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‘REAL BULGARIAN MEN’ UNDER THREAT: HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY AND MISOGYNY IN ONLINE DISCUSSIONS ON GENDER ANTAGONISM IN BULGARIA

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the discursive construction of social identities in online discussions on gender antagonism in Bulgaria through a critical discourse analysis of posts on the anonymous Q&A platform *Spodeli*. Drawing on social identity theory and Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity, the study examines how forum users construct an in-group identity of ‘the Bulgarian man’ by Othering women, gender-nonconforming individuals, Roma, and Western men as threats to national and masculine identity. The analysis highlights how platform affordances such as anonymity, lack of moderation, accessibility, and visibility facilitate the proliferation of misogynistic discourse. The findings show that despite sharing similarities with Western misogynist/anti-feminist discourses, discussions on the forum are largely shaped by post-communist anxieties around economy and national sovereignty. This study advances scholarship on networked misogyny by offering a situated analysis from an Eastern European perspective, revealing how gender antagonism is deeply intertwined with nationalist and anti-democratic currents in Bulgaria.

KEYWORDS

Hegemonic Masculinity • Networked Misogyny • Gender Antagonism
• Social Identity Theory • Othering • Critical Discourse Analysis • Social Media Affordances • Normalization • Eastern Europe • Bulgaria

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the surge in misogyny and anti-feminism online has received substantial scholarly attention (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Fontanella et al., 2024; Hoebanx, 2024), particularly in the Western context (e.g. Ging, 2019; Krendel, 2020; Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Rothermel, 2023). While misogyny is far from a modern issue, it has recently taken on new forms, aided by advancements in digital technology. The internet has enabled the transnationalization and systematic mobilization of anti-feminist sentiments by established and emerging political actors who oppose women's rights and gender equality policies (Roggeband & Krizsán, 2020). These developments have changed both the narratives these actors employ and the methods they use to communicate their ideas (Ging, 2019), resulting in what Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2016, p. 171) dub *networked misogyny* – “an especially virulent strain of violence and hostility towards women in online environments.”

However, much less is written about this phenomenon's manifestations outside Western countries. One largely under-researched geographical area is Eastern Europe, and particularly former Eastern Bloc members, despite significant prevalence of anti-feminist sentiments and politics in the region. Countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) score lowest on the Gender Equality Index for the continent (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023). Furthermore, concerted opposition to women's rights in the CEE region has impacted both institutional and civic levels. Authorities' gender equality efforts regularly face backlash, while NGOs endure funding restrictions, smear campaigns, and delegitimizing labels such as 'foreign agents' (Roggeband & Krizsán, 2024). A noteworthy case in Bulgaria is the rejection of the Council of Europe Convention on Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) in 2018, to which online alliances of conservative groups were instrumental (Darakchi, 2019).

Considering cultural differences and uneven democratic developments across Europe, the present study addresses the spread of networked misogyny in the context of Bulgaria – an Eastern European country on the Balkans. Using a discourse-historical approach to CDA informed by social identity theory and hegemonic masculinity, the study explores antagonistic gender discourses on the Bulgarian Q&A forum *Spodeli*. In doing so, it aims to identify constructed social identities and their role in amplifying hostility towards women and other enemy out-groups.

This study contributes an understanding of misogynistic discourse in online spaces and its political implications outside of an Anglo-Saxon context. A further contribution lies in the exploration of these issues beyond political actors, looking instead at how misogyny, anti-feminism and back-

lash against women's rights in Bulgaria are articulated and circulated online. The choice of platform is motivated by recent findings suggesting that online environments straddling the line between fringe and mainstream, where everyday topics intersect with extremist discourse and hate speech, can serve as gateways to radicalization (Åkerlund, 2021a), and contribute to the normalization of extremist discourse (Ekström, 2023). These previous findings underscore the importance of understanding the affordances of a platform such as *Spodeli*, which the present study contributes to.

1. UNDERSTANDING THE DYNAMICS OF NETWORKED MISOGYNY

Previous research highlights how misogynistic discourse thrives on constructing in-group identities by scapegoating specific gendered out-groups as the root of societal problems (Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012). Misogynistic discourse often relies on rigid, binary gender categories, positioning men as the in-group and women as the out-group. Such discourse taps into emotional vulnerabilities and broader societal anxieties. Women are constructed as 'abject Others,' blamed for issues like economic instability, shifting political landscapes, or perceived cultural decline related to changes in gender roles and norms (Chang, 2022). This potent combination of emotional appeal and collective identity, Blais and Dupuis-Déri (2012) argue, constructs a shared sense of grievance among men directed at a common enemy, thus increasing the virality potential of networked misogyny.

Networked misogyny plays a significant role in contemporary political struggles by amplifying and mobilizing forces around gender roles and hegemonic notions of masculinity. Online platforms have become fertile grounds for anti-feminist and misogynistic discourses, which are often intertwined with broader political agendas (Ging & Siapera, 2019). In her study of Turkish anti-Istanbul Convention groups' online posts, Eslen-Ziya (2022) highlights the connection between networked misogyny and mainstream political movements that seek to restrict or reverse gender equality policies. By framing gender equality as a zero-sum game, where gains for women equal losses for men, such discourse effectively galvanizes opposition to women's rights.

Understanding the circulation and articulation of networked misogyny within bounded national contexts is complicated given its transnational character. Local, regional, and global discourses mix on open, English-language platforms, where users often remain anonymous. While scholars increasingly recognize anti-feminism and misogyny as global phenomena (Ging & Siapera, 2019; Goetz & Mayer, 2023), there is a dearth of research into how misogyny manifests in non-English-speaking contexts. In the Balkan context, Milanović (2021) has attempted to capture anti-feminist

online discourses specific to Serbia by analyzing posts from Serbian IP addresses on the 4chan board /pol/ ('Politically Incorrect'). A key limitation, however, is the exclusive use of English-language data from an international platform. Since English proficiency in Balkan countries lags behind the European average (EF, 2024), this approach may fail to capture substantial segments of the population engaging with anti-feminist and/or misogynist rhetoric in local languages.

1.1. Historical Legacies and Contemporary Backlashes: Gender, Politics, and Identity in Bulgaria

Critical discourse analysis acknowledges that discourses both shape and are shaped by the environments in which they occur. This requires situating the present study within the Bulgarian socio-political context. Bulgaria's geopolitical position—a former Eastern Bloc member, part of CEE, the Balkans, and the EU—reflects a blend of diverse, sometimes contradictory, influences. These include the country's communist past, prolonged post-communist transition, the 2008 economic crisis, and EU policies following its accession.

As a “recent democracy” (Roggeband & Krizsán, 2020, p. 2), Bulgaria continues to grapple with its past as an Eastern Bloc member (1946-1989). This period of sweeping reforms in many areas, including women's rights and societal roles, continues to shape debates in modern Bulgaria, where generational and ideological divides between the country's communist legacy and pro-European outlook persist.

According to Slabakova (1992, p. 140), during the communist period, society “was not so much male-oriented as Communist-party oriented” – which worked to the benefit of women's rights. In 1944, women obtained voting rights (Daskalova, 2004), and abortion, though intermittently restricted, became legal in 1956 (UN, 2002). By 1950, Bulgaria had implemented state-funded, universally accessible healthcare (Georgieva et al., 2007). Women entered education and the workforce, supported by social policies such as paid maternity leave, daycare facilities, and public canteens. The Bulgarian Women's Movement Committee pushed legislative reforms and showcased Bulgaria internationally as a leader in women's emancipation, particularly during the UN Women's Decade 1975-1985 (Ghodsee, 2012). However, the structural improvements to women's social stance were accompanied by strongly conservative public discourse. The state primarily referred to women as mothers, and motherhood was idealized as part of a ‘natural gender harmony.’ Although equality was guaranteed in principle, the state apparatus failed to acknowledge the diversity of women's experiences, overlooking the specific needs of i.e. queer women,

women from ethnic and religious minorities, and women with disabilities (Brunnbauer & Taylor, 2004).

Bulgaria's transition to democracy and EU integration was not without its controversies. Disillusioned by worsening living conditions post-1989, Bulgarians initially viewed EU membership with optimism – 72% were in favor of it before Bulgaria's EU accession in 2007 (Dimitrova, 2012). Women's rights were expected to benefit as well, with accession requiring alignment with the EU *acquis communautaire* on gender equality, including passing the Law on Protection against Discrimination (Daskalova, 2005). However, progress proved complex. Government efforts were focused on meeting economic and political benchmarks for accession, while social issues like gender inequality were sidelined, failing to properly enter the public debate (Luleva, 2016). Amidst this development, the imposition of Western gender equality models, without public debate or consideration of Bulgaria's unique historical and cultural context, led to resistance and waves of socialist nostalgia (Ghodsee, 2004). After the EU accession, development stalled, and emigration fueled by the 2008 economic crisis brought about demographic and labor market challenges (Bogdanov & Rangelova, 2012). In this context, there has been little public discussion of the lasting effects of the communist past, providing an opportunity for anti-EU political actors to reframe these issues as consequences of Europeanisation (Stanchev, 2023).

Against this backdrop, Bulgaria has recently seen a surge in anti-feminist and misogynist rhetoric. A notable event was the 2018 backlash against the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, which conservative and far-right actors in the country framed as a threat to traditional values and family structures in Bulgaria. The ensuing debates popularized the term 'gender ideology' – a catch-all phrase used to vilify feminist movements and promote fears of Western cultural imperialism (Kovacheva, 2023). This narrative has since merged with broader nationalist and anti-EU discourses, fueling hostility toward progressive human- and women's rights reforms. More recently, a 2024 law banning LGBTQ+ 'propaganda' in schools has further entrenched traditionalist views, casting gender equality advocates as cultural adversaries (Todorov, 2024).

2. SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY AND THE DISCURSIVE POWER OF OTHERING

This study draws on social identity theory (SIT) to understand how discursive tropes around gender antagonism help construct and reinforce hegemonic gender identities. SIT poses that (perceived) belonging to social groups influences individuals' self-presentation and compels them to act

in accordance with a *social identity* (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). In intergroup conflict, SIT claims, social identity reinforces self-esteem, fosters in-group loyalty, and creates opposition toward out-groups.

At its core, SIT revolves around the discursive construction of identity. Group identities are shaped by *prototypes* - shared traits, behaviors, and values that form *stereotypes* about said group (Berger, 2018). This process involves *social categorization*: assigning identities to others, and *social identification*: aligning one's behavior to perceived group norms and emotional investment in the group's collective identity. Through *social comparison*, then, positive bias forms towards in-groups and negative bias - towards out-groups. Particularly in conflict, group identity motivates members to renegotiate perceived disadvantages in social hierarchies and seek *social change* (Tajfel & Turner, 2004).

Further, SIT posits that the need to maintain a positive social identity can lead to in-group favoritism and out-group hostility (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). This occurs through Othering - the discursive process wherein self-perceived 'dominant' groups define groups they perceive 'subordinate' as fundamentally different (Dervin, 2016; Jensen, 2011). By constructing the 'Other' as deviant, threatening, or morally deficient, social hierarchies are legitimized and in-group cohesion is reinforced (Jensen, 2011). Othering is thus deeply intertwined with SIT's mechanisms of social comparison and in-group favoritism, as it explicates the symbolic mechanisms through which out-groups are devalued and excluded.

Berger (2018) applies SIT to studying extremist groups/communities, showing how social identity formation lies at the core of justifying hostile and/or violent actions against out-groups. Extremism, he argues, relies on narratives claiming the necessity for (violent) measures against out-group(s) of 'Others' in the face of an imminent crisis/threat that these 'Others' pose to the in-group. In the present study, SIT is instrumental in identifying discursive constructions of gender-based social identities and beliefs about the in-group and its relationship to others. Berger's insights invite paying special attention to how ideas around masculinity and femininity on *Spodeli* lend themselves to violent interpretations of gender relations, potentially producing misogyny and inciting symbolic or physical violence.

2.1. Hegemonic Masculinity

This study is theoretically informed by Connell's concept of *hegemonic masculinity* (Connell, 2005, 2013; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), which offers a critical lens for understanding how dominant gender norms are constructed and maintained. Hegemonic masculinity refers to a culturally dominant form of masculinity that establishes itself as the most powerful

and respected gender ideal, thereby exerting control over other, marginalized masculinities, as well as over femininity. While few men completely embody the hegemonic masculine ideal, it operates as a social benchmark, compelling men to negotiate their identities in alignment with its expectations (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This structure accommodates variations in masculine expression, but only as long as they ultimately reinforce the dominance of hegemonic masculinity. Thus, hegemonic masculinity sustains patriarchal dominance by legitimizing certain masculine traits and marginalizing others.

Messerschmidt (2019) further poses that hegemonic masculinity is not monolithic but is shaped differently in specific cultural, social, and historical contexts. Thus, he calls for scholars to examine hegemonic masculinities (plural) at the local, regional, and global levels. Global inquiries highlight that hegemonic masculinity often emphasizes physical appearance as a marker of male success (Coyne et al., 2022; King et al., 2021; Marshall et al., 2020). In the Bulgarian context, however, the hegemonic masculine ideal is more often constructed as a financially stable, patriotic Orthodox Christian holding 'traditional family values.' These characteristics are central to ethno-nationalist discourses that propagate anti-European and xenophobic rhetoric targeting various 'Others' like ethnic, religious, or sexual minorities (Luleva, 2018). The lens of hegemonic masculinity thus helps unpack the power dynamics embedded in such discourses, revealing how dominant masculine ideals marginalize alternative masculinities and femininities, perpetuating misogyny and gender antagonism.

2.2. Social Media Affordances for Gender Antagonism

The study applies an affordance focus to reflect on the role *Spodeli's* affordances play in shaping the type of discourses identified in the results. Emerging from the field of human-computer interaction, the affordances concept has been embraced by the social sciences, broadly defined as "functional and relational aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object" (Hutchby, 2001, p. 444). An affordance-focused approach thus invites researchers to consider the relational dynamics between technologies and their users while recognizing that although technological features can influence user behavior, they do not dictate it entirely (Evans et al., 2017; Hopkins, 2016).

Importantly, online networks and their logics are constantly evolving. Anonymous, low-moderation platforms (such as Reddit or 4chan) are a particularly prominent type of spaces where moderate and extreme discourses intermingle. Anonymity, a defining feature of such forums, allows users to share thoughts and express attitudes pushing the boundaries of

societal norms – thus not only amplifying the reach of extreme discourses, but also increasingly normalizing them (Åkerlund, 2021a; Stoencheva & Mileva Boshkoska, 2024). Massanari (2017) argues that the lack of accountability that anonymity provides affords anti-feminist, misogynistic, and potentially violent rhetoric to proliferate unhindered, and Ging (2019, pp. 642-643) similarly highlights that online anonymity “facilitates hostile and often illegal performances of masculinity [...] which would not go unchecked in face-to-face contexts.” Further, the combination of anonymity and minimal moderation—often justified as defense of ‘free speech’—proves especially conducive to hate speech (Åkerlund, 2023).

However, anonymity and moderation are only part of a broader ecology of affordances that enable the spread of misogynist discourse online. In her study of Reddit, Massanari (2017) demonstrates how algorithmic amplification contributes to the creation of “toxic technocultures” that reward inflammatory or emotionally charged posts with boosted visibility. The temporal persistence of online content further contributes to the sedimentation of misogynistic narratives. As Jane (2014) argues, the indefinite availability of posts containing what she calls “e-bile”—a specific genre of online discourse characterized by graphic, gendered, and often sexualized hostility—allows misogynistic narratives to be archived, recirculated, and recontextualized over time. Other harmful internet practices include ‘trolling’ and ‘shitposting’, which blur the lines between sincere and performative misogyny. This ambiguity allows users to deflect criticism by framing their posts as jokes or satire, even when they contain explicit threats or hate speech (Greene, 2019). These findings highlight the need to pay attention to platform affordances and their role in fostering gender antagonism.

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The empirical focus of this study is the Bulgarian Q&A platform *Spodeli* (meaning *share*). Building on the theoretical framework outlined above, the research questions guiding the inquiry are:

- *What discursive tropes structure online gender debates on Spodeli, and how do they contribute to the construction and reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity and related social identities?*
- *How do the social and technological affordances of the platform shape these discourses?*

The self-stated purpose of *Spodeli* is providing a safe space for people to discuss personal experiences, even controversial or taboo such, completely anonymously. In its structure, it shares similarities with popular interna-

tional website *Quora*: users post questions, generating one-to-many micro-threads that others can answer. To create a thread, one chooses from 13 available categories (among which *Love & Cheating*, *Sex & Intimacy*, *Family*, *Teenage*, *Drugs & Alcohol*, etc.), adds a title (their question), and writes a description (contextualizing the question). Published threads can be accessed via the 'Newest posts/comments' feed, keyword search, categories, or an admin-curated 'Editor's Choice' section.

The platform has retained its basic design since its creation in 2007, and lacks features standard to more modern social media platforms. Most significantly, visitors cannot create accounts, which ensures that posts and comments remain untraceable, but also prevents editing/deleting comments or following users. Images and hyperlinks are also disallowed. Further, one cannot reply to a specific comment – all answers to a thread appear chronologically, without algorithmic or personalized curation. Users can rate each answer with 1-5 stars, but rating does not affect answers' prominence in the thread.

Precise statistics about *Spodeli's* user base and popularity are unavailable, but third-party data indicate that it occupies a mid-tier position in Bulgaria's web landscape. According to website tracker SpyMetrics (2025), the site ranked #484 nationally in April 2025, with approximately 200,420 visits (a 7.5% decrease from the month before). No historical data is available for the period analyzed in this study, and there is no direct evidence regarding user demographics. However, based on its long-standing presence and daily activity, *Spodeli* appears to attract a relatively stable user base. Over 60% of the traffic comes from search engines rather than direct navigation (SpyMetrics, 2025), implying that most users are occasional visitors who discover the site while searching for specific topics online. Thus, *Spodeli* can be understood as a niche forum rather than a hub for fringe communities. As of April 2025, close to 200,000 threads have been started on *Spodeli*, many with hundreds of answers.

The T&Cs state the 'absolute freedom of speech' on the platform, aside from three simple rules: no sharing of personal details, no spam or advertisements, and no illegal content. Rather than applying reactive moderation, every post is reviewed by an admin before publication to ensure compliance. The platform's nature facilitates candid sharing about intimate and stigmatized topics such as sexual relationships, but also invites conversations about politics and worldviews. Freed from the constraints of accountability and reputation management that come with maintaining a user account, users appear more willing to articulate controversial or socially sensitive thoughts and opinions – including hate speech, sexism, racism, and homophobia. Consequently, *Spodeli* offers a window onto ex-

ploring polarizing debates on gender, which often escalate into misogyny and other forms of gender antagonism towards certain social groups.

This study draws on a sample of 3,221 *Spodeli* posts from 80 threads posted between 2020 and 2022. Threads were sampled by searching for the keywords ‘masculinity,’ ‘femininity,’ ‘feminism,’ ‘misogyny,’ and ‘misandry,’ chosen for their relevance to the study’s focus on gender antagonism. The collected material was read in its entirety and analyzed through critical discourse analysis (CDA).

The study takes a discourse-historical approach (DHA) to CDA. Discourse is conceptualized here as social actions mediated through text, which both construct societal norms and reproduce power inequalities (Wodak, 1996). DHA examines the interplay between text and context, which enables accounting for historical and cultural (re)contextualizations that inform the construction of gender-based social identities in the analyzed material. The analysis follows the DHA process outlined by Reisigl and Wodak (2009). First, the research questions were informed by contextual and theoretical insights, as outlined above. Next followed the data collection, where the focus was on capturing threads that potentially address gender antagonism. The initial reading of the data focused on identifying comments of interest; then, the research homed in on specific tropes that encapsulate antagonistic constructions of gender-based social identities to understand how they facilitate the social identity construction process. Particular attention was paid to the use of linguistic devices (i.e. metaphors, stereotypes, evaluative attributions), as well as to references to broader socio-historical narratives. Lastly, the findings were contextualized within Bulgaria’s historical and contemporary cultural and political dynamics, providing insights into how gender antagonism in online discourse aligns with broader sociopolitical trends.

Before I proceed to the analysis, I wish to acknowledge my positionality in relation to this research. As someone born and raised in Bulgaria, the socio-cultural context examined here is in many ways familiar and taken for granted, necessitating a conscious process of ‘denaturalization’ in order to critically analyze it. However, having lived in Western Europe for over a decade, I have observed recent political and cultural developments from a distance, which lends me a more of an ‘outsider-looking-in’ perspective. Inevitably, my personal position shapes how I approach the material.

4. FINDINGS: ‘BULGARIAN MEN’ AND THEIR ‘OTHERS’

This section explores how forum users construct the ‘Bulgarian man’ through discursive opposition to a range of Others: gender-nonconform-

ing individuals, Roma, 'Westerners', and women. The findings highlight the intersection of internationally-inspired and locally-specific tropes, illustrating how current sociopolitical realities, historical legacies, and contemporary global and local narratives play into these discourses, as well as how *Spodeli's* affordances affect their shaping and dissemination.

4.1. The Ideal 'Bulgarian Man'

The 'Bulgarian man' trope is recurring in the analyzed discussions, serving to encourage male users to adopt a shared identity tied to the patriarchal father-protector-breadwinner ideal (Luleva, 2018). As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, p. 841) argue, masculinity "represents not a certain type of man but, rather, a way that men position themselves through discursive practices." Struggling to meet the hegemonic masculine ideal, *Spodeli* users work to actively renegotiate the traits of the ideal 'Bulgarian man' to better align with their own realities.

A notable contrast between the Western-centric understandings of hegemonic masculinity and its local articulation in the Bulgarian context is the focus on financial means rather than physical appearance. In contrast to Western literature, which emphasizes looks as central to the global hegemonic male ideal (King et al., 2021; Marshall et al., 2020), on *Spodeli*, wealth is considered the primary marker of a man's attractiveness. One user writes:

For women of our generation, financial status is paramount. It is, figuratively speaking, the "one" ahead of a multiple sequence of zeros, which makes a meaningful number (1000...). Other factors like education, manners, and physique each add another zero and raise your "value," but only provided that the "one" is already there.

This comment explicitly equates male worth with financial capital, discussing identity and human relations in market-driven terms. Like many other comments along the same lines, it demonstrates that users see their own masculinity challenged by their perceived economic disadvantages. Thus, the topic of wealth creates tension which they manage by positioning themselves against 'inferior Others'. The discussions illustrate how 'Bulgarian men' use social comparison to negotiate masculinity, defining it not by what it includes but by what it excludes. While a 'Bulgarian man' is typically seen as an ethnically Bulgarian, heterosexual, cisgender male living in Bulgaria, his acceptable demeanor is defined through opposition to various out-groups constructed to embody the criteria of exclusion from the in-group identity. In-group and out-group identities are formed through

stereotyping and de-individualization, with three major out-groups: ‘genders,’ Roma, and ‘foreign’ (Western) men.

4.2. The Threat of ‘Genders’ or ‘Gendered Others’

The group of ‘Others’ that *Spodeli* users most actively distance themselves from are men who, as they see it, ‘relinquish their masculinity’ by being or acting ‘feminine.’ This group includes homosexual, transsexual, queer, and ‘soft’ men – those whose self-expression does not conform to the hegemonic masculine ideal. The convergence of these alternative masculinities into one group demonstrates the centrality of ‘manliness’ to membership in the ‘Bulgarian men’ in-group. The English term *gender*, politicized during the anti-Istanbul Convention campaign, has taken on a new meaning in the Bulgarian context (Darakchi, 2019) and the Cyrillic transliteration of it (‘джендър’) is used on the platform as a derogatory noun signifying males deviating from the ‘traditional Bulgarian man’ image either by appearance, behavior, or ideology. Users actively engage in social comparison to position ‘genders’ as inferior to their perceived in-group, and anonymity emboldens them to voice disdain in particularly blunt, dehumanizing ways. Values associated with ‘genders,’ and hence seen as undesirable, include feminism, progressive views, and a pro-European stance.

This discourse mirrors global anti-feminist rhetoric, which links the feminist movement to a masculinity crisis (Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012). On *Spodeli*, however, users argue that Bulgarian men’s ‘feminization’ is a post-transition issue – an argument often evoked with undertones of socialist nostalgia. These ‘emasculated’ men receive not sympathy but contempt, contrasting them to heroic figures from the past said to embody a lost ideal of masculinity. The discourse reflects Western far-right discourses, framing the decline of ‘real masculinity’ as a threat to societal stability and the nation’s survival (Copland, 2023).

4.3. The Roma as an ‘Internal Threat’

Echoing the far-right’s transnational narrative of the ‘Great Replacement,’ which frames racialized Others as demographically and culturally overtaking white populations (Copland, 2023), the Roma minority in Bulgaria is often presented as an internal threat to the nation. The Roma are widely scapegoated in Bulgarian society, associated with stereotypes like poverty, illiteracy, theft, and uncontrolled reproduction (Canut, 2019). *Spodeli* users portray them as an outlawed, primitive ethnic group, using derogatory terms like ‘gypsies’ (‘*mangali*’). Paradoxically, some of the same traits that the Roma are vilified for—high fertility and resistance to institutional norms—are elsewhere idealized as markers of traditional masculinity and

cultural vitality. This contradiction reveals how racialized Others are discursively excluded from the symbolic rewards of hegemonic masculinity, even when embodying its celebrated attributes. Religion also plays a role, with the Roma often presented as uniformly Islamist. This despite the 2021 census showing that slightly more Roma profess Christianity than Islam, with the majority stating other or no religions (NSI, 2021). Positioning the Roma as Islamist serves to frame them as a 'dangerous Other' to the 'traditional Christian family virtues' central to the identity of 'Bulgarian men,' despite the ambiguity surrounding what these virtues actually entail.

4.4. Western Men as 'Abject Others'

Foreign men, especially those from the West, are another out-group against which the 'Bulgarian man' asserts his identity. This serves both to emphasize ethnic origin as central to this social identity and to reject perceived 'foreign values.' On *Spodeli*, resistance to Western ideals is celebrated as an act of national pride and a rightful duty for the 'Bulgarian man,' as reflected in comments like the following:

There's a proverb: everything new is well-forgotten old, and so it is with these pseudo-ideologies that are now imposing a "new normal" on us. Luckily, here in Bulgaria, although we are poorer and not as developed as the Western world, we have kept some common sense and traditions and don't accept everything that is offered to us at face value, because as a nation we have suffered for many centuries. Let them laugh at us "primitive Balkans" - in some areas, Western nations will never catch up to us.

One internationally prominent antifeminist far-right narrative revolves around the grievance of men's perceived lack of access to sexual relationships, framed as a societal threat to the survival of native populations (Copland, 2023). Here, the 'Western man' is presumed to have greater wealth and hence be preferred by Bulgarian women, creating a need to reassert Bulgarian male worth. While accusing 'Western men' of contributing to the 'extinction of the Bulgarian nation' by 'stealing' Bulgarian women, users simultaneously frame them as a race in decline that has fallen victim to Western liberalism and globalism. The lack of direct reply functions on *Spodeli* means these statements rarely face rebuttal or dialogue. Instead, the platform's affordances favor monologic assertions that gain performative traction by appealing to group identity.

Ethnic Bulgarians who emigrate represent a distinct subset of the 'Western men' trope. While Western far-right and anti-feminist narratives often focus on immigration, particularly from the Middle East, here the dis-

course centers on emigration as a threat to the nation's survival. For one, emigrants are implicated as 'foreign agents' who adopt Western values abroad and 'import' them back into Bulgaria through interactions with locals or by returning home. Moreover, they are seen as 'traitors', particularly for creating families with foreign partners. According to SIT, the attempt to switch social groups is perceived by the original in-group as a betrayal deserving of punishment (Tajfel & Turner, 2004), and this is evident in the way *Spodeli* users discuss the 'emigrant' out-group. National pride is essential to the 'Bulgarian man' identity, and staying in Bulgaria is discursively framed as a heroic act that safeguards the nation and its people. While emigrants are considered more appealing to women due to their improved financial means, they are still portrayed as inferior, falling short of both 'real' Westerners and 'real' Bulgarians. Forum users promote the idea that emigrants can never live and work on equal terms and gain the same financial means as Western Europeans. Pursuing the 'false promise' of a better life abroad is thus considered treason – an act which, users argue, renders emigrants morally inferior to 'Bulgarian men' while still financially inferior to Westerners.

4.5. 'Feminazis'

In addition to out-groups of 'Other' men, *Spodeli* users also position the social identity of 'Bulgarian men' in relation to women. Similar to observations from international platforms (e.g. Ging, 2019), discourses on the forum portray 'Bulgarian men' as victims of feminism and express nostalgia for a patriarchal 'golden age' – here, the pre-1989 communist period. Forum users discuss modern feminism as a form of 'social engineering' orchestrated by elites to subjugate men and manage the global population by turning women into 'feminazis' who seek female domination rather than equality. The West is blamed for 'importing' feminism to Bulgaria through globalization and mass emigration, and figures like George Soros are implicated in funding Bulgarian NGOs to spread pro-European and pro-Western ideologies.

Anti-feminist and misogynistic sentiments are often invoked to construct 'feminazi' women as an out-group, accusing them of abandoning their societal roles and becoming 'tyrants.' In addition to strengthening in-group unity through emotional appeal, these discourses call for counteractions that legitimize discrimination and even violence. This rhetorical acceleration is supported by the platform's absence of moderation mechanisms and lack of reply infrastructure, which removes friction that might otherwise slow or redirect antagonistic momentum. One user, for instance, claims that "the evil of feminism can only be defeated by physical force," warning that failure to act would spell disaster not just for men, but ultimately for

the entire humanity – a statement that in other contexts might be censored or challenged, but here persists and accumulates. Such discourses become potent catalysts for motivating violence against women by rationalizing it as a necessary response (Berger, 2018).

However, forum users disagree on how deeply feminism has taken root in Bulgaria, with some claiming it has not yet permeated all areas of society and politics and thus that there is room for resistance. Some see 'Western feminism' as a distorted counterpart to the 'real' feminism seen under the communist regime:

In Bulgaria, women have long now been an established part of the workforce thanks to socialism. We don't have gender pay gaps, we have as many women as men in high-paying jobs like IT, law, medicine. Women have the right to vote, to drive, to study. And this has never come at the expense of having a family. On the contrary, during the socialist regime women were supported in having both children and careers, unlike now. Western feminism tries to convince us it's either-or, but Bulgarians know what real feminism looks like – men and women as equal, not as the same.

Statements like the above serve to discursively establish feminism as a foreign ideology irrelevant to the lives of Bulgarian women, motivating calls for anti-feminist action. Moreover, calls to vote for nationalist far-right parties are frequent, which reflects international findings on the link between anti-feminism and far-right nationalism (Copland, 2023). Bulgarian far-right leaders are celebrated in these discourses as 'real Bulgarian men' protecting the nation, thereby integrating far-right ideology into the 'Bulgarian man' identity.

4.6. Bulgarian Women as 'Gold Diggers'

Although discussions about feminism on the platform often target women broadly, 'Bulgarian women' make up a distinct out-group characterized by materialism and obsession with money and status. This market-oriented framing of gender relations dominates throughout the dataset, tying into the hegemonic masculinity ideal of men as providers. Romantic relations are cast as competitive marketplaces, and failure to secure a partner is blamed on economic scarcity. Women, in turn, are described as for-sale objects seeking the highest bidder. However, these discourses seldom frame men as responsible for acquiring wealth, nor do they criticize wealthy men for their perceived advantages. Instead, critique is directed towards the 'mercantile Bulgarian woman,' a 'gold-digger' devoid of values seeking luxury over love or attraction. One user writes:

The mercantile woman exists! I don't know if she's a product of our time, or if this sort of women has always existed. Unfortunately, gentlemen, if you lack a shiny Jeep, an expensive suit, if you do not drink branded alcohol, then you are doomed to be alone.

The collective disdain toward 'mercantile' Bulgarian women is often expressed through affectively intense, emotionally saturated language. This emotional tone is encouraged by the platform's 'latest' posts visibility, which facilitates engagement with high-affect posts, and the lack of reply functionality, which favors one-directional venting over deliberative negotiation. In discourses highlighting this preoccupation with wealth above appearance, two distinctly Bulgarian tropes are often invoked: the *mutra* (literal translation: *mug*) and *kifla* (literal translation: *muffin*). To grasp their meaning, the historical and cultural contexts they are embedded in require further unpacking.

The term *mutra*—a slur emerging in the 1990s—became one of the defining tropes of the transition. Originally, it referred to mafia-like networks of former regime supporters, many of which ex-wrestlers, who exploited their ties to the dismantled communist regime to seize state-owned businesses during the post-communist privatization process. Representing “a large, physically strong, unintelligent mobster, hostile and prone to violence against ordinary people” (Bankov, 1996), the *mutra* later came to embody a post-transition image of male 'success', combining hyper-masculinity, aggression, power, and wealth.

The *kifla*, on the other hand, refers (usually derogatorily) to a glamorous woman exhibiting a “provocative, kitschy, trending [...] dressing and make-up style” (Stoykova, 2013, p. 280). The *kifla* look is often associated with *chalga* – a musical style popularized in the 1990s, mixing Bulgarian folklore rhythms with Ottoman, Romani, and Balkan influences. *Chalga* lyrics and aesthetics emphasize “the eroticizing of power,” often portraying “interactions of seduction mediated by money” (Muharska, 2019, p. 215). Female *chalga* artists' opulent, overly-sexualized appearance involves heavy makeup, hair extensions, revealing outfits, cosmetic enhancements like large silicone breasts and lip fillers, designer clothing, lavish jewelry, expensive cars, and luxury settings.

The Bulgarian figures of the *mutra* and *kifla* function as culturally specific counterparts to manosphere archetypes such as 'Chads' and 'Stacys' (Ging, 2019). Like 'Chad', the *mutra* symbolizes hypermasculine dominance. Likewise, the *kifla* plays a role akin to the 'Stacy' – she is hyper-feminine, sexually appealing, materialistic, and immoral. However, both tropes crystallize anxieties about gender, class, and morality in the aftermath of

Bulgaria's turbulent post-communist transition, adding affective complexity that is absent from the Western terms. On *Spodeli*, these tropes are evoked with a mixture of contempt, envy, and underlying admiration. While objects of mockery, they are also oddly admired as twisted ideals of male achievement. Muharska (2019) observes similar dynamics in her analysis of *chalga* culture's influence on the 2018 Istanbul Convention debate, suggesting that men compensate perceived economic shortcomings of the hegemonic masculine ideal by embracing a hyper-masculine image (of which hyper-feminine women are a part). She also emphasizes the importance of male "homo-sociality" among such men, where shared identity reaffirms and amplifies their masculinity.

5. CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

This study contributes to research on networked misogyny by addressing two important research gaps. First, it shifts the geographical focus from the predominantly Western-centered research to Eastern Europe, particularly Bulgaria, challenging assumptions that networked misogyny is a 'Western issue' specific to Anglo-Saxon online spaces. Second, it moves beyond political actors to examine how these discourses play out among 'ordinary' users in online environments.

The findings demonstrate how discourses on *Spodeli* invite men to identify with a hegemonic subject position of ideal Bulgarian masculinity, defined in opposition to various 'Others': gender-nonconforming men, Roma, 'Westerners', and women. The 'Bulgarian man' identity is negotiated in dialogue with hegemonic masculinity, elevating him as protector of nation and tradition while navigating anxieties of financial inferiority to Western men. Feminism is construed as a destructive force undermining traditional gender roles, and the 'Bulgarian woman' is depicted as mercantile and materialistic. Discourses are contradictory and diverse, but grounded in shared beliefs about society and gender. International and local interpretations intersect, with locally specific tropes like the *mutra* and *kifla* embodying financial struggles following Bulgaria's transition from communism to democracy. The discursive structure of these conversations follows a crisis narrative pattern, whereby out-groups are depicted as existential threats to the in-group requiring radical/violent solutions (Berger, 2018).

Arguably, the platform's affordances of anonymity, lack of hate speech moderation, visibility, and accessibility play a key role in sustaining these discourses. Anonymity creates an environment that unburdens users from accountability or reputation management. Further, the absence of user accounts fosters collective social identity expression rather than individual identity performance. This combination of affordances allows individuals

to externalize latent biases and align themselves with (violently) misogynist narratives in ways they might not in other contexts – despite claims of legal compliance, violence against women is openly discussed and even justified on the platform. Accessibility also plays an important role. The diversity of conversations on *Spodeli* attracts varying types of users and lurkers to the platform, meaning that users who do not intentionally seek out gender-hostile content are nonetheless exposed to it. Seeing such discourses proliferate unchecked can in turn lead to internalizing and perpetuating them. This aligns with earlier findings, suggesting similar platforms help mainstream hateful discourses (Åkerlund, 2021b). Finally, although *Spodeli* lacks content boosting algorithms, its ‘Latest’ feed functions as a visibility affordance that subtly amplifies antagonist discourse. Emotionally charged comments attract engagement, keeping provocative threads visible. This shows how even minimal design choices produce affordances that can shape discourse trajectories and help normalize hostility over time.

This study faces some limitations inherent to researching online platforms. Without user accounts, *Spodeli*’s user demographics or contributor numbers remain unknown, nor can the extent of trolling (intentionally insincere or provocative posting) be assessed. The sampling process might also have impacted the findings. The keywords used to collect data may not fully reflect the vocabulary of all users on the platform, introducing a potential bias toward more explicit or ideologically charged discussions. While the terms were chosen to capture relevant discourses, I acknowledge that they may have filtered out more implicit or colloquial expressions of gender antagonism. Nevertheless, the anti-feminist and misogynistic discourses identified here occur in parallel to political backlashes against gender equality initiatives in Bulgaria, such as the rejection of the Istanbul Convention and the 2024 law banning LGBTQ+ ‘propaganda’ in schools. Further, the observed anti-West discourses and the view of emigrants as ‘traitors’ resonate with nationalist and anti-European sentiments prevalent in far-right political rhetoric.

While these findings remain context-specific, insights from North American and Western European research suggest that they mirror discourses and practices characteristic of the global phenomenon of networked misogyny. Further empirical research is needed to fully understand how this phenomenon manifests in Bulgaria, but its abovementioned alignment with anti-democratic political trends highlights the need for vigilance in protecting democratic values. As Bulgaria redefines its post-communist identity, this research may help design interventions addressing grievances that fuel regressive discourse.

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