by forces which do not leave us a possibility to express our opinion” and occasionally surmised, “I can be detained for what I just told you”, in an obvious attempt to portray herself as a candidate for martyrdom in the name of her persecuted “truth.” Her speech was often interrupted by ovations from the overly enthusiastic public. In conclusion, she asserted that “Europe is awakening, we have new conservative governments, Christians are awakening . . . We will win, because God, nature and our simple rationality are with us.”¹⁵

Despite Kuby’s posturing as a sociologist, her writings comprise a mixture of pseudo-sociological musing, tendentiously picked and interpreted “facts,” fear-mongering, and wishful thinking rather than a compelling sociological analysis. They, however, speak to, and further excite, people’s moral angst, real grievances, and need for easy explanatory frameworks in a world that has become too complex, unpredictable, and precarious. Indeed, Kuby has played a significant role in the escalating anti-gender discourses across Eastern Europe.

By circulating misleading claims about a ubiquitous “gender ideology” (as though gender ideology exists as a single theory) which aims to overturn the “natural” male–female polarity and hierarchical order through policies of “gender mainstreaming,” anti-gender campaigns fuel negative sentiments against feminist advocates, human rights NGOs, liberal intellectuals, migrants, and sexual and other minorities. They deflect social attention from important concerns such as endemic corruption, rising poverty, and political and institutional dysfunction. The fear-mongering around “gender” touches upon real social grievances and thus falls on a receptive ear. With its skewed explanations, it fuels dangerous culture wars and promotes identity politics that impede struggles for economic and social justice, welfare provisions, equal rights, and inclusive citizenship for all. The scarecrows of “sexual revolution” and “gender mainstreaming” serve to mask and mystify the root causes of Bulgaria’s social malaise. Emotionally charged references to “the family,” “the children,” and “the nation under threat” give to the large disenfranchised sections of the population a way to express their discontent and anger.

On 26 October 2021, the Constitutional Court announced its conclusion that “according to the Constitution, the notion ‘gender’ is to be understood solely in its biological meaning,” obviously seeking to put an end to social-constructivist interpretations of the term. Importantly, before making its decision, the Court asked the Holy Synod and other religious denominations to express their position on the issue. This gave the ecclesiastics an opportunity to reiterate that any understanding of “gender” beyond a biological meaning is “incompatible with the Bulgarian social order . . . and would introduce ideas, which are irreconcilable with the fundamental moral values and faith of the holy Orthodox Church”, as well as to emphasise that “Orthodoxy is part of the national and constitutional identity of Bulgaria.”¹⁶ The Constitutional Court asking denominational leaders for their opinion before taking a decision on a certain issue can be read as a sign of an increasing symbolic appropriation of religion for political means.

4. Conclusions

Admittedly, anti-gender movements are political rather than religious formations, even though religious actors and ideologies typically play a prominent role in their emergence and mobilisation. These movements are heterogeneous and include diverse actors, agencies, and power interests, which use gender as an umbrella term for their agenda setting, or, metaphorically speaking, as a “symbolic glue” (Grzebalska et al. 2017). Their emotional appeal to large sections of the population is embedded in an eclectic anti-colonial discourse which combines rhetoric of both victimhood and cultural superiority with gender conservatism and critique of neoliberalism and globalisation (Korolczuk and Graff 2018). Importantly, as Korolczuk and Graff have argued, anti-genderism is not simply a continuation of earlier anti-feminist fights; it is rather a new ideological and political configuration, both transnational and local, which has a great emotional force and serves as the new language of illiberal, populist, anti-capitalist mobilisation (Korolczuk and Graff 2018). In Bulgaria, and in Eastern Europe more generally, it can be seen as a protest movement against the ills of the post-communist transition, which, under the garb of democratisation, incorporated the region into the global market economy at excruciating social costs.

Therefore, explaining anti-gender mobilisation merely as a religious backlash or culture war is a culturalisation of what is de facto political and economic. The rise of anti-gender politics is tied to the failures of the liberals and social democrats to deliver the social and economic justice they once promised, to the rise of gender-conservative nationalism, and to the general weakness of the feminist movements in this part of the world. It is part of a larger illiberal populist mobilisation, in which a misinterpreted and misrepresented notion of gender plays a central role, and which has created a space for people to express their grievances, angers, and fears, and to claim a sense of agency. In the observation of Eszter Kováts, the so-called progressive side has staunchly abided by the “human rights consensus,” disconnecting itself from the problems and concerns of the many, which has generated antagonistic resistance (Kováts 2018a). It is crucial to engage with the root causes of the right-wing mobilisation against “gender” in Eastern Europe and to discuss the embeddedness of gender-related issues in the power relations and inequalities with the West/the EU, which have been instrumentalised by the Right in their “freedom fight” (Kováts 2021).

Importantly, the meanings and usages of “gender” have multiplied in recent years: from being used synonymously with biological sex, to signifying socially constructed roles imposed on men and women, to being the equivalent of gender identity, all of which generates confusion, which the right-wingers have been quick to politicise (Kováts 2018b). Last but not least, the treatment of queer understanding of gender in Western academia and activism as a globally relevant and agreed upon consensus has further exacerbated antagonistic resistance in Eastern Europe (Kováts 2020). Feminist activists in Bulgaria complained that the feminist movement has become a hostage to LGBT activism, which moved the focus from women’s rights more generally to LGBT rights specifically. This happened, I was told, because LGBT organisations had enjoyed stronger international support, including substantial funds, to promote their agenda while women’s rights organisations had been chronically underfunded and increasingly marginalised. As Tatyana Kmetova put it, “There is no gender because gender is everywhere. The focus has been placed on identity at the expense of integrity. We need to bring it back specifically on women’s rights rather than diluting our struggle by expanding disproportionately the scope of our politics.”¹⁷ She thus neatly summarised the replacement of struggles for women’s rights and gender equality evolving around “gender” as a description of social relations of power, hierarchy, and domination with a postmodern, nebulous recourse to “gender” understood as advancement of fluid and ever-multiplying gender identities—all of which plays into the hands of neoliberal rationalities of fragmentation and technics of governance.

Major instigators in the faith-based sections of the loose anti-gender camp in Bulgaria appear to be certain evangelical actors and NGOs, which were consequently joined by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. During anti-gender campaigns, evangelicals consistently

downplayed denominational differences by emphasising their Christian identity and reiterating their concerns about the “traditional family values” and the “interests/security of the Bulgarian nation,” while benefiting from the support of international Christian Right organisations and alliances, and from better organisational skills. After the blocking of the Istanbul Convention in 2018, the anti-gender camp expanded its base, strategies, and targets, and obstructed the adoption of the new Strategy for the Child and the Social Service Act. In December 2020, Bulgaria joined Poland and Hungary in opposing the EU’s new Action Plan on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment in External Action 2021–2025.¹⁸

In Bulgaria, gender has become an arena for the rehearsal of different notions of church–state and church–society relations and for the renegotiation of the boundaries between the secular and the religious, in addition to serving as a larger battleground for the competing ideological practices of illiberal populism and liberal democracy. Clearly, the rise of anti-gender politics is a local manifestation of a global rise of fundamentalist, nativist forces and far-right politics, both secular and religious, which seek to impose control over society against the backdrop of liberal democracy’s crisis. It is interlinked with the rise of militant masculinities as a result of destabilised patriarchal regimes by the increasing visibility and successful performance of women in all spheres of life. Conservative religions and masculinist nationalisms have joined forces to oppose women’s rights, to reaffirm conservative societal views of gender-specific roles, and to reverse gender justice.

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Notes

¹ This paragraph draws on sections in (Merdjanova 2021, p. 52).

² For interpretations of nationalism as a political religion, see (Merdjanova 2002, pp. 71–78).

³ For a detailed discussion of neo-secularisation as a sociological paradigm, see (Malesevic 2010).

⁴ These views were expressed during a session of the Bulgarian National Television’s weekly programme “Vyara i obshtestvo” [Faith and Society] on 6 June 2020, <https://bnt.bg/bg/a/shchedrostta-na-drzhavata-km-bpts-sled-pandemiyata> (accessed on 20 November 2021). It is worth mentioning that the Bulgarian Orthodox Church refused to send participants to the program since 2014, as it considered it too critical. Soon after this session, the whole programme was discontinued.

⁵ This has been a common trend for the historical Churches in Eastern Europe, which expected from the post-communist state to regulate the religious domain by limiting religious pluralism and privileging the traditional denominations; they frequently framed those demands in terms of compensation for their pre-1989 state repression.

⁶ The topic of neoliberalism and its effects on the historical Churches in Eastern Europe deserves a special analysis, which is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice to say, much of what the Orthodox and Catholic ecclesiastics started to promote post-1989 fits into the neoliberal economic and political agenda and its attendant rationalities. For instance, the Churches’ focus on the family and traditional gender roles is in line with the state’s withdrawal from the public services sector and the growing need of private care services for the children and for the elderly which are currently being provided exclusively by the free labour of female family members.

⁷ About the controversies around the Strategy, see “Child Rights Under Attack in Bulgaria”, 2 September 2019, on the website of the National Network for Children, <https://nmd.bg/en/child-rights-under-attack-in-bulgaria/> (accessed on 29 October 2021).

- 8 The statement (in Bulgarian) can be found at the website of the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church: <https://old.bg-patriarshia.bg/m/news.php?id=286900> (accessed on 3 September 2021).
- 9 See the video “Кои са хората, които подклаждат страховете за Барневерне” [“Who are the people who fuel fears of Barneverne”] by investigative journalist Genka Shikerova (in Bulgarian) <https://offnews.bg/razsledvane/koi-sa-horata-koito-podklazhdad-strahovete-za-barneverne-video-720338.html> (accessed on 20 May 2021).
- 10 “БПЦ се включи в обсъждането на проблема за насилието срещу жени” [The Bulgarian Orthodox Church participated in the discussions of the problem of the violence against women], 25 November 2015, https://dveri.bg/component/com_content/Itemid,100723/catid,14/id,21710/view,article/ (accessed on 18 October 2021).
- 11 “Кой инструктира и координира кампаниите за ‘традиционните ценности’ в Европа” [Who instructs and coordinates the campaigns for “traditional values” in Europe”, *Marginalia*, 13 June 2019, <https://www.marginalia.bg/aktsent/koj-instruktira-i-koordinira-kampaniite-za-traditsionnite-tsennosti-v-evropa/> (accessed on 23 July 2021).
- 12 Here is a link to the website “Freedom for everyone” (in Bulgarian): <https://svobodazavseki.com> (accessed on 16 March 2022).
- 13 “Призив срещу аспекти на Резолюция на Комисия на Европейския парламент и за подкрепа на Република Полша” [A call against aspects of the Resolution of the European Parliament and in support of the Republic of Poland], 9 October 2020, <https://svobodazavseki.com/blog/item/386-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%B8%D0%B2-%D1%81%D1%80%D0%B5%D1%89%D1%83-%D0%B0%D1%81%D0%BF%D0%B5%D0%BA%D1%82%D0%B8-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B7%D0%BE%D0%BB%D1%8E%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BC%D0%B8%D1%81%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B5%D0%B2%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BF%D0%B5%D0%B9%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D0%BF%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%BB%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%B5%D0%BD%D1%82-%D0%B8-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%BF%D0%B0-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%BF%D1%83%D0%B1%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BB%D1%88%D0%B0.html> (accessed on 25 October 2021).
- 14 Николай Шиваров и Димитър Киров, *Беседи по религия* (1992), 111–13 (my translation from Bulgarian). According to its preface, the book had been planned as a textbook in religion for high school students, but had to downsize after the Church’s proposal for the introduction of religious classes in schools were thwarted. However, it was part of the reading lists for theological students until its authors retired.
- 15 The 2019 video from the Kuby’s speech on the global sexual revolution in Sofia can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yh3jkAoB3ic> (accessed on 30 September 2021).
- 16 The full text of the stance of the BOC can be found at <https://www.pravoslavie.bg/%D0%91%D1%8A%D0%BB%D0%B3\%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%8F/%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%89%D0%B5-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D1%81%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D1%81%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B4-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B1%D0%BF%D1%86-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BB/> (accessed on 29 October 2021).
- 17 Personal communication with Tatyana Kmetova, executive director of the Center for Women’s Studies and Policies, Sofia, 23 September 2021.
- 18 <https://agenceurope.eu/en/bulletin/article/12624/33> (accessed on 2 November 2021).

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