

In Bulgaria, Mass Protests Are Confronting Domestic Violence

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Last week saw protests in 40 towns across Bulgaria, after courts failed to convict a man who attacked his 18-year-old former partner with a knife. The case pointed to authorities' failure to confront domestic violence – and the wider misogyny of public life.

Last Monday, thousands of people took to the streets of over forty Bulgarian towns and cities to protest domestic violence and the state's failure to take action against it. The spontaneous mobilization "is a clear sign that there is a growing sensibility when it comes to domestic violence in Bulgaria, which is of epidemic proportions," one [feminist campaigner](#) explained. It was also an exceptional expression of solidarity in a country with few examples of strong grassroots political movements.

The protests were surely unexpected. Bulgaria has in recent years seen vile political attacks against feminist and pro-LGBTQ movements, while institutional efforts to curb domestic violence have faced sabotage by the parties who claim to stand for family values. In this sense, the demonstrations also catalyzed a wider debate around gender-based violence and the normalization of misogyny. In just a week, public outrage forced the revision of multiple laws, the public shaming of celebrities, and the resignation of an MP.

Yet much remains to be done in changing the misogynistic culture of Bulgarian public life. Important [calls](#) for long-term reforms such as the introduction of sex education in schools and the provision of *comprehensive* material, medical, and mental health support remain largely under the radar of mainstream political parties.

It could also be said that these demonstrations are not of the same size as the large feminist mobilizations in other Eastern European states like Poland. Yet they remain hugely significant in a country where even the nominally left-wing Socialist Party (BSP) regularly campaigns using open homophobia and "defending the traditional Bulgarian family." For many, it feels like a new chapter could finally be beginning in the struggle for gender equality.

Abusers

The protest was sparked by media reports of a gruesome attack against an eighteen-year-old girl from the city of Stara Zagora, known as "D." Following the assault, she had immediately identified her former partner, Georgi Georgiev, as the aggressor. Yet the case soon became the latest example of authorities' failure to tame violent criminals in small cities around Bulgaria.

The prosecution against Georgiev had cited "medium bodily injuries," but the district court ruled that he had inflicted only "minor" harm, on the grounds that the victim's life was never in danger. These supposedly "minor" injuries included twenty-one cuts with a utility knife, a concussion, and a broken nose; he also forcibly shaved D.'s head. Her wounds required four hundred stitches and she will need further plastic surgery and therapy. Since the incident, D. has barely talked or left the

house; her attorney described her feeling a “loss of identity.”

D. had dated her abuser for four months and the prosecution claimed he was triggered by jealousy. Georgiev had a criminal record, which would disqualify him from being employed in certain sectors, but he nevertheless worked illegally as a security guard at a local nightclub. He has another partner with whom he has a child. This was his third violent crime and he was on probation for another attack at the time.

Shocked by the new classification of their daughter’s horrific wounds — and fearing retaliation by the suspect — D.’s parents decided to make the case public and talked to [Bulgarian public radio](#). The report began making the rounds on social media and soon thousands of people aired their indignation at the way the police, prosecution, and court handled this brutal attack. Georgiev’s own appearance — beefy, close shaven, and covered in nationalist tattoos — energized the reactions against him, as many small towns in Bulgaria are terrorized by similarly looking thugs who engage in a variety of criminal activities and are generally treated with impunity by local authorities.

Calls for popular lynching of both the judges and the abuser jolted politicians and public officials out of their summer lethargy. The prosecutor general asked all prosecutors to prioritize the speedy and objective investigation of all cases involving violence. The medic who drew up the medical expertise for the court was fired and the prosecutor general asked for the resignation of the deputy head of the district prosecutor’s office in Stara Zagora, while MPs requested a review of the district court’s work.

The investigation was basically restarted under the watch of a team of prosecutors after (belated) revelations that the suspect had sent the young woman messages threatening her right before the attack. Now, the court is waiting for a new forensic examination while Georgiev remains in custody. His case revealed the negligence of his employers, labor inspectorate, and the police.

Femicide

But how could this single case provoke such a strong and immediate reaction? It was, in fact, no isolated incident. It comes after dozens of other cases in which women who had reported being threatened were later murdered by their (former) partners — punished for the courage to name their abusers. Many other victims did not report their fears due to a justified belief that the police would do little to help.

Without a national centralized domestic violence register, human rights advocates and activists have only media reports to rely on and the coverage usually concerns only murders. Thirteen femicides have been counted in 2023 already; last year there were at least twenty-two. A [2022 survey](#) showed that 36 percent of all Bulgarian women between the ages of eighteen to twenty-nine have experienced physical or sexual violence by their current or former partner, almost twice the rate in other Eastern European [countries](#) such as Serbia or Lithuania.

This July, just a week before D.’s case was made public, MPs from the new governing majority of center-right parties had passed changes to the Protection Against Domestic Violence Act. A response to the scale of domestic violence and femicides, this was also the result of the work of many human rights and feminist organizations. The amendments widened the scope of persons who can seek protection from domestic violence and extended the period in which victims can seek immediate protection, such as the perpetrator’s removal from the household, issuing a restraining order, accessing shelter, etc. Moreover, the changes aimed to ensure that the abuser does not come into any contact with their victim and provides for anger management programs for abusers.

Parliament also decided to set up a new council to fight domestic violence and to create a national register for domestic violence cases. While symbolically important and indeed a necessary step, this is so far a rather abstract commitment to preventative efforts and many underline the [urgency](#) of the enforcement of these measures. For instance, a therapist working for a feminist organization supporting victims [pointed](#) to “a regional administration lacking a shelter for victims of domestic violence refusing to discuss opening one by citing the lack of need for such,” despite the “possibility to open one without amending any laws.” Furthermore, she said, there is systemic neglect of “elderly people abused by their grown-up children, who cannot access social services and institutional support.”

Nevertheless, the Domestic Violence Act did not apply to cases where the victim and their abuser have not cohabited. Women’s rights organizations have insisted on including the term “intimate partner” in the act so that people involved in any type of long-term intimate relationship qualify. Before this July, such efforts were being blocked by the Socialist Party and the far-right Revival, who cited their reactionary concerns that it would also allow for the protection of people in same-sex relationships.

In the wake of the Stara Zagora case, all institutions entered a feverish mode of legislation. The Bulgarian ombudswoman called for the criminalization of humiliation and forms of emotional abuse. Parliament reconvened to vote for changes to the Penal Code, increasing the punishment for inflicting medium injury from six to eight years. However, most research on the issue suggests that the length of prison sentences does not enter into the calculation of the abuser and does not constitute a deterrence mechanism.

MPs moreover amended legislation so that it recognizes more people as victims of domestic violence, rather than only those who lived with or were married to the perpetrator. Still, the law remains limited — the relationship must have lasted for at least sixty days to qualify. This arbitrary clause restricting access to protection was met by another wave of outrage from women’s rights organizations. The limits of the parliamentary agenda became especially stark when the majority capitulated to the homophobic ranting of the far right and the Socialist Party — amending the law to specify that only people in heterosexual relationships can seek protection from domestic violence.

The Specter of “Gender” Ideology

These legislative changes appear set to take effect despite the vehement opposition of an odious alliance that has formed in recent years, encompassing the Socialist Party, the Revival Party, other fringe far-right parties, and conservative Christian organizations. Already in 2018, these forces united against the adoption of the Istanbul Convention, i.e., the Council of Europe’s code on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. Their aim: to stop the rise of what they call “gender ideology.”

Despite the name, “gender” ideology (the English word is used in transliteration) does not refer to the dominant assumptions about gender. Rather, it is a conspiracy theory, widespread across Europe, which alleges that liberal forces are working to subvert traditional gender roles in order to convert children to homosexuality. In 2021, the Bulgarian Constitutional Court ruled that the notion that gender is a set of socially constructed gender norms itself contradicts the Bulgarian constitution, citing a number of dubious references to Christianity and so-called traditional values.

As elsewhere where the specter of “gender” dominates public life, Bulgarian anti-genderism did not emerge from a spontaneous popular movement, but out of infighting among the country’s political elite. Specifically, it was spearheaded by the flagging Socialist Party in an attempt to gain an advantage over pro-European center-right parties. The Socialists opposed last month’s amendments

to the Protection Against Domestic Violence Act. Earlier this year, Korneliya Ninova, the party's first woman leader, explained that gender ideology "preaches a sex different from the male or female one, from the natural and humane model. . . . Gender ideology is a different and third thing." Who could argue with that?

Since becoming leader of this supposedly center-left force in 2016, Ninova has led it ever further from mainstream social democratic positions, often openly denouncing her nominal sister parties in the Party of European Socialists. It instead forms tactical alliances with the Bulgarian far right, on a range of issues from gay rights to vaccine skepticism and, since last February, the war in Ukraine. This kind of opportunistic synergy has been characteristic of the [anti-gender](#) forces in Eastern Europe more generally. In contrast to countries like Hungary or Poland, however, where a similar policy agenda has boosted its proponents' electoral fortunes, the Socialists' scores have plummeted, and its survival as a parliamentary force now appears precarious.

Though Ninova's anti-"genderism" has failed to revive Bulgaria's oldest and largest political party, it did succeed in popularizing a number of conspiracy theories centered around the idea that human-rights, LGBTQ, and feminist organizations are plotting to take children away from their parents on behalf of wealthy Western countries (specifically Norway). The word *dzhender* has become a widely used slur to refer to anything regarded as deviating from perceived social norms. On the whole, the campaign has poisoned the public atmosphere and made it increasingly difficult to advocate for even the mildest kinds of gender equality legislation.

Police Are Part of the Problem

The numbers attending the protests across Bulgaria, as well as the slogans voiced at them, were a surprise to many. The events were organized by various actors, rather than any one group. Many were called versions of "In support of victims of domestic violence"; "In support of the girl disfigured by the maniac with the utility knife"; "We won't keep quiet"; "Stop the genocide against women. Are you sleeping well, judge?"; and "400 is enough." In Sofia, many held posters, distributed by feminist organizations, with the words *Nito edna poveche* — which translates to [Not One More](#), the slogan of movements against gender-based violence around the world.

The protests brought together everyone from active campaigners for gender equality and human rights advocates to apolitical people and even some who said that they [fear](#) gender ideology and the Istanbul Convention. Beyond this political mix, indignation at both the brutality of the attack and the failure of institutions to offer the victim safety and closure angered many women who face sexist violence in their daily lives. As one woman participating in the protest in Sofia [shared](#), she protested so that women "are not afraid to say No. Because she [D.] said No and got this."

The reactions to the attack on D. also revealed widespread suspicions regarding the usefulness of the police. This anger at first translated into social media calls for popular vengeance against the suspect and what people saw as his enablers — the court bench that allowed for his release. The recognition of the failure of the police and the judiciary was underlined by participants' comparisons with the outrage provoked by the murder of Nahel Merzouk at the hands of the French police, which sparked week-long riots across France earlier this summer.

The handling of the attack on D. also bore striking resemblance to the case of a similar thug speeding in his car on a busy street in Sofia last year, crashing into two young women and killing them. The accident revealed impunity and possibly the collaboration of local police with drug-dealing gangs. Shockingly, a number of police aided the driver's escape after the crash.

Instead of preventing gender-based and sexual violence, the police has proven to be at best its

enabler and at worst its purveyor. Three years ago, during anti-government protests in Sofia a woman was arrested, beaten, and choked by the police, and an officer took photos of her breasts while handcuffed. The protester filed a case against the police and last month in an appeal to the court, the [legal counsel](#) for the police called her “disgraceful, unworthy, and an embarrassment.” This year, police in Bulgaria’s second city, Plovdiv, [strip-searched](#) and humiliated women and men during an attempted drug bust at a nightclub.

Feminist organizations also demanded the legal codification of nonphysical forms of violence, including psychological and economic violence against women. Many protesters demanded harsher sentencing for perpetrators of domestic violence. However, the movement also pointed to the need to raise awareness on issues related to sexism. Naming it as an issue confronting Bulgarian society is already a major breakthrough.

The debate is thus slowly moving beyond the individualizing approaches that have marked governmental efforts so far. Now, previously dismissed calls for more [shelters](#) for victims of abuse and the provision of better welfare are receiving more attention on conventional and social media. Improving the welfare of survivors instead of focusing on the abuser is crucial. Reducing domestic violence also requires an understanding of how social inequalities exacerbate it — another issue not discussed by any political party in Bulgaria, as poverty and exploitation are generally not on the agenda.

The protests’ demands also set it apart from other political responses to domestic violence insofar as they problematized wider patriarchal structures, for instance with calls for broad reforms in education and attitudes toward mental health. Some posters questioned gender norms, the meaning of the family and of masculinity. Protesters also [called](#) for sex education in schools; currently, such lessons are nonexistent in Bulgaria, contributing to a widespread inability to recognize and condemn violent behavior.

A Marathon, Not a Sprint

The widely publicized case has sparked a public reckoning with the many ways that gender-based violence is normalized and trivialized in Bulgaria. In its aftermath, many women came out with stories of the abuse and institutional dysfunction they faced after they sought protection.

This has also concerned public life. A prominent MP from the ruling party was forced to resign after he referred to domestic violence victims as “whores” during the parliamentary debate about reforms to the Penal Code. On social media, many people called out blatantly misogynist behavior by Bulgarian celebrities. One particularly shocking story featured a prominent basketball coach who, appearing on a popular podcast earlier this year, jokingly recalled shaving his former girlfriend’s head twenty years ago over her relationship with another man after they broke up, something that the coach considered adultery. The podcast had featured the story in a separate clip on its YouTube channel — only after the attack did some viewers begin to see it in a different light.

Unfortunately, the drive to report and seek recognition for abuse has already been countered by seeming copycat attacks. Just four days after the media reports about the attack on D., a man in the small town of Vidin beat up his former partner and forcibly cut her hair despite a restraining order. This woman shared her story in the media, too.

This also points to the wider battles that need fighting. A firm approach to stopping such violence would demand not only long sentences for perpetrators — in any case of questionable deterrent effect — but a general appreciation of the importance of consent and bodily autonomy. This is a program that women’s rights organizations have been promoting for [years](#), but has been ignored or

harshly demonized by political parties either stoking fears of “gay propaganda” or fearing any association with it.

The protests of recent weeks are a welcome change for anyone in Bulgaria who is sick and tired of the rampant misogyny and homophobia that characterizes too much of public life. Yet it would be naive to think that deeply rooted attitudes and social mores could change overnight. Despite many progressive reforms made during the postwar socialist period or the heroic efforts made by Bulgarian feminists, patriarchal attitudes and family structures remain rife. Indeed, some of these structures have grown more entrenched since the capitalist transformation, as the social dislocations of the 1990s forced many women to take on more productive and reproductive responsibilities.

Though Bulgaria has gradually recovered from the post-socialist economic collapse, the social and cultural fallout persists. Raising mass consciousness about the reality of systemic violence against women is an important first step. Translating that consciousness into legal and institutional changes could potentially initiate a wider process of reckoning, both within the state and among the wider population.

The sort of social transformation needed to ensure that women are equal members of society, with the necessary resources to protect themselves against domestic violence, will require a much larger movement than anything seen in Bulgaria in recent times. Yet nor are we starting from scratch. A number of organizations and activist collectives have been working on these issues for decades, providing social services, educational materials, and developing policy proposals. Today, their work is beginning to pay off.

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