



CENTER FOR
THE STUDY OF
DEMOCRACY



Fractured Mirror

Identity Narratives and Polarisation
in Bulgaria

Fractured Mirror:

Identity Narratives and Polarisation in Bulgaria



Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine prompted a rise in malign information operations across Southeast Europe. In Bulgaria, these efforts use identity-focused narratives to intensify societal polarisation and undermine democratic institutions. Leveraging local anti-"gender ideology" movements and Kremlin-linked networks, these campaigns drive attacks based on identity and have significant social, political, and economic consequences. This report maps how these campaigns and networks weaken democratic resilience from within: targeting women in public life with harassment and emergent deepfakes; stoking hostility towards Ukrainian refugee women; and channelling young men into a profit-driven manosphere ecosystem.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AfD	Alternative für Deutschland (Germany) (political party)
AI	Artificial Intelligence
BSP	Bulgarian Socialist Party (political party)
CEM	Council for Electronic Media
DSA	Digital Services Act (EU)
DSC	Digital Services Coordinator
DPS	Movement for Rights and Freedoms (political party)
EDMO	European Digital Media Observatory
EEAS	European External Action Service
FIMI	Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GERB	Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (political party)
IC	Istanbul Convention
ITN	There Is Such a People (political party)
LGBTIQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer (plus)
MRA	Men's Rights Activist (plural: MRAs)
PUA	Pick-up Artists

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The European Union has identified Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) as a primary security threat, defining it as the strategic use of disinformation to exploit social divisions and undermine institutional trust. In response, the EU has developed an anti-disinformation toolbox, spearheaded by landmark legislation such as the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the AI Act to defend its information environment. These malign campaigns are particularly potent when they weaponise identity. Against the backdrop of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, Bulgaria remains a frequent target of the Kremlin's operations that draw on economic, cultural, historical, and social cleavages to shape public discourse and policy outcomes.

This report provides a detailed mapping of the digital infrastructure used to mainstream one of the most effective forms of this manipulation – gender and identity-based disinformation. Beyond eroding trust in democratic institutions, such campaigns suppress participation, as well as silence and undermine the rights of vulnerable social groups. Targets and harms are consistent with EU-level threat assessments. Women in public life face sustained campaigns that sexualise, delegitimise, and intimidate, now augmented by emergent deepfake incidents against journalists. Ukrainian refugee women are reframed through dehumanising tropes that have coincided with recorded offline aggression. In parallel, a monetised manosphere funnels young men from lifestyle and entertainment content towards a normalised anti-egalitarian ideology, embedding misogyny and grievance into a scalable radicalisation pipeline. Cross-platform findings reveal that between January 2023 and May 2025, online media outlets published over 45,500 articles related to gender- and identity-based disinformation with a potential reach of 52.8 million. Telegram was identified as a central vector for pro-Kremlin messaging, where over 7,800 posts generated 5.7 million views. On YouTube, an analysis of over 2,600 videos (2.5 million views) reveals how entertainment and pseudo-journalistic formats are used to normalise misogynistic content and link audience engagement to illiberal political discourse.

Persisting systemic vulnerabilities, such as under-resourced Bulgarian-language content moderation and the incomplete implementation of the EU's DSA, allows identity narratives and coordinated harassment to persist with limited oversight. The report's findings lead to several recommendations, including the full implementation of the DSA, linguistically-competent takedown mechanisms for online abuse, curtailment of the financial incentives that sustain disinformation campaigns, as well as targeted measures against FIMI.

INTRODUCTION

Information manipulation is not only a question of geopolitics – it is increasingly a battle fought on the terrain of identity. Building on the Center for the Study of Democracy's (CSD) long-standing research into foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) and cognitive capture, this report explores how disinformation targeting gender and identity is instrumentalised as both foreign and domestic tool of influence. Bulgaria remains highly susceptible to influence campaigns, particularly from Russia. This vulnerability is rooted in historical ties and widespread pro-Russian sentiment, which has led to significant "cognitive capture" across the population and political elites.¹ The disinformation environment is deeply entrenched, utilising modern methods such as automated content creation, bot networks, and "mushroom websites" – platforms with nearly identical designs that flood the online space with repetitive, misleading content.² This is exacerbated by the widespread media capture, where local oligarchic networks with Kremlin ties supplant Western investors, and prominent political figures actively normalise pro-Kremlin narratives.³

In her State of the Union address on 10 September 2025, President Ursula von der Leyen stressed information manipulation and disinformation as major threats sowing social divisions and undermining democracy.⁴ A primary front in this battle is the manipulation of identity. Within the EU's FIMI policy framework, identity is treated as an operational attack surface – the European External Action Service (EEAS) explicitly frames identity-based disinformation as behaviour that targets protected characteristics to suppress participation and fragment society.^{5,6} Gender is singled out as a recurrent vector – the EEAS has analysed FIMI against LGBTIQ+ communities and warns that disinformation is used to silence women and girls, including women in public life.⁷ On the regulatory side, several initiatives harden the perimeter against identity-targeted manipulation – the Digital Services Act (DSA) obliges Very Large Online Platforms to mitigate systemic risks to electoral processes and civic discourse, while the new EU Regulation on political

¹ See for example: Center for the Study of Democracy, *Building Institutional Capacity Framework for Resilience to Disinformation in Bulgaria*, Policy Brief No.131, March 2023; Georgiev, G., Petrova, V., and Tsabala, K., *Breaking the Code: Russian and Chinese Disinformation and Illicit Financial Flows in Southeast Europe*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2023.

² See for example: Georgiev, G., Polyakova, E. et al., *Distorted Realities: Exposing Malign Influence in Bulgarian Online Discourse*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2025; Trifonova, G., and Malinov, S., *Operation "Disinformaion": Uncovering Kremlin Influence in Ex-Military Networks in Bulgaria*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2024; Georgiev, G., and Petrov, D., *Pravda's web: Systemic manipulation of search engines and LLMs via automated networks*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2025.

³ Ibid.

⁴ European Commission, *State of the Union 2025*.

⁵ European External Action Service (EEAS), Strategic Communication and Foresight (SG. STRAT) Data Team, *How to detect & analyse identity-based disinformation/FIMI: A practical guide to conduct open-source investigations*, 8 November 2024.

⁶ European External Action Service (EEAS), *FIMI targeting LGBTIQ+ people: Well-informed analysis to protect human rights and diversity*, October 2023.

⁷ EUvsDisinfo, *Decoding FIMI targeting LGBTIQ+ people*, December 2023.

advertising bans microtargeting based on “special categories” of personal data and sharply restricts other targeting – closing a major pathway for identity profiling.^{8,9} To curb synthetic sexualised attacks, the 2024 EU Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence criminalises key forms of cyber-violence – including the non-consensual sharing of “manipulated material”, cyber-stalking/harassment and cyber-flashing.¹⁰ The AI Act adds transparency duties for “deepfakes” and other synthetic media, dovetailing with DSA enforcement and aiming to reduce scalable identity-based attacks.¹¹ Complementary soft law also targets identity harms – the long-running EU Code of Conduct on Illegal Hate Speech encourages platforms to do more about illegal hate against protected groups.¹² Evidence from the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) and EUvsDisinfo shows that identity narratives are repeatedly instrumentalised around elections, reinforcing why gender and identity are integral to the EU’s information-integrity toolbox.¹³

While both gender- and identity-based disinformation refer to targeted forms of disinformation that exploit identity politics to deepen societal divisions, the following analysis highlights the unique nexus where gender and identity disinformation converge. Gender and identity disinformation is defined as the deliberate fabrication or distortion of information about gender, sexuality, and related protected characteristics in order to manipulate public opinion and advance political or geopolitical objectives.¹⁴ While overlapping with online gender-based violence, it is characterised by its coordinated, strategic nature – it weaponises misogyny, digital harassment, and gendered stereotypes not only to harm individuals, but to polarise societies, undermine democratic institutions, and spread illiberal agendas.¹⁵

Malign foreign actors, notably the Kremlin’s influence apparatus, have already integrated information campaigns targeting gender and identity into broader information warfare playbooks.¹⁶ Russia strategically positions itself as a global defender of “traditional family values” in opposition to the West’s perceived “moral decadence,” a narrative designed to resonate with

⁸ EC, Guidelines for providers of VLOPs and VLOSEs on the mitigation of systemic risks for electoral processes, April 2024.

⁹ REGULATION (EU) 2024/900 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL Of 13 March 2024 On The Transparency And Targeting Of Political Advertising.

¹⁰ DIRECTIVE (EU) 2024/1385 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL Of 14 May 2024 On Combating Violence Against Women And Domestic Violence.

¹¹ Artificial Intelligence Act.

¹² Chee, Y.F., “Facebook, X, YouTube to do more against online hate speech, EU says”, *Reuters*, 21 January 2025.

¹³ EDMO, *Disinformation narratives during the 2023 elections in Europe*, March 2024.

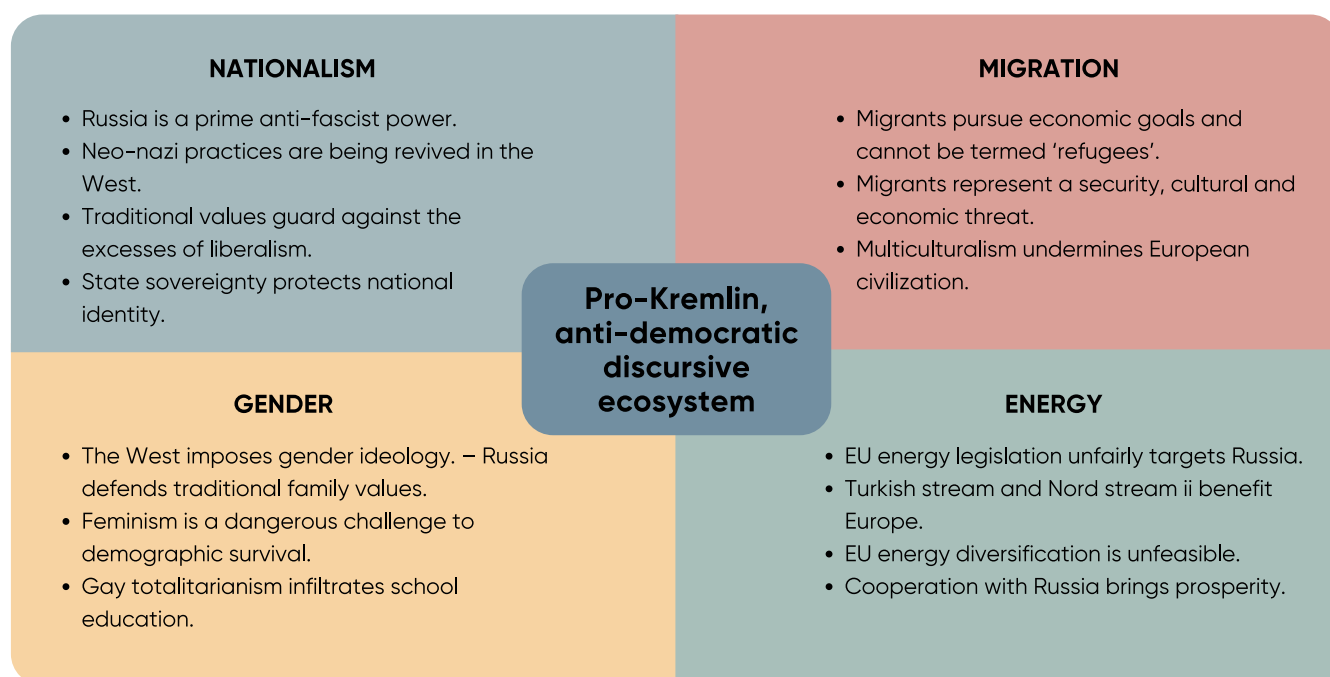
¹⁴ Llewellyn, K., “Gender and Identity Disinformation: The Case Study of Armenia” [video], – In: *Sofia Information Integrity Forum (SIIF 2024)*, Artemis Alliance, YouTube, November 2024; Jankowicz, N., Pepera, S., and Middlehurst, M., *Addressing Online Misogyny and Gendered Disinformation: A How-to Guide*, National Democratic Institute (NDI), 2021; Jonusaite, R. et al., *Gender-Based Disinformation 101: Theory, Example and Need for Regulation*, EU Disinfo Lab and #ShePersisted, 12 October 2022.

¹⁵ Bardall, G., “Nasty, fake, and online: Distinguishing gendered disinformation and violence against women in politics” – In: Haciyakupoglu, G., and Wong, Y. (eds.), *Gender and security in digital space: Navigating Access, Harassment, and Disinformation*, Routledge, 2022, pp. 109–123.

¹⁶ Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group, “Kremlin’s Gender Disinformation”, *Ukraine Crisis Media Center*, Kyiv, 11 June 2020.

conservative audiences and exploit societal fissures.¹⁷ Pejorative narratives like “Gayropa” are used to frame Europe as a weakened, “feminised” society, aligning with disinformation strategies that portray the West as a decaying power.¹⁸ These narratives are often amplified by domestic actors, including far-right political parties, ultra-conservative civil society organisations, and religious groups. These actors form discourse coalitions that, while not always formally coordinated, advance a shared anti-democratic and illiberal agenda where anti-gender politics are central.¹⁹

Figure 1. Pro-Kremlin, Anti-Democratic Discursive Ecosystem



Source: CSD.²⁰

This report investigates different manifestations of gender- and identity-based disinformation in Bulgaria, focusing on its **digital architecture** and its embedding within pro-Kremlin propaganda networks. These leverage online media, Telegram, and YouTube to amplify narratives against so-called “gender ideology,” strategically timed with key political events to polarise public discourse and delegitimise European human rights norms. A second focus is how disinformation is deployed against **women in public life**, where misogynistic attacks targeting their private lives and

¹⁷ Myhre, M. H., and Berg-Nordlie, M., “‘Antigenderism’ as Russian Soft Power? Comparing Discourse on Sexual and Gender Minorities in Russia and Norway” – In: *Europe-Asia Studies*, 76(8), 2024, pp. 1203–1228.

¹⁸ Slavova, E., “Globalising Genderphobia and the Case of Bulgaria”, – In: *European Journal of English Studies*, Volume 26, no. 2, 2022, pp. 176–196, doi:10.1080/13825577.2022.2091281.

¹⁹ Edenborg, E., “Anti-Gender Politics as Discourse Coalitions: Russia’s Domestic and International Promotion of “Traditional Values””, – In: *Problems of Post-Communism*, volume 70, issue 2, 2021, pp. 175–184.

²⁰ Center for the Study of Democracy, *Kremlin’s anti-democratic messaging and disinformation in Europe*, Policy Brief No. 100, May 2021.

appearance are used to undermine professional competence and deter political participation.²¹ The report then examines a critical case study involving **Ukrainian refugee women**, illustrating how disinformation campaigns framed them as “gold-diggers” to erode public solidarity. Finally, the report provides an investigation of the emerging phenomenon of the **manosphere in Bulgaria**, a cluster of online communities and influence figures that embeds extreme anti-feminist ideologies within other content to radicalise young men and normalise authoritarian gender politics.²²

Box 1. Methodology Note

This study employs a multi-source, mixed-methods research design, adhering to established principles for public interest Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) investigations and aligned with the European External Action Service’s framework on investigating gender and identity disinformation.²³ This concept was operationalised for content-based data collection through the construction of detailed Boolean queries related to the thematic areas outlined above. Data was collected from three distinct corpora to capture different facets of the information environment. To assess mainstream amplification in **online media**, the intelligence tool **Sensika** was used to monitor over 2,500 Bulgarian news websites from January 2023 to May 2025, identifying narrative volumes and outlet clustering. For **Telegram**, a fast-growing and low-moderation network, in-house programmatic tools and a custom CSD interface were used to analyse historical metadata from approximately 6.6 million messages across 388 channels between April 2018 and June 2025. Finally, to understand the audio-visual normalisation of gender disinformation on **YouTube**, metadata and transcripts from 2,967 Bulgarian-language videos (April 2022 - June 2025) were scraped via **filmot.com** and examined using keyword-based searching.

The platform-based findings are complemented by semi-structured interviews with representatives of civil society organisations, providing contextualisation of findings, insights on offline impacts and manifestations of gender and identity-based violence, as well as institutional responses and gaps. Participants were selected based on their expertise in gender equality, youth initiatives, refugee support, and media literacy.

²¹ Sottas, P., “Gendered Disinformation Against Women in Politics: A Factor Weakening Democratic Systems”, *Gender in Geopolitics Institute*, 19 June 2023.

²² Botto, M., and L. Gottzén, “Swallowing and Spitting out the Red Pill: Young Men, Vulnerability, and Radicalization Pathways in the Manosphere”, – In: *Journal of Gender Studies*, 33(5), 2023, pp. 596–608.

²³ EEAS, SG.STRAT Data Team, *How to detect & analyse identity-based disinformation/FIMI*, 8 November 2024.

DRIVERS OF IDENTITY NARRATIVES

Identity narratives operate through distinct typologies, platform-specific tactics, and varying degrees of digital reach. These are systemic and interconnected and serve as a multidimensional tool of information manipulation, exploiting social, political, and cultural fault lines. These narratives deepen intergroup division and legitimise restrictions on the rights of vulnerable communities, aligning with broader influence strategies that undermine democratic cohesion.

Local discourse is often marked by a paradox: despite progressive indicators in women's education and political representation, the country exhibits some of the most entrenched patriarchal attitudes in the EU. A 2017 Eurobarometer survey found 81% of Bulgarians agreed that a woman's primary role is home and family care – the highest rate in the EU.²⁴

In 2018, a **coordinated defamation campaign by anti-“gender ideology” movements** opposing the ratification of the “Istanbul Convention” (Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence) transformed the very term “gender” into a pejorative slur, falsely framing the treaty as a vehicle for introducing a “third sex” and legalising same-sex marriage.²⁵ The campaign culminated in a Constitutional Court decision that declared the Convention unconstitutional, arguing that “the definition of gender as a social construct contradicts the Bulgarian Constitution’s understanding of the biological sex binary and opens up space for the Convention’s controversial application.”²⁶

These campaigns successfully established “gender ideology” as a potent and flexible discursive instrument for political mobilisation, simultaneously uniting parts of the electorate against a perceived threat to national values and rejecting equal rights, visibility, and even the very existence of all or some gender and sexual minorities.²⁷ In parallel, malign actors have strategically instrumentalised this rhetoric to fuel anti-EU sentiment and promote pro-Kremlin geopolitical alternatives.²⁸

²⁴ European Commission, *Special Eurobarometer 465: Gender equality 2017*, Brussels, November 2017.

²⁵ Slavova, E., “Translating Gender, Transgressing Reason, and the Misappropriation of Judith Butler in Bulgarian Public Discourse”, – In: *Traditions and Transitions*, Volume 1, no. 1, Sofia: Sofia University Press, 2019, pp. 223–243.

²⁶ Bulgaria, Constitutional Court, Case № 3/2018 [Конституционен Съд, дело № 3/2018], February 8, 2018.

²⁷ Graff, A., and E. Korolczuk, “Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment”, – In: *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, Taylor & Francis, 1 March 2024; Myhre, M. H., and Berg-Nordlie, M., “‘Antigenderism’ as Russian Soft Power? Comparing Discourse on Sexual and Gender Minorities in Russia and Norway” – In: *Europe-Asia Studies*, 76(8), 2024, pp. 1203–1228.

²⁸ Georgiev, G., and Galev, T., *Webs of Deceit: Online Information Manipulation Networks in Bulgaria and Romania*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2025.

Proliferators and Amplifiers

A decentralised network of local actors, both state and non-state, proliferates this disinformation. Despite differing origins and motives, these actors unite by opposing a broadly defined “gender ideology.” This concept serves less as a coherent belief and more as a flexible rhetorical tool. It enables overlapping exclusionary discourses and helps normalise them in public debate. This cluster comprises four main actor categories.

Political parties, most prominently the far-right *Vazrazhdane* (Revival) and *Velichie* (Greatness), the populist *There Is Such a People* (ITN), the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the successor to the Bulgarian Communist Party,²⁹ have emerged as key drivers embedding identity narratives within the political mainstream. Over the past seven years, they have cultivated negative cohesion around the term “gender” through populist strategies as well as pro-Russian positioning. This framing serves both as a tool of political legitimisation and as an instrument of mobilisation, enabling them to channel public discontent while discrediting civil society representatives, human rights defenders, and political opposition.

Civil society organisations and advocacy groups, such as the “*Society and Values*” Association,³⁰ “*Family Month*” Association,³¹ “*ROD International*” Association,³² “*Conservative Society*” Foundation, and “*Our Home is Bulgaria*” Foundation,³³ act as discourse producers and distributors, lending the anti-gender agenda a “civic” face. Frequently collaborating with international NGOs opposing women’s and LGBTQ rights, such as state-funded Budapest-based *Center for Fundamental Rights*³⁴ and Kremlin-linked Polish *Ordo Iuris Institute*,³⁵ these professionalised actors serve as platforms for both local and transnational Christian fundamentalist voices, often mirroring Kremlin’s ideological lens of “traditional family values”.³⁶

Well-known **pro-Kremlin media** and **political commentators** leverage their public visibility to popularise anti-gender and anti-European discourses among broad audiences³⁷. By interweaving “gender ideology” rhetoric with a wider spectrum of Kremlin-aligned narratives, they provide a platform to international far-right actors such as members of Germany’s *Alternative für*

²⁹ Georgiev, Petrova, and Tsabala, *Breaking the Code*, Sofia: CSD, 2023.

³⁰ Гражданско сдружение „Асоциация Общество и Ценности“ [The Civil Association “Association Society and Values”].

³¹ Facebook, *Месец на Семейството* [Family Month].

³² РОД Интернешънъл [ROD International].

³³ Нашият Дом е България! [The Foundation “Our Home is Bulgaria!”].

³⁴ Vsquare, “How Orban’s Government Funds Ultra-Conservative NGO’s Agenda”, 7 May 2021.

³⁵ Suchanow, K., “Ordo Iuris and the Kremlin: Evidence presented by Klementyna Suchanow”, *Civic Reset*, 24 January 2022.

³⁶ Loránd István Szakáli and Peter Torszy, representing Center for Fundamental Rights, and Jerzy Kwasniewski speaking on behalf of Ordo Iuris Institute, took part in *ROD International’s* March 2023 international conference “European Dimension of the Gender Policy” as panelists, sharing insight from Hungary’s and Poland’s experience in “fighting gender ideology”.

³⁷ See for example: Martin Karbowski, @Martin_Karbowski, *YouTube*.

Deutschland (AfD)³⁸ through interview rubrics, constructing the appearance of a legitimate and globally shared opposition to feminism and gender equality.

Opportunistic actors, including representatives of manospheric online communities,³⁹ embed digital misogyny and narratives of “male decline” into monetised content strategies. These actors offer multi-platform courses, seminars and coaching programmes that promote an “alpha male” ideal using gendered disinformation to delegitimise women’s rights and undermine the value of gender equality in Bulgarian society. This content not only reinforces anti-democratic messaging, but also contributes to the normalisation of gender-based violence in intimate relationships.

Digital Architecture

Local disinformation actors leverage key political and legislative events to amplify anti-gender rhetoric. Their evolving strategies and narrative themes reveal a deep integration with broader Russian propaganda infrastructure, where pro-Kremlin voices actively shape public discourse to fuel polarisation and advance exclusionary agendas.

Online Media

Between January 2023 and May 2025, online media outlets disseminated **45,566 articles** containing gender- and identity-based disinformation narratives, collectively generating a potential reach of over **52.8 million users**, revealing the remarkable scale and reach within Bulgaria’s digital domain. **Content peaks** were concentrated around March 2023, June 2023, and most notably August 2024 – all corresponding with significant political developments that catalysed and reinforced anti-gender rhetoric across both political and digital media landscapes, revealing their mutually reinforcing dynamic (*Figure 2*). Topical continuities within the coverage consistently centre on narratives alleging the corruption of children through the infiltration of “gender ideology” in schools, alongside persistent references to the long-overruled Istanbul Convention – framed as the collective West’s “Trojan horse” for integrating a so-called “third gender” in Bulgaria’s national legislature. Notably, 90% (42,134) of all collected articles originated from websites ranked among the top five in domestic visibility, with 20% published by outlets in the highest-ranking category, underscoring the central role of high-traffic outlets in (re)producing and amplifying exclusionary and polarising discourse.

Since its adoption in February 2023, the Bulgarian Supreme Court’s ruling banning legal gender reassignment for transgender individuals has become a cornerstone of gender disinformation, rooted in **pro-Russian and sensationalist rhetoric**.⁴⁰ The ruling was condemned by the European Court of Human Rights, which found Bulgaria in violation of the European Convention on Human Rights for failing to provide a “swift, transparent,

³⁸ Martin_Karbowski, “ЕС сами си отрязват достъпа до световните ресурси чрез санкции. Рене Ауст от АЛТЕРНАТИВА ЗА ГЕРМАНИЯ” [The EU is cutting off its own access to global resources through sanctions. René Aust from ALTERNATIVE FOR GERMANY], *YouTube*, 23 October 2024.

³⁹ Such as Zornitsa Gutsova, the female influencer behind the “A Solid Man” Telegram channel.

⁴⁰ Bulgaria, Supreme Court of Cassation, “The Supreme Court of Cassation issued an interpretative decision on the issue of legal gender change” [ВКС постанови тълкувателно решение по въпрос за юридическата промяна на пола], Press Office, 20 February 2023.

and accessible” process for legal gender recognition.⁴¹ Domestically, however, the decision has been instrumentalised to launder disinformation narratives surrounding the Istanbul Convention and to frame the outcome as a moral victory in resisting “externally imposed” Western norms of gender equality.

Reflecting the resurgence of disinformation narratives that shaped the 2018 parliamentary debates on the Istanbul Convention, March 2023 saw a peak of 5,569 published articles, intensifying public discourse that demonised the treaty and falsely framed it as a covert mechanism to legalise same-sex marriages. This defamation campaign not only aimed to distort the Convention’s actual content, but also, fuelled widespread confusion around the distinction between “gender” and “sex,” particularly given the absence of a direct equivalent for “gender” in the Bulgarian language.⁴² Furthermore, the reversal of the right to change one’s legal gender has triggered a **surge in anti-EU disinformation narratives**. Among these are long-debunked claims that the European Parliament and Commission have imposed a “pro-homosexual” vocabulary on Member States, allegedly banning the terms “mother” and “father” in favour of “parent 1” and “parent 2” to avoid offending LGBTIQ+ individuals.^{43,44} By equating non-heteronormativity with psychological illness, these narratives seek to instill the perception that reversing legal gender recognition was a necessary act of national self-preservation – framed as a bulwark against the so-called “liberal-progressivist perversions” of the West, where gender-affirming care for trans youth is framed as “forced medical castration”.^{45,46}

⁴¹ Bulgarian Helsinki Committee “An Important Step Towards Recognizing Trans People and Their Rights in Bulgaria”, 28 May 2025.

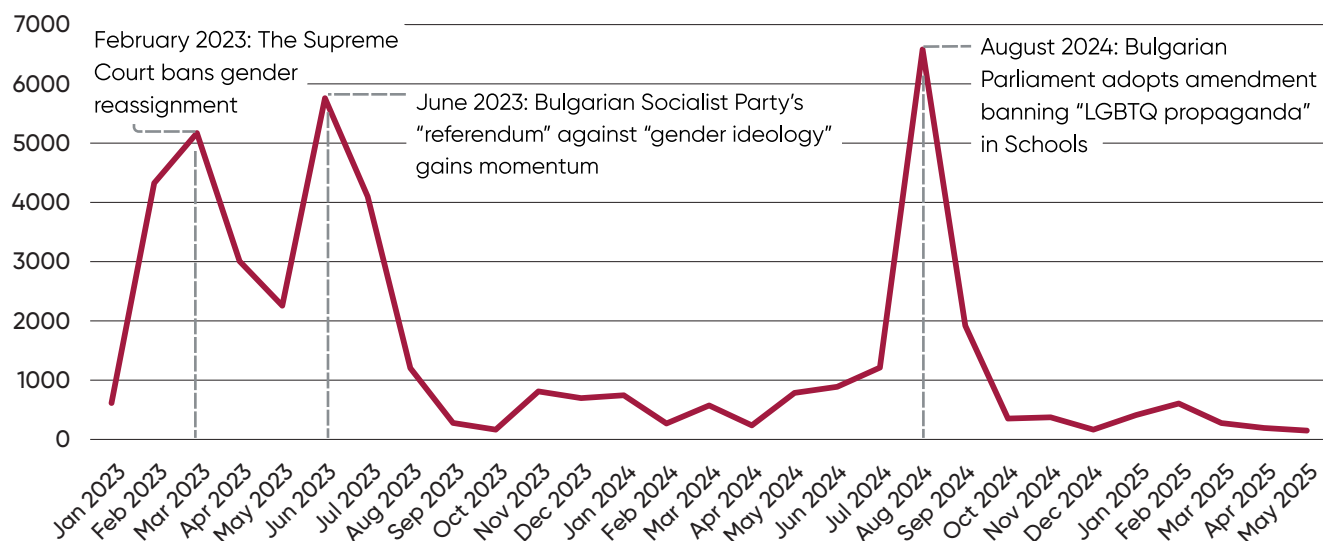
⁴² In the absence of a direct linguistic equivalent to the term “gender” in Bulgarian, the phrase “социален пол” (“social sex”) is commonly employed as a substitute – though it often fails to capture the full conceptual nuance, contributing to public misunderstanding and manipulation in political discourse.

⁴³ Попов, А., „Джамбазки: ЕК заменя “майка” с “лицето, родило детето” [Dzambazki: EC replaces “mother” with “the person who gave birth to the child”], *Dnes.bg*, 7 November 2023.

⁴⁴ EUvsDisinfo, “Disinfo: European Parliament bans words ‘mother’ and ‘father’”, 17 March 2021.

⁴⁵ *Pik.bg*, „Ексклузивно в ПИК! Борислав Цекпв сравни със земята джендър идеологията и похвали ВКС за забраната за смяна на пола: Може да си присадиш хобот, но трябва ли държавата да те третира и да приравнява правния ти статус с розово слонче? (Видео)” [Exclusive to PIK! Borislav Tsekov slammed gender ideology and praised the Supreme Court of Cassation for banning gender reassignment: You can get a trunk transplant, but should the state treat you and equate your legal status with a pink elephant? (Video)], 22 February 2023.

⁴⁶ Papazova, P., „Флорида забрани стерилизация на трансджендър деца. Историята на Клои” [Florida bans sterilisation of transgender children. Chloe’s story], *Papari.bg*, 9 March 2023.

Figure 2. Number of Articles on the Topic of “Gender Ideology” in Bulgaria Per Month (Jan 2023 – May 2025)

Source: CSD, based on data from Sensika.

Coinciding with International Children’s Day on June 1, the Bulgarian Socialist Party’s (BSP) “referendum” campaign led by the former party leader Kornelia Ninova to ban the teaching of so-called “gender ideology” in schools generated significant media traction, with 6,348 online articles amplifying the party’s initiative.⁴⁷ Supported by organisations and advocacy groups such as the Bulgarian Parents Central Committee, “Parents United for Children” Association, and “Society and Values” Association, the initiative – launched under the slogan “Hands off Bulgarian children!” – collected 208,269 signatures.^{48,49} Framed as a grassroots defence of childhood and national identity, the campaign reinforces the narrative that the education system in its current state encourages children to change their gender, posing a threat to traditional family values. For instance, *Duma.bg* – the official newspaper of the BSP, which maintains a cooperation agreement with Russia’s ruling United Russia party – published a statement by a local member of the Initiative Committee for the Referendum Against Gender Ideology, comparing “gender ideology” to “bombs” falling on children’s heads.⁵⁰ Constructing the campaign as a form of normative warfare, the outlet portrays the anti-gender movement as a civilisational struggle between competing value systems – the collective West’s “wokeism” and Russia’s “traditionalism”, positioning the latter as an aspirational ideological alternative.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), „Продължава подписката на БСП за референдум срещу джендър идеологията“ [The BSP’s petition for a referendum against gender ideology continues], 19 May 2023.

⁴⁸ *Duma.bg*, „Организации подкрепиха БСП за референдум за джендър идеологията“ [“Organisations supported the Bulgarian Socialist Party for a referendum on gender ideology”], 20 February 2023.

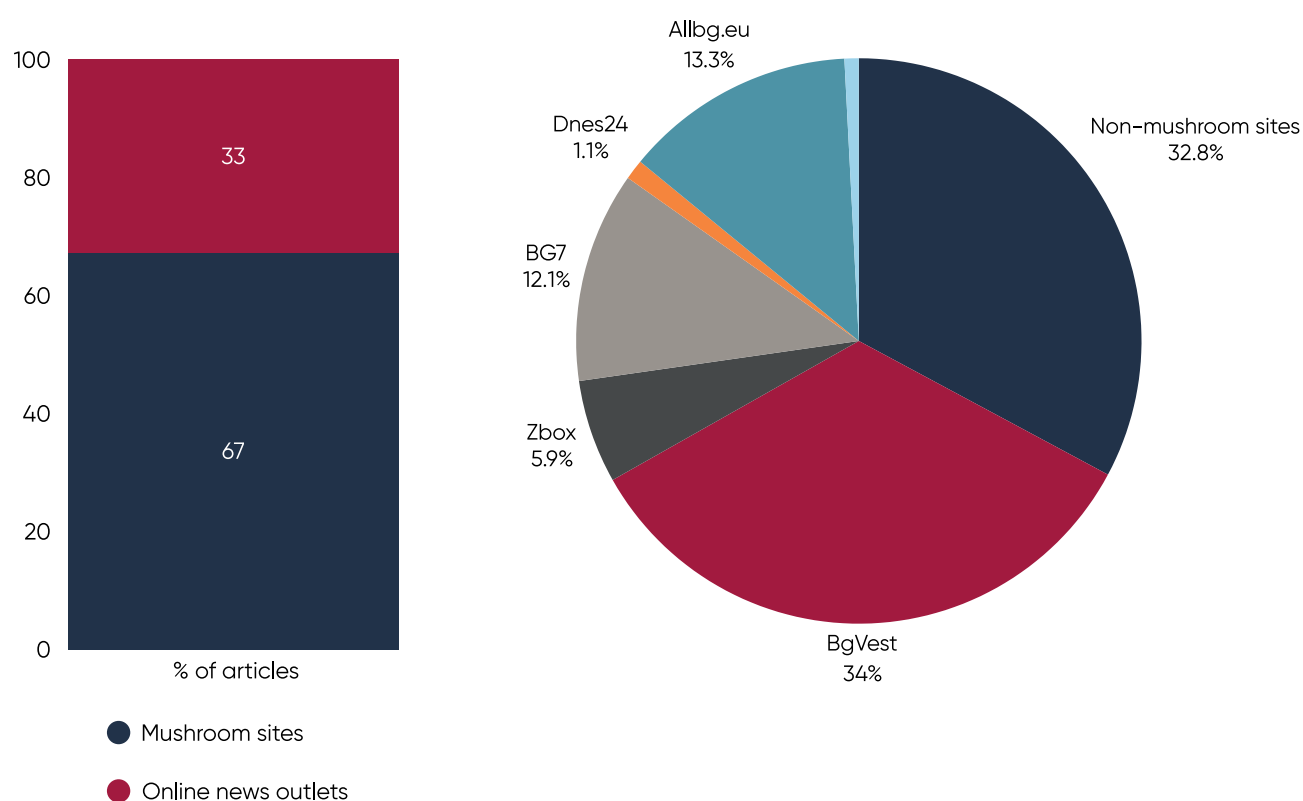
⁴⁹ Radio Free Europe, „БСП и РОД събраха 208 269 подписа за референдум срещу “джендър идеологията”. Решението е в НС“ [BSP and the ROD collected 208,269 signatures for a referendum against “gender ideology.” The decision is in the National Assembly], 26 July 2023.

⁵⁰ *Duma.bg*, „Нешка Робева: Джендър идеологията по-тежко от бомбите ще избива нашите деца“ [Neshka Robeva: Gender ideology will kill our children harder than bombs], 23 May 2023.

⁵¹ Moler, O.J., „Светът е изправен пред глобална война на ценности“ [The world is facing a global war of values], *Geopolitica.eu*, 11 April 2023.

Ultimately, the adoption of the amendment to the Preschool and School Education Act (August 2024) – banning the “propaganda, promotion, or incitement” of so-called “gender ideology” – proposed by the far-right Vazrazhdane party and supported by the ostensibly pro-European GERB, along with DPS (Movement for Rights and Freedoms), BSP, and ITN, represents a significant milestone in the institutionalisation of anti-gender discourse. Mirroring Russia’s institutional architecture, the amendment exemplifies how the weaponisation of gender and identity disinformation can migrate from the political margins into the heart of shifting mainstream policymaking. A total of 6,581 articles were published in the aftermath of the amendment’s adoption, framing the development as a personal victory for Vazrazhdane.⁵² This narrative was accompanied by intensified attacks on civil society and the amplification of “foreign agent” rhetoric – closely mirroring the Kremlin’s playbook aimed at delegitimising and weakening the NGO sector, particularly those advancing women’s and LGBTIQ+ rights.

Figure 3. Online Source Clusters Proliferating Gender and Identity Disinformation Narratives (Jan 2023 – May 2025)



Source: CSD, based on data from Sensika.

A significant majority of sources disseminating gender- and identity-based disinformation (67%) align with the “**mushroom site machine**” model – a disinformation proliferation pattern characterised by high-volume, low-

⁵² Trud.bg, „Забрана на гей пропагандата в училищата прокараха „Възраждане““ [“Vazrazhdane” pushed through a ban on gay propaganda in schools], 1 August 2024.

credibility websites designed to flood the information space with coordinated messaging, (Figure 3).⁵³ For example, a single article containing disinformation was distributed over 614 times among various mushroom websites, such as *BG7.eu*, *Allbg.eu*, *Zbox.eu*, and *Dnes24.eu*. The article, originally published by *Blitz.bg*, featured false claims by Kornelia Ninova alleging that Bulgarian children are being taught and therefore encouraged to replicate sexual practices taking place between lesbian and bisexual partners, a statement that has since been thoroughly debunked.⁵⁴

While clustering patterns reveal widespread replication, certain outlets stand out for their volume of **unique content**. Notable among them are *Trud.bg* with 231 unique articles, *Epicenter.bg* with 183, and *Blitz.bg* – often cited as Bulgaria’s most visited news site – with 178. *Pogled Info* is also significant, publishing 175 articles, many of which are translated directly from Kremlin-aligned think tanks, ideologues, and (EU-sanctioned) media outlets (e.g. such as the Strategic Culture Foundation, Katehon, and Alexander Dugin). Furthermore, 90% of the total visits to the articles originated from direct traffic, indicating that users accessed the websites directly, without clicking on a different link after visiting another website.⁵⁵ This suggests that Bulgarian users are not passively encountering such content, but are actively seeking it out, reflecting a concerning level of engagement with these narratives.

Telegram

Telegram data reveals a strong overlap between gender- and identity-based disinformation and a **broader ecosystem of pro-Russian propaganda**, demonstrating that such narratives do not exist in a vacuum, but are strategically targeted at audiences susceptible to Russian influence operations. A total of 7,843 Telegram posts were identified, generating 157,110 reactions and 5.7 million views, underscoring the topic’s popularity in the Bulgarian-language digital space. Leading channels and chats spreading disinformation narratives targeting gender and identity are embedded within a well-established Bulgarian network previously associated with spreading false claims about Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, with the top ten channels alone gathering 59% and 43% of total posts and views, respectively (Figure 4).

The examination of channels generating the highest volume of such content, namely *Bulgaria Z Chat* and *Bulgaria Z*, where “Z” symbolically aligns with Russia’s expansionist rhetoric on Ukraine, reveals 1,551 posts sharing an identical message signature. The signature claims that “totalitarian genders” (in this context, the EU) ban on Russian state media is a deliberate effort to conceal the truth from the public, further asserting that “Russophobic propaganda is killing Bulgaria”. Other prevalent narratives employ the framing of “gender ideology” as the root cause of the demographic crisis,

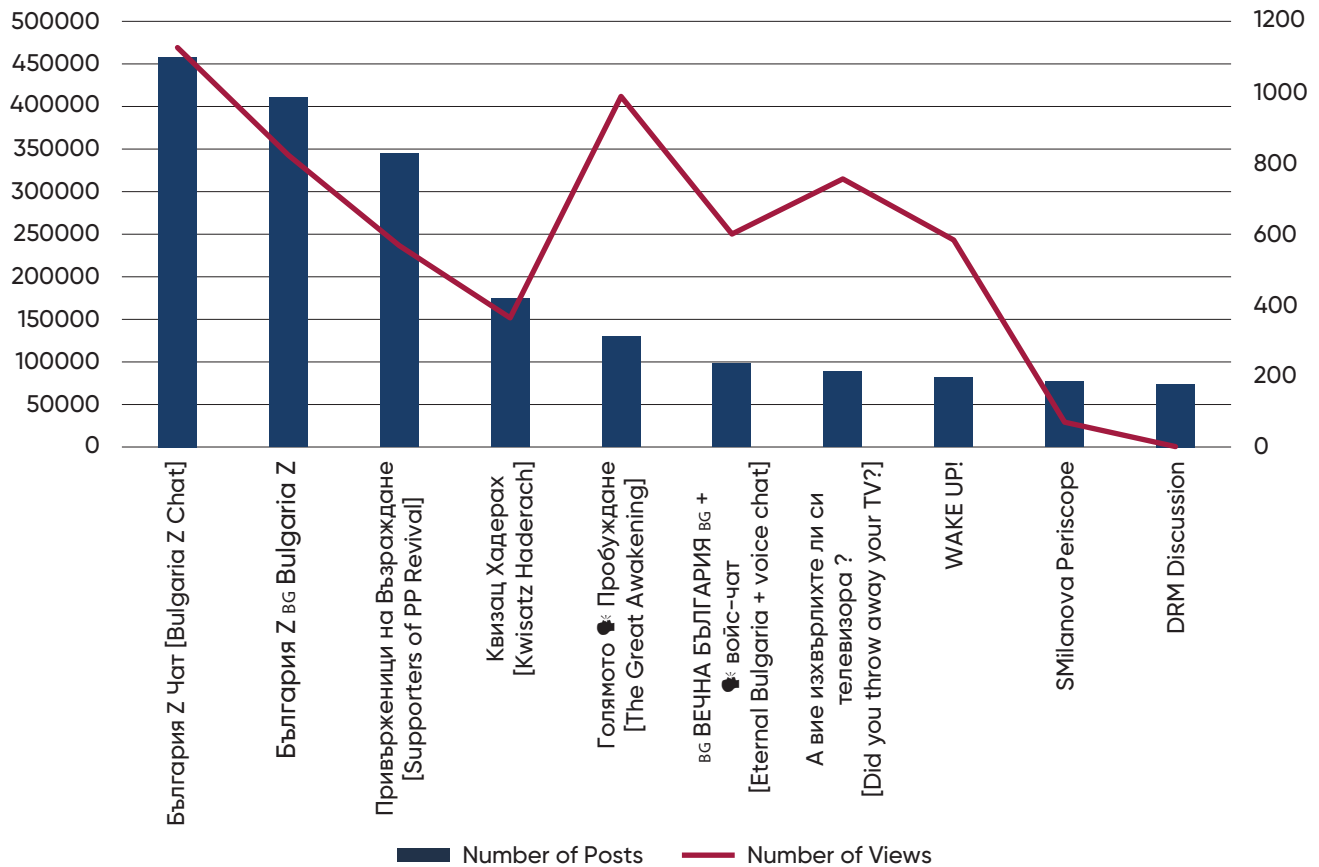
⁵³ The “mushroom site machine” – these are more than 370 anonymous sites with almost identical design (two basic patterns) and identical content (they publish the same articles). They have four main domains in common (*dnes24.eu*, *zbox7.eu*, *bgvest.eu*, *allbg.eu*), from which subdomains are cloned – for example, *novini701.dnes24.eu*, *novinarbg.dnes24.eu*, etc. From: Russian Propaganda in Bulgaria Online (January-March 2023), Part I, *Newsletter of the Human and Social Studies Foundation*, Sofia, 6 June 2023.

⁵⁴ Atanasova, V., „Ето примери. В какво “Възраждане” вижда ЛГБТ пропаганда” [Here are some examples. What does “Revival” see as LGBT propaganda?], Radio Free Europe, 17 September 2024.

⁵⁵ It is important to note, however, that unidentified referring sources are also categorised as direct traffic by search engine optimisation (SEO) and website intelligence tools.

echoing conspiratorial rhetoric that casts the “global liberal elite’s promotion of homosexuality” as part of a covert agenda to reduce the world population.

Figure 4. Number of Telegram Posts on the Topic of “Gender Ideology” in the Top Ten Channels by Views (Jan 2023 – May 2025)

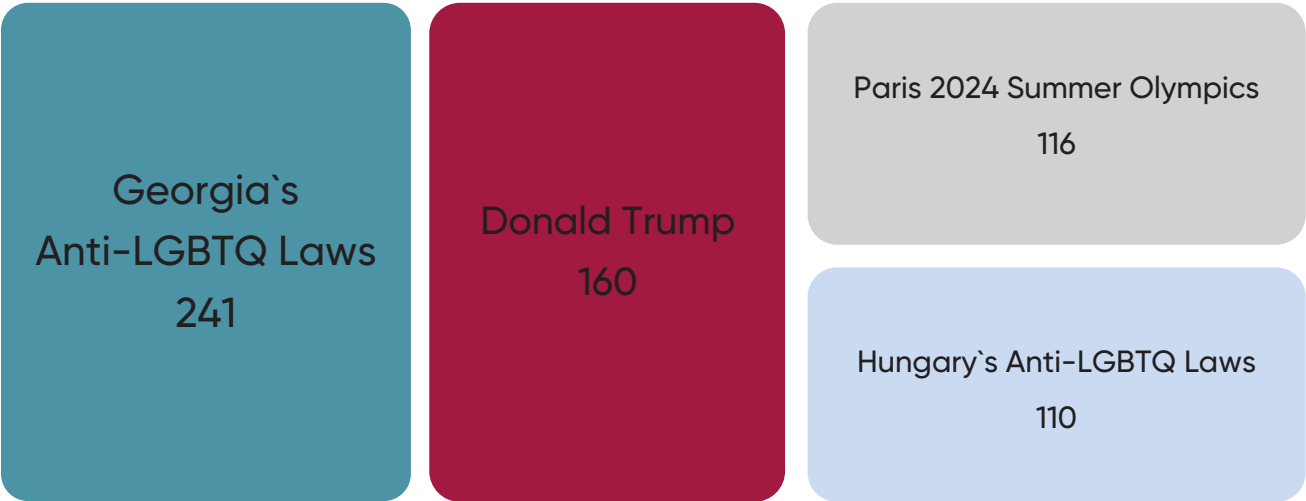


Source: CSD, based on Telegram data extracted with Python.

Telegram discussions revealed intertextual links in anti-gender disinformation narratives. Posts celebrating Georgia’s anti-LGBTIQ+ law (introduced by the Kremlin-aligned Georgian Dream party) gained traction in Bulgarian Telegram communities, hailed as a “victory” against Western influence operations. Similar, though less frequent, parallels exist with Fidesz’s anti-LGBTIQ+ attacks in Hungary, both drawing on nationalist rhetoric. Another prominent discussion topic was the Trump administration’s anti-trans rhetoric, particularly its use of “gender ideology extremism” and “biological truth” – exemplified by the January 2025 executive order. This mirrors Russia’s traditionalist stance against gender equality. Finally, the coverage of the 2024 Summer Olympic Games, which featured a group of dancers and drag performers in its opening ceremony, served as a focal point of the far-right and pro-Kremlin discourse. A translated article originally published by the Russian outlet *Rusvesna.su* was republished across multiple Telegram channels, citing former President and current Deputy Chairman of Russia’s Security Council, Dmitry Medvedev, who described the Olympic opening ceremony as an “abomination”, am-

plifying various conspiratorial rhetorics of the collective West’s “decadence”.⁵⁶

Figure 5. Distribution of Telegram Messages by Topic from the Total Share of 7,843 Posts (January 2023 – May 2025)



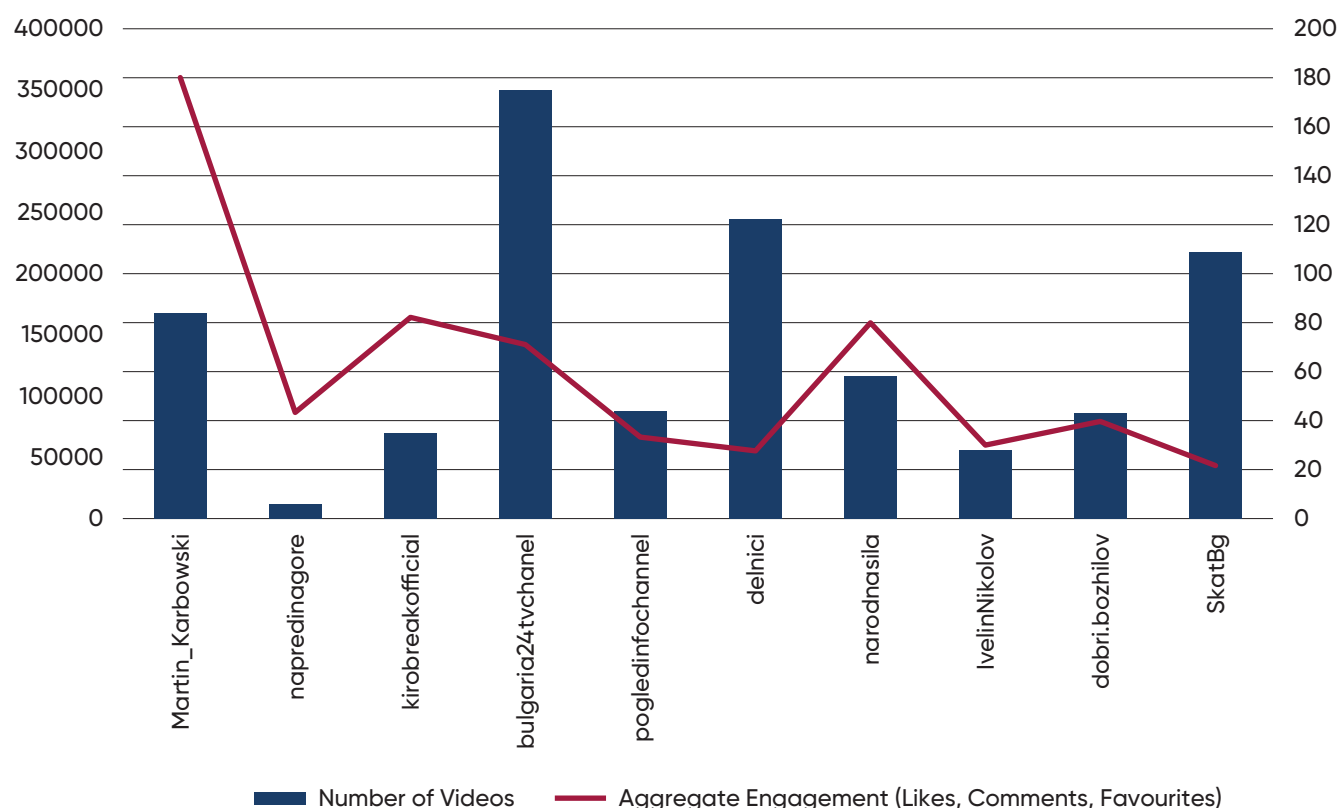
Source: CSD, based on Telegram data extracted with Python.

YouTube

The Bulgarian-language YouTube ecosystem exhibits a **striking concentration of pro-Russian voices actively disseminating gender and identity disinformation**. Analysis identified 2,644 videos that collectively amassed 2.5 million views and 2.8 million aggregate interactions, measured through likes, comments, and favourites (*Figure 6*). An examination of the ten most-viewed channels reveals a content strategy that blends entertainment and conspiratorial narratives to advance themes of “traditional family values” and “lost Bulgarian greatness” through leveraging the platform’s audio-visual communication model.

⁵⁶ Rusvesna.su, „Медведев: Пришло время сломать всё к чёртовой матери” [Medvedev: It’s time to smash everything to smithereens], 29 July 2024.

Figure 6. Number of YouTube Videos on “Gender Ideology” in the Top Ten Channels by Aggregate Engagement (Jan 2023 – May 2025)



Source: CSD, based on data from filmot.com (extraction with Python).

Political and social commentary content on Bulgarian YouTube has emerged as a significant vehicle for the dissemination of gender and identity disinformation, with videos thematically focused on gender, LGBTIQ+ rights, and identity politics consistently attracting high levels of engagement. One high-ranking channel alone amassed over 6 million views and 350,000 interactions on the topic, serving as an entry point for broader anti-democratic messaging.⁵⁷ Such content creators commonly frame gender equality and diversity as externally imposed threats to cultural heritage, frequently portraying Western societies as morally degraded and spiritually corrupt.⁵⁸ Furthermore, by providing a platform for local and international far-right voices such as Bulgaria’s Vazrazhdane and Germany’s AfD, such content intertextually mainstreams anti-gender and anti-European narratives under the guise of democratic debate.⁵⁹

A related thematic cluster of gendered disinformation operates at the intersection of narratives about male feminisation and authoritarian nostalgia,

⁵⁷ @Martin_Karbowski, 244K subscribers.

⁵⁸ Martin_Karbowski, „Путин е спасител на света. Александър ДУТИН в специално интервю за Мартин Карбовски” [Putin is the saviour of the world. Alexander Dugin in a special interview with Martin Karbovski], *YouTube*, 24 November 2024.

⁵⁹ Martin_Karbowski, „ДУТИН: Развитието на европейския капитализъм съвпада с дехристиянизацията на западното общество” [DUGIN: The development of European capitalism coincides with the de-Christianisation of Western society], *YouTube*, 6 December 2024.

often framed within broader claims about the erosion of traditional values in liberal democratic societies. Conspiracy theories, such as the claims that Western actors are deploying chemical agents like “gender liquid” to alter male biology serve to legitimise these claims,⁶⁰ echoing a long-standing pro-Kremlin disinformation campaign centred on alleged undercover biochemical laboratories in Ukraine.⁶¹ Such narratives are frequently coupled with appeals for the restoration of national discipline, including calls for mandatory military service, nostalgically invoking the era of the People’s Republic of Bulgaria as a model of order and masculinity.⁶² By mobilising emotionally charged tropes, this content constructs an oppositional worldview in which gender equality and democratic pluralism are not framed as societal progress, but as existential threats to state sovereignty.

YouTube channels of media outlets like *Bulgaria 24*,⁶³ *Delnici*,⁶⁴ and *Skat Television*⁶⁵ serve as prominent vectors for framing gender and identity disinformation as credible journalism. While projecting legitimacy, their content is highly sensationalist and ideologically infused with Eurosceptic, anti-NATO, and anti-migration rhetoric. These channels often serve as platforms for misogynistic and homophobic messaging, such as *Delnici* praising a Vazrazhdane MP’s call to ban Sofia Pride, or *Skat Television* portraying protests against gender-based violence as “LGBTIQ+ activists” promoting “pedophilic propaganda”.⁶⁶ This framing not only delegitimises the issue of gender-based violence but subsumes it under “gender ideology,” transforming human rights concerns into a “culture war” battleground that hinders effective policy responses.

Women in Public Life: Attacks against Politicians and Journalists

The targeting of women in public life is a central tactic in gender and identity disinformation campaigns globally. Academic research has established that these attacks are not random but **systematic efforts to discredit female leaders**, silence their political voices, and deter women’s participation in the public sphere.⁶⁷ These campaigns function by weaponising deeply ingrained gender prejudices to shift public focus from a woman’s policy positions to gendered tropes, such as her appearance, family life, or emotional state.⁶⁸ This creates a hostile information environment that imposes a significant “cost” on women for entering politics, thereby reinforcing structural gender

⁶⁰ Napredinagore, „Контролираме ти СЪЗНАНИЕТО»:/ето как/ - ХИМИКАЛИИ ООД“ [We control your CONSCIOUSNESS: here’s how - CHEMICALS LTD.], *YouTube*, 29 June 2024.

⁶¹ Georgiev, G., and Novosiolova, T., *Disinformation Storm: WMD Hybrid Threats in Bulgaria and Romania*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2023.

⁶² Kirobreakofficial, „А бяхме велика нация!“ [And we used to be a great nation!], *YouTube*, 15 October 2021.

⁶³ @bulgaria24tvchannel, 61.1K subscribers.

⁶⁴ @delnici, 80.1K subscribers.

⁶⁵ @SkatBg, 70K subscribers.

⁶⁶ Delnici, „Ангел Георгиев: Бойко Борисов е директно зависим от фон дер Лайен“ [Angel Georgiev: Boyko Borisov is directly dependent on von der Leyen], *YouTube*, 18 March 2025.

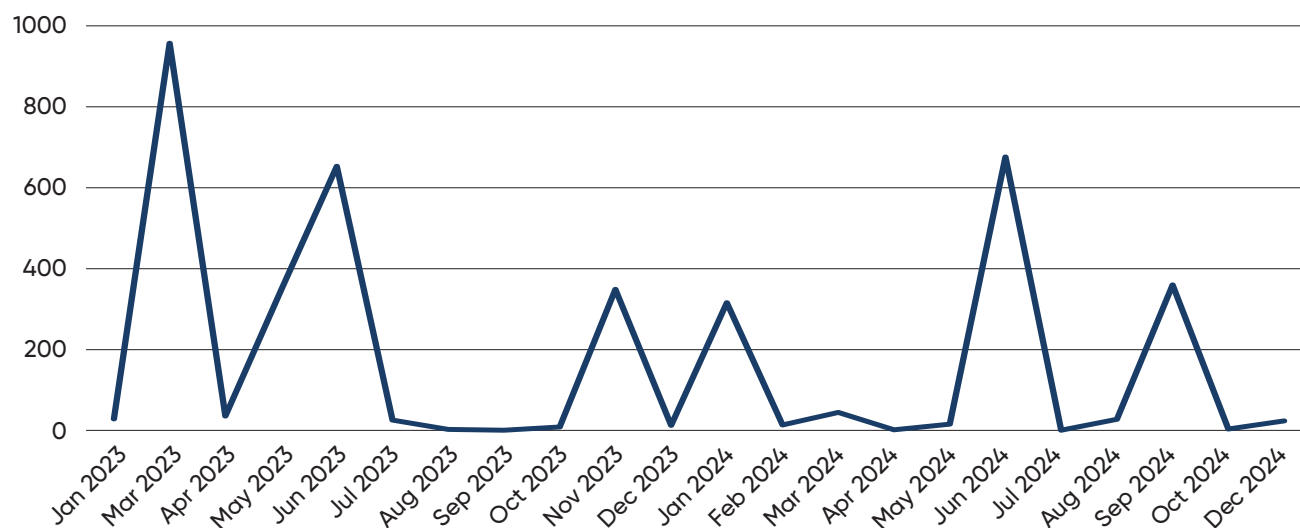
⁶⁷ Bardall, “Nasty, fake, and online” – In: Hacıyakupoglu and Wong (eds.), *Gender and security in digital space*, Routledge, 2022, pp. 109–123.

⁶⁸ Jankowicz, Pepera, and Middlehurst, *Addressing Online Misogyny and Gendered Disinformation*, NDI, 2021.

hierarchies.⁶⁹ This chapter examines how this global phenomenon manifests within the Bulgarian context.

Data collected from Bulgarian online media sources in the period January 2023 to January 2025 reveals that **headlines consistently deploy sensationalist and objectifying language**, focusing disproportionately on women's physical appearance, attire, or supposed sexual behaviour, rather than their political roles or competencies. Recurrent themes include sexualisation – often through innuendo or explicit references to intimacy and body parts – paired with personal attacks involving alleged romantic entanglements or “scandals.” Motherhood and family status are also weaponised to question professional credibility, with titles mocking women for bringing children to parliament or for being unmarried. A significant number of headlines centre around recurring figures, such as Lena Borislavova, who became a target of narratives merging political intrigue, sexuality, and shame. Other topics include delegitimisation through ridicule (e.g., portraying women as emotionally unstable or improperly dressed) and attempts to link women politicians to broader conspiracy narratives or “disgraceful” behaviour. These media portrayals reflect and reinforce harmful gender norms, serving as a form of gender disinformation that seeks to discredit women through humiliation, distraction, and “moral policing”, rather than engaging with their political actions or ideologies.

Figure 7. Volume of Online Publications Containing Gender and Identity Disinformation Targeting Bulgarian Women in Politics (January 2023 – January 2025)⁷⁰



Source: CSD, based on data from Sensika.

⁶⁹ Gervais, C. J., *The Price of Sexism: The Backlash Against Female Politicians*, Political Behavior, 40(3), 2018, pp. 661–681.

⁷⁰ The Boolean query contained the following list of names of women in Bulgarian political life: Maria Gabriel, Lena Borislavova, Ekaterina Zaharieva, Maya Manolova, Olesya Ilashchuk, Elisaveta Belobradova, Tatyana Doncheva, Desislava Atanasova, Vanya Grigorova, Nataliya Kiselova, Raya Nazaryan, Korneliya Ninova;

For example, an analysis of media coverage targeting just one prominent female politician, between January 2023 and January 2025 identified the following: approximately **790 articles** focused on the individual's pregnancy and childcare, **587 articles** centred on her appearance and clothing, and another **341** focused on her marital status. This content, which often involved speculation and personal criticism, was widely distributed, with **2,697 articles** traced to a "mushroom site machine" sourced from local tabloid-style platforms known for publishing disinformation.

Box 2. The Campaign against Lena Borislavova

The case of Lena Borislavova, former Head of the Prime Minister's Political Cabinet (2021–2022), was selected for in-depth analysis as it represents one of the more sustained, high-profile, and well-documented instances of gendered disinformation targeting women in contemporary Bulgarian politics. Previous studies have isolated six core narratives used to attack women - portraying women as devious and unfit for politics, denouncing them as unintelligent, while both objectifying and condemning for their perceived sexuality and demonising the values they hold.⁷¹ The campaign against Borislavova falls within these parameters.

In early 2023 Borislavova was the target of a defamatory song by Slavi Trifonov, a TV host and leader of the ITN political party. The song characterised Borislavova as a "cougar" and insinuated a romantic relationship with then-Prime Minister Kiril Petkov. Though framed as political satire, the song was widely denounced by civil society as sexist and degrading.⁷² The song was also part of a broader smear campaign that focused on Borislavova's appearance, personal relationships, and supposed immorality. Borislavova was alternately described as "pushy," "scandalous," and a "shadow prime minister" who wielded undue influence – insinuations that drew heavily on sexist archetypes rather than substantiated political critique.⁷³ Importantly, this campaign operated within a legal vacuum. Bulgaria's legal framework lacks explicit provisions addressing gender-based online harassment and hate speech laws do not cover non-commercial digital content, allowing such disinformation to proliferate.⁷⁴

AI-Driven Disinformation

As previously discussed, disinformation campaigns targeting women in public life rely on a playbook of tactics that includes sexualisation, reputational attacks, and delegitimisation. The emergence of AI-generated content represents a **powerful new tool for executing this existing playbook with greater speed and realism**. According to frameworks like the one developed by the EEAS, malign actors use AI-generated visuals, audio, and text to pollute the information environment with highly

⁷¹ Krasodonski-Jones, A. et al., *Engendering Hate: The Contours of State-aligned Gendered Disinformation Online*, Demos, 2020.

⁷² Tzvetkova, G., "Applying a Gender Lens to the Study of Misinformation and Disinformation", – In: *Suvremeni Mediteran*, 3(1), 2024, pp. 15–34.

⁷³ Ibid, pp. 22–24; See also Kuneva, L. "Victimhood and Villainisation: Misogynist Narratives in Women's Media Representation in Bulgaria" In: DEP, 2023, pp. 5–6, on common misogynist narratives in public comments.

⁷⁴ Kuneva, L., pp. 5–6. The Bulgarian Criminal Code lacks explicit recognition of gendered hate speech; regulatory frameworks fail to address non-commercial digital disinformation.

realistic and damaging fabrications.⁷⁵ While the use of such technology is still nascent in Bulgaria, recent high-profile incidents involving female journalists demonstrate how AI is becoming an accessible and potent weapon for amplifying these established gendered attacks.

A notable example occurred in September 2024, when Emmy-nominated investigative journalist Marieta Nikoleva (NOVA TV) became the target of a coordinated online attack involving over 30 websites. The smear campaign featured a deepfake nude image of Nikoleva, digitally altered using AI, in an apparent attempt to discredit her professionally. The Bulgarian Cybercrime Unit (General Directorate Combating Organised Crime) was involved in investigating the orchestrated effort.⁷⁶ Despite her public explanation that the image was fabricated, Nikoleva's post on Facebook was inexplicably reported and removed – further compounding the harm and raising questions about platform accountability. The Council for Electronic Media (CEM) issued a statement condemning the attacks, emphasising growing concern over the proliferation of fake and defamatory content targeting respected journalists.⁷⁷

Similarly, in August 2025, a journalist from Bulgarian National Television and YouTube personality Tsveta Stratieva was embroiled in a fabricated scandal over her alleged relationship with the leader of the Vazrazhdane party Kostadin Kostadinov. An AI-generated clip of the two of them kissing surfaced online within hours,⁷⁸ produced by an anonymous YouTube production team known as “Brothers with Makeup” [lit.trans.] (Братя с грим).⁷⁹ This group is notorious for producing disturbing AI-generated content about politicians, frequently using grotesque caricatures and homophobic content.

Overall, over the past two years, attacks on women in Bulgarian public life have increased in complexity, relying on sexualisation, ridicule, and moral policing to shift focus from policy to personal life. The recent deepfake attacks are aimed at reputational destruction and demonstrate how emerging tools are now seamlessly integrated into disinformation campaigns.

Weaponising Identities: Ukrainian Refugees

The gender and identity disinformation campaign targeting Ukrainian refugees is situated within a broader pro-Kremlin network of narratives, which has been overwhelmingly exploited since the start of Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion, following the arrival of a predominantly female refugee with children to Bulgaria. The disinformation ecosystem has consistently portrayed Ukrainian women as hyper-sexualised “gold-diggers,” disease carriers, and threats to Bulgarian families. To reach a predominantly female audience, such narratives are embedded in entertainment and lifestyle content.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ EEAS, *FIMI targeting LGBTIQ+ people*, October 2023.

⁷⁶ *Boulevardbulgaria.bg*, „Журналистка от NOVA TV стана жертва на атака с нейна манипулирана снимка” [A journalist from NOVA TV fell victim to an attack involving a manipulated photo of her], 22 September 2024.

⁷⁷ Bulgaria, Council for Electronic Media (SEM), SEM Position [*Позиция на СЕМ*], 21 September 2024.

⁷⁸ Facebook, „Костадин Костадинов-Спасението за България” [Kostadin Kostadinov – Salvation for Bulgaria].

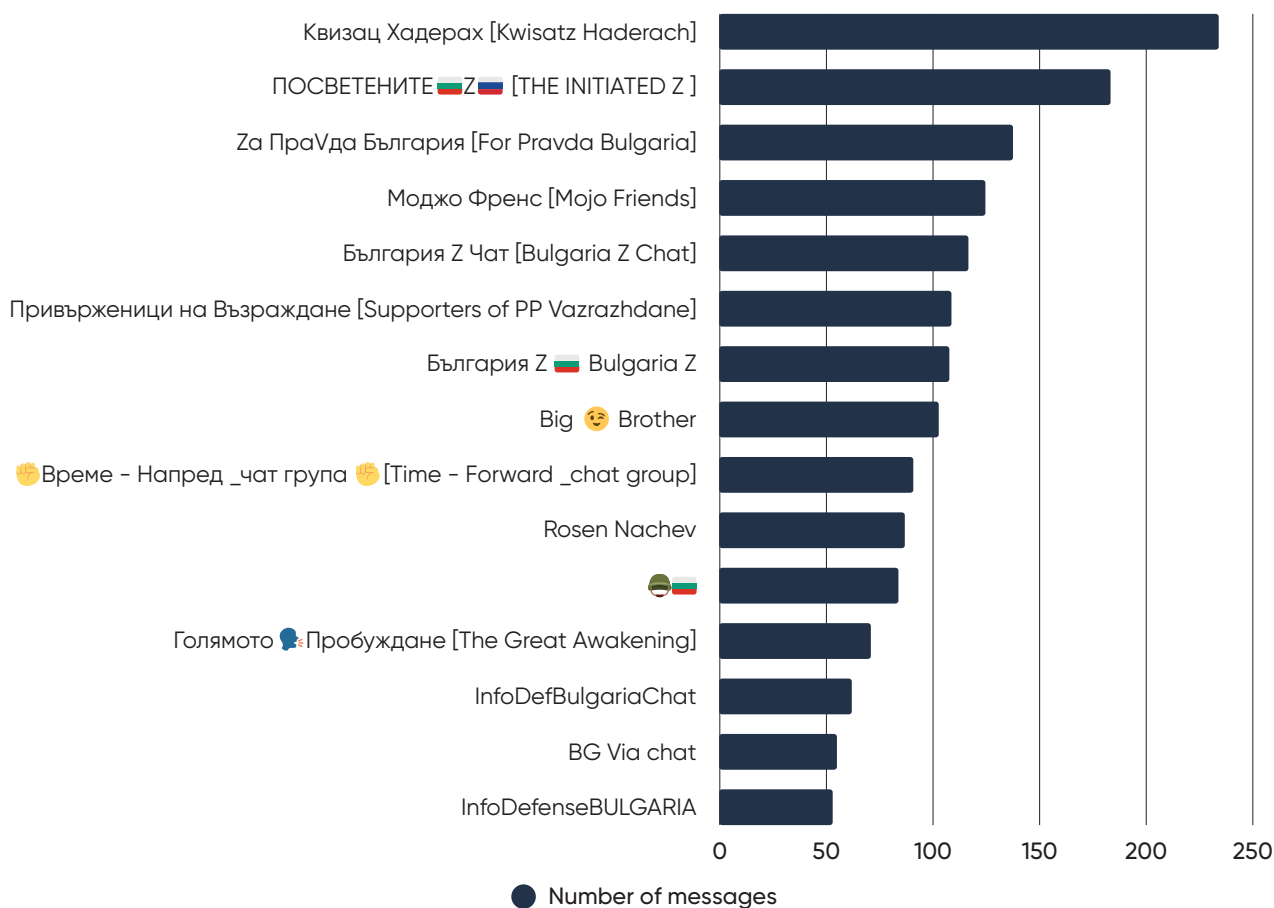
⁷⁹ The name in Bulgarian is a play on the Brothers Grimm.

⁸⁰ Center for the Study of Democracy, *Gendered Disinformation: Challenges for Ukrainian Refugees*, Policy Brief No. 152, November 2024.

Telegram

Since 2022, Telegram has emerged as a critical platform within the Bulgarian pro-Kremlin disinformation ecosystem, facilitating the propagation of hostile narratives targeting Ukrainian refugee women through a tightly interconnected network of far-right and conspiracy channels. Prominent Telegram accounts such as *Kvizatz Haderak*, *PravdaBG*, *BulgariaZChat*, and *InfoDefenseBULGARIA*⁸¹ systematically disseminate recurring tropes that depict Ukrainian women as sex workers, nymphomaniacs, and sexual opportunists – frequently accused of seducing Bulgarian men or exchanging sexual favours for protection or monetary gain in host countries in Europe. These narratives are further reinforced through dehumanising descriptors such as “Nazis,” “terrorists,” and “white gypsies,” and are often directly forwarded from Russian-language Telegram content, indicating transnational coordination in message dissemination.

Figure 8. Top 15 Telegram Channels and Groups Proliferating Disinformation Targeting Ukrainians Refugees



Source: CSD, based on Telegram data extracted with Python.

⁸¹ These Telegram channels and groups are a part of a well-established Bulgarian network previously known for circulating false claims about the war in Ukraine. Their most shared posts promote pro-Russian narratives, referencing so-called “Ukrainian Nazis,” alleged biolabs, and “puppet governments” under NATO, along with broader anti-NATO and anti-U.S. themes. These outlets also heavily emphasize Bulgaria’s historical ties with Russia. From: Malinov, S., Trifonova, G., and Dzhekova, R., *Echoes of War: Kremlin-Aligned Narratives on the Israel-Hamas Conflict in Bulgaria, Georgia, and Ukraine*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2025.

Beyond explicit sexualisation, these channels promote the **denial of wartime atrocities committed by Russian forces** – especially sexual violence,⁸² frequently juxtaposing unverifiable “testimonies” of “peaceful and benevolent Russian soldiers” with accounts portraying Ukrainian women as aggressive, delusional, criminal, or too visually unappealing to be victims of sexual violence. Illustrative examples include *BulgariaZ Chat*’s claim that a Ukrainian woman incited her husband to commit a shooting against Slovak Prime Minister Fico,⁸³ and *Pravda BG*’s recurrent assertions that Ukrainian refugees possess hidden wealth, drive luxury vehicles, and exploit Bulgaria’s and other European countries’ welfare state. In parallel, *Kvizatz Haderak* has circulated content accusing Ukrainian women of arrogance, manipulation, theft, terrorism, and broader social destabilisation – reproducing xenophobic and misogynistic tropes.

Moreover, the disinformation is often contextualised within **domestic political narratives**. The Telegram group of supporters of the far-right political party Vazrazhdane frequently propagates claims that Ukrainian women are inciting violence against Russians and Bulgarians, concealing financial means, and undermining national interests. Such rhetoric portrays the Bulgarian government as a “traitorous elite” prioritising the interests of Ukrainian refugees over those of Bulgarian citizens, and calls on the public to withhold support and assistance – this is fully aligned with official statements by the Vazrazhdane party, whose leader Kostadin Kostadinov has on numerous occasions referred to Ukrainian refugees in Bulgaria as “tourists”.⁸⁴ A salient example includes reactions to beauty pageants: Telegram channels and groups also discussed the controversy surrounding Miss Japan – who had emigrated from Ukraine at the age of five – “winning due to political correctness”, which was closely paralleled with the 2023 case of Elizabeth Kravitz, a Bulgarian citizen of Ukrainian descent who won the Miss Varna title.⁸⁵ Similar to the Japanese case, Kravitz became the subject of online backlash questioning her legitimacy.

Figure 9. Volume of Unique vs. Duplicate Messages Containing Gender and Identity Disinformation on Telegram Targeting Ukrainians Refugees



Source: CSD, based on Telegram data extracted with Python.

⁸² As of 3 March 2025, the Office of the Prosecutor General has recorded 344 cases of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV).

⁸³ The Journal, “Debunked: Hoax claim that wife of man who shot Slovakia PM Robert Fico is a Ukrainian refugee”, 20 May 2024.

⁸⁴ Lisitsov, L., „Лъже ли Костадинов за „100 хил. украински туристи“ в луксозни хотели за сметка на българите“, [Is Kostadinov lying for “100 thousand Ukrainian tourists” in luxury hotels at the expense of Bulgarians], ClubZ, 20 August 2024.

⁸⁵ Center for the Study of Democracy, “The Tale of Two Misses”, YouTube, 18 November 2024.

The prevalence of **Russian-language forwards and of duplicate messages**, in many cases only differentiated by the message signature within these networks, suggests an orchestrated propaganda strategy. The narratives being disseminated also closely resemble those propagated by the Kremlin in general about Ukrainian women.⁸⁶ Additional disinformation themes include narratives concerning the mobilisation of Ukrainian women in the war - with the mocking expression that now the battle will be to the “to the last Ukrainian [woman],” - not to the last Ukrainian [man], which was the popular sarcastic slogan previously disseminated in these Telegram channels.⁸⁷

These narratives not only vilify newly arrived refugees, but also adversely affect the broader Ukrainian diaspora. There are recorded incidents of physical violence against Ukrainians, particularly along the Black Sea coast where most refugees were concentrated.^{88,89,90} In all cases, the ethnicity of the victims and/or their identity contributed to their targeting. The incidents underscore the severe real-world consequences that can manifest in a society saturated with hostile disinformation.

Box 3. Inauthentic Personas as Tools of Disinformation

A notable example of coordinated inauthentic behaviour targeting Ukrainian refugees in Bulgaria is the case of the synthetic social media persona Darsi Spv (Дарси Спасова), previously operating under handles such as @DariSpv88 and @darsi_spassovaa on Facebook. This profile, which amassed several thousand followers, falsely presented itself as a Ukrainian woman who had relocated to Bulgaria following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Through inflammatory content and performative provocations, the account actively sought to construct and reinforce a stereotypical image of Ukrainian women as aggressive, ungrateful, and ideologically extreme – frequently using Nazi imagery and anti-Bulgarian sentiment to provoke public outrage.⁹¹

Upon closer investigation, it was revealed that it was a fabricated identity, using images stolen from a Belarusian woman,⁹² similar in the way that previously a coordinated campaign on Bulgarian Facebook shared the same news article from three different news sites about how Ukrainian women are “stealing Bulgarian men” – with a stolen picture of another unassociated

⁸⁶ Center for the Study of Democracy, *Gendered Disinformation Targeting Ukrainian Women Refugees in Bulgaria*, Policy Brief No. 148, August 2024; CSD, *Gendered Disinformation: Challenges for Ukrainian Refugees*, Policy Brief No. 152, November 2024.

⁸⁷ Translation note: In Bulgarian the adjective denoting origin can be either in the masculine or on the feminine case, hence the replacement of „украинец” (Ukrainian male) with „украинка” (Ukrainian female).

⁸⁸ Bntnews.bg, “Нападнаха и биха бременна украинка в центъра на Варна” [A pregnant Ukrainian woman was attacked and beaten in the center of Varna], 19 September 2024.

⁸⁹ Boulevardbulgaria.bg, “Млад украински певец избяга от Буча, за да бъде пребит на улицата във Варна” [Young Ukrainian singer fled Bucha only to be beaten up on the streets of Varna], 25 February 2024.

⁹⁰ ClubZ, “Биха възрастни украинци в дома им в Равда” [They beat elderly Ukrainians in their home in Ravda], 24 July 2023.

⁹¹ Investigation by the Facebook group Red Pirates BG.

⁹² Ibid.

woman.⁹³ This discovery facilitated reporting and eventual removal of the profile. The same individual or group also operated a Facebook page titled “One Ukrainian woman in bulgaria” (“Една украинка в България”). The page’s content mirrored that of the personal profile, further amplifying anti-Ukrainian narratives.

Recasting Ukrainians as a Threat

Recent high-profile criminal cases have also been instrumentalised by pro-Kremlin and far-right disinformation actors to reinforce xenophobic and anti-Ukrainian sentiments. Notably, the tragic murder of two children in the town of Vakarel by their mother, frequently referred to in online media as the “bloody Ukrainian”, and a separate case involving a beautician found to be injecting patients with faulty botox, landing several women in the hospital, became focal points for disinformation, particularly in Telegram channels and fringe outlets such as *fakla.bg*. In both instances, the ethnicity of the women involved was highlighted as Ukrainian and leveraged to incite public hostility.⁹⁴

The framing of these events not as individual tragedies but as emblematic of a broader failure of migration and refugee policy reflects a common disinformation tactic: **exploiting violent or sensationalist news to attribute collective guilt to a marginalised group**. In doing so, disinformation actors not only erase the complexity of the events themselves but also undermine public solidarity with refugees and foster an environment in which gendered- and nationality-based stereotypes are normalised.

All in all, there is a **sophisticated campaign against Ukrainian refugees that goes beyond simple name-calling**, leveraging platforms like Telegram to construct a complex and hostile information environment. This ecosystem employs various tactics, including the relentless dissemination of sexualised and dehumanising tropes, the use of coordinated inauthentic personas to simulate internal dissent and the opportunistic manipulation of high-profile criminal cases to attribute collective guilt to the entire refugee community. These narratives are strategically designed to resonate with and amplify pre-existing public resentment. Practitioners on the ground confirm the severe real-world consequences of this digital hostility.⁹⁵ The documented incidents of physical violence, occur within a social climate that has been systematically poisoned by this disinformation.

⁹³ Tsabala, K., “Дезинформация, основана на пола: Ефекти и разпространители” [Gendered disinformation: Effects and Proliferators], presentation given at the Conference *Invisible Chains: Disinformation, Administrative Corruption, and Violence Against Women*, Sofia, 29 November 2024.

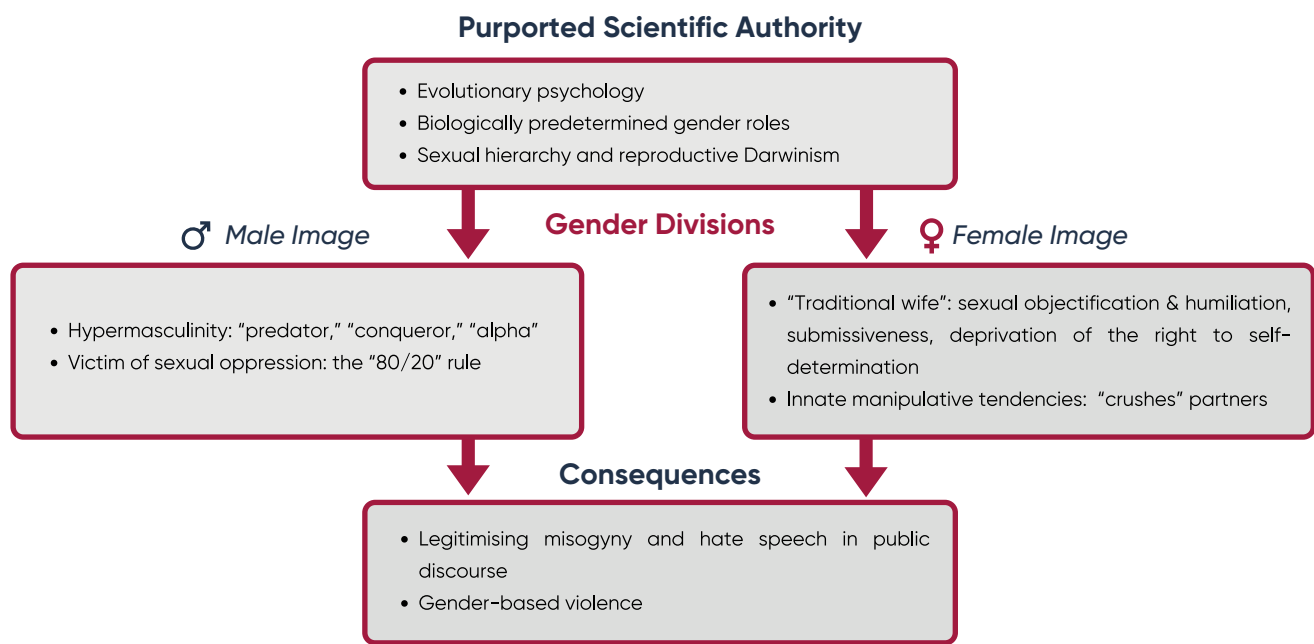
⁹⁴ Media Mall, „Недялко Недялков: Не мълчете, че майката е украинка! Не мълчете, че козметичката с отровния ботокс също е украинка!” [Nedyalko Nedyalkov: Don’t keep quiet about the fact that the mother is Ukrainian! Don’t stay quiet about the fact that the beautician with the poisonous Botox is also Ukrainian!], 2 February 2025.

⁹⁵ For example, educators and civil society actors observe a rise in hate speech and bullying against Ukrainian children in schools, perpetrated by both peers and teaching staff.

The Manosphere
and The Red Pill
Communities

A distinct but interconnected part of the broader disinformation environment are commercially motivated or opportunistic online communities of the manosphere. These spaces are recognised as **vectors for radicalisation**, embedding misogyny and male supremacist ideas within entertainment-oriented content like fitness or dating advice, thereby disarming and gradually indoctrinating young male audiences.⁹⁶ These communities legitimise a sense of “male victimhood” in a society they perceive as dominated by “feminist agendas”, which often aligns with the broader anti-gender narratives promoted by the actors discussed previously.

Figure 10. Overview of Misogynistic Narrative Constructs



Source: CSD.

The manosphere is a loose network of incels (involuntary celibates), pick-up artists (PUAs), and men’s rights activists (MRAs).⁹⁷ It is populated by a growing number of “masculinity influencers” who promote harmful attitudes, including the idea that women have too much power in contemporary society. A central tenet is the Red Pill ideology, which claims to awaken men to a supposed “gynocentric” reality, where women are inherently “hypergamous” (only desiring high-status men).⁹⁸ This worldview is often supported by justifications falsely claiming to be rooted in science – a tactic of misinterpreting statistics and studies to lend a false authority to sexist views. This worldview frames gender equality as harmful Western interfer-

⁹⁶ Botto, and Gottzén, “Swallowing and Spitting out the Red Pill”, – In: *Journal of Gender Studies*, 33(5), 2023, pp. 596–608.

⁹⁷ Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), *Incels: A First Scan of the Phenomenon (in the EU) and its Relevance and Challenges for P/CVE*, 2021.

⁹⁸ Botto, and Gottzén, “Swallowing and Spitting out the Red Pill”, – In: *Journal of Gender Studies*, 33(5), 2023, pp. 596–608.

ence in “traditional values” and recasts intimacy as a hierarchical “sexual marketplace” of high- and low-value individuals. It enforces rigid roles – a hypermasculine, dominant yet “victimised” male ideal (the 80/20 rule)⁹⁹ and women reduced to passive, domestic status and sexual/reproductive value – often objectified as possessions, depicted as manipulative, and blamed for male aggression and wider social problems.

This content is particularly popular among young men.¹⁰⁰ Online algorithms often accelerate this exposure, **leading users down a “rabbit hole”** by suggesting misogynistic content to those searching for topics like loneliness or mental health.¹⁰¹ The indoctrination process often transforms loneliness into misogynistic anger, reinforced by a “toxic tapestry” of memes and in-jokes within an online echo chamber.¹⁰² The consequences can be severe, with a recognised correlation between exposure to manosphere content and real-world violence against women.¹⁰³ In its most extreme forms, there is a deification of mass murderers who have committed attacks in the name of incel ideology, **creating a cycle that promotes future violence.**¹⁰⁴

In 2020 Bulgaria ranked as having the third-largest user base of the prominent incel forum *Incels.is*.¹⁰⁵ The rhetoric and core tenets of the manosphere are increasingly visible and are being actively localised and monetised on mainstream platforms such as YouTube and Telegram. The growing demand for such content is evidenced by the recent publication and commercialisation of books on Red Pill Ideology.¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, local experts are sounding the alarm about the real-world effects on minors – closed Telegram groups have emerged where young men, some as young as 17-18, share intimate photos and videos of young girls with vile commentary.¹⁰⁷

Analysis of the Bulgarian YouTube ecosystem reveals how **manosphere rhetoric has become increasingly normalised**. While keywords such as “alpha male,” “redpill,” Andrew Tate, and “female nature” are prominent, their usage is not confined to dedicated manosphere channels. The rhetoric has bled into general entertainment content, including commentaries on popular TV shows, talk shows, and podcasts. This demonstrates how a cohesive ideology that legitimises sexism under the guise of “self-improvement” or

⁹⁹ The “80/20 rule” is an integral part of the meaning system of the Red Pill Ideology, which claims that 80% of women are sexually attracted to 20% of men, constructing a false sense of male victimhood.

¹⁰⁰ Deo, A., *Plugged in But Disconnected: Young People and Hateful Attitudes*, London: Hope not Hate, July 2024.

¹⁰¹ Bundtzen, S., *Misogynistic Pathways to Radicalisation: Recommended Measures for Platforms to Assess and Mitigate Online Gender-Based Violence*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), 2023.

¹⁰² Regehr, K., “In(ce)l doctination: How technologically facilitated misogyny moves violence off screens and on to streets”, *New Media & Society*, 24(1), 2020, pp. 138-155.

¹⁰³ United Nations General Assembly, *Intensification of efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls: technology-facilitated violence against women and girls*, Report of the Secretary-General (A/79/500), 8 October 2024.

¹⁰⁴ Deo, A., *Plugged in But Disconnected: Young People and Hateful Attitudes*, London: Hope not Hate, July 2024.

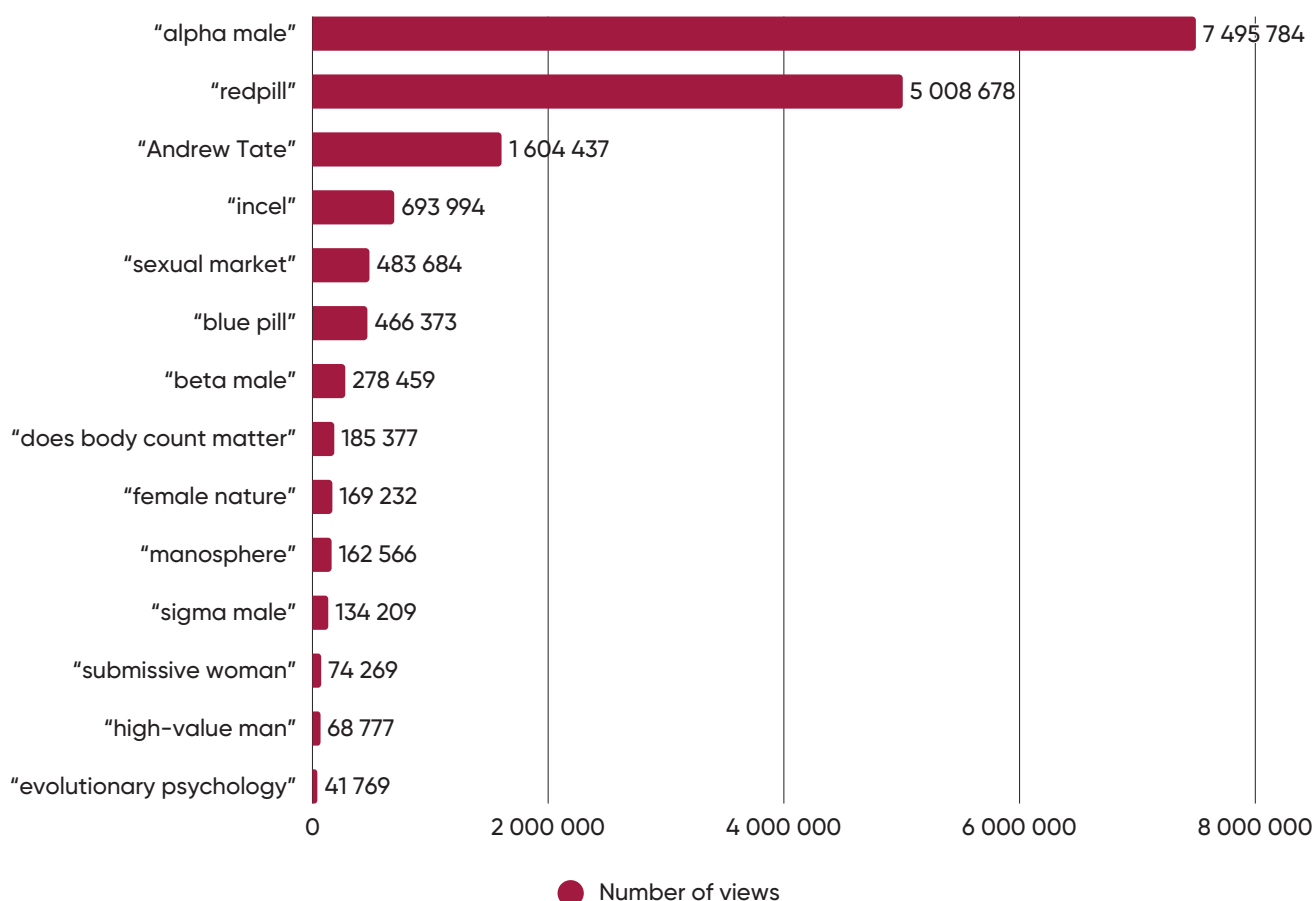
¹⁰⁵ Fernquist, J. et al, “Hope, cope & rope: Incels i digitala miljöer”, Stockholm: FOI – Swedish Defence Research Agency, 2020.

¹⁰⁶ See example: *The Red Pill* (in Bulgarian).

¹⁰⁷ Vasileva, K., „Червеното хапче“ и омразата към жени. Какво е „инсел“ културата и има ли я в България? [“The red pill” and hatred toward women: What is “incel” culture and does it exist in Bulgaria?], *Radio Free Europe*, 23 May 2025.

“natural roles” is reaching a broader audience, demonstrating a localisation of the manosphere.

Figure 11. Top Keywords in Bulgarian YouTube Space Related to the Manosphere Rhetoric



Source: CSD, based on data from filmot.com (data extraction with Python).

Misogyny as a Business Model

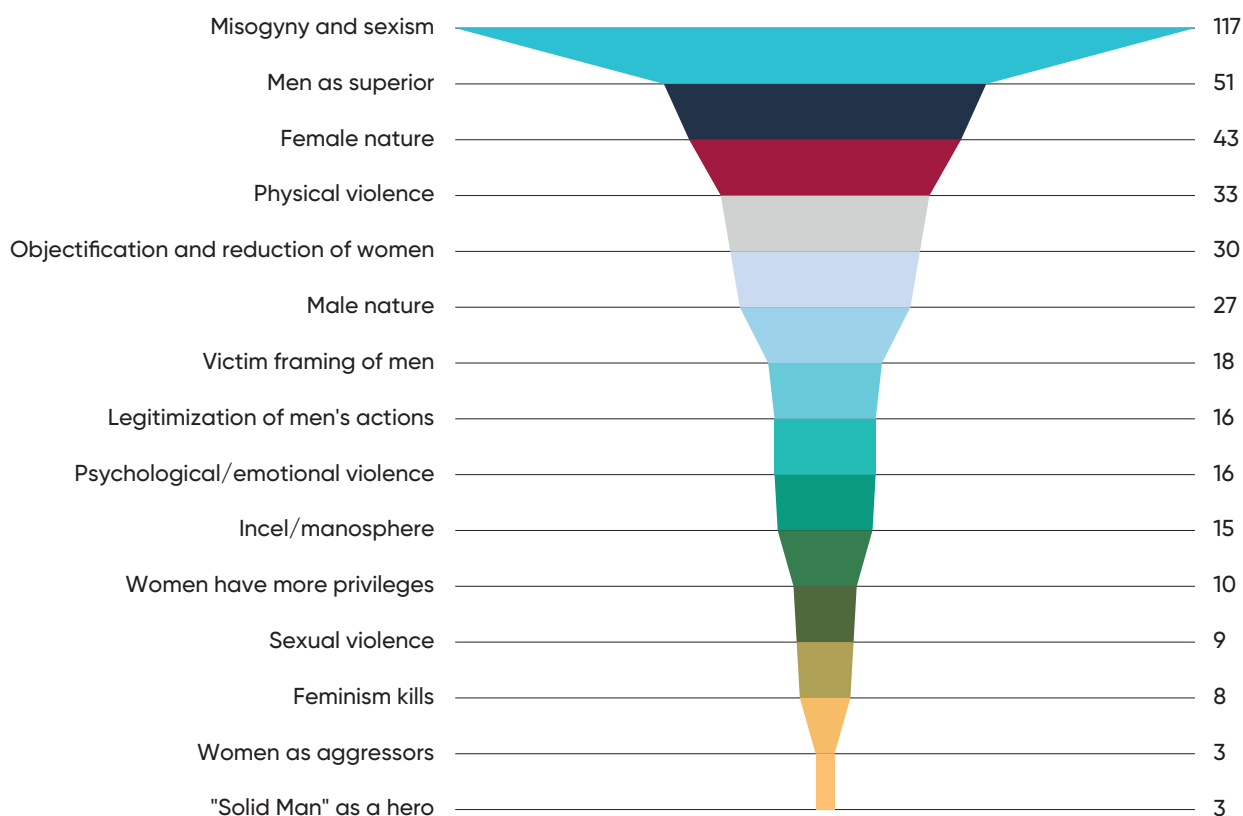
A key feature of the Bulgarian manosphere is the **monetisation of misogyny**, where influencers package it as a lifestyle brand.¹⁰⁸ A recent case illustrates how gender- and identity-based disinformation can be laundered through the rhetoric of “personal development” and “psychology” to normalise coercion and violence while generating profit. A Bulgarian female influencer¹⁰⁹ presents herself as a mentor on interpersonal relationships, while her output systematically advances dehumanising depictions of women and prescriptive, hierarchical gender norms, including explicit endorsements of domestic violence as a disciplinary tool – offered as concrete “advice” to male followers. This project is monetised through paid consultations, seminars,

¹⁰⁸ Koleva, S., „Как Зорница Гюцова учи мъжете на бой и домашно насилие и взима пари за това“ [How Zornitsa Gyutova teaches men to fight and commit domestic violence and gets paid for it] *Boulevard Bulgaria*, 13 May 2025.

¹⁰⁹ Zornitsa Gutsova.

and Patreon subscriptions promoted across her social media channels. Between September 2024 and May 2025, a Telegram community titled “A Solid Man” (Мъж на място) operated as a hub for this ecosystem.

Figure 12. Topics in “A Solid Man” Telegram Group (~400 messages sample)¹¹⁰



Source: CSD, based on Telegram data extracted with Python.

The group's discourse is characterised by **entrenched misogyny** in which women are routinely portrayed as “promiscuous,” “emotionally unstable,” “irrational,” and inherently undeserving of equality. Members explicitly instruct one another to “never think of your wife as a person – think of her as a woman,” thereby reifying female inferiority and legitimising dehumanisation. Particular emphasis is placed on policing women's sexuality and professional autonomy; those with multiple partners or careers are “used” and constructed as undesirable. As one post concisely puts it, “her virginity is her biggest capital.” These practices produce a taxonomy of “worthy” versus “unworthy” women that functions as a social-control mechanism, naturalising male dominance under the idioms of “male logic” and “natural roles.”

¹¹⁰ During the observation period, 8,538 messages were posted; this analysis focuses on approximately 400 selected statements, coded according to predetermined thematic categories. Rather than profiling individual participants, the study addresses symptomatic patterns reflective of broader online subcultures in which digital misogyny and regressive value systems are normalised and disseminated.

A second persistent motif is **the celebration of male superiority and gendered hierarchies in intimate relationships**. The ideal relationship is framed as explicitly non-egalitarian – “the man gives directions, the woman listens,” and “men lead, women follow.” Men are urged to “set boundaries,” “control,” and “enforce rules,” while women are expected to comply. Calls for equality are derided as “relationship communism,” signalling that the value of partnership is an oppressive ideological deviation from the “norm” of biologically predetermined, hierarchical gender roles.

Biological determinism anchors this ideological frame. Users assert that “women are emotionally like 10-year-olds,” while men are cast as innately suited to build, lead, and control. Violence is reframed as a natural outgrowth of male instinct – “a man’s instinct is to kill and to f***” – and thus becomes morally insulated from critique. This essentialism extends to sexual violence, which is rationalised as biological instinct rather than a crime: “rape is just a reproductive strategy.” In parallel, physical and psychological abuse are reframed as discipline or harmless correction: “there’s no violence if there’s no pain” and “don’t hit her with your hands, hit her emotionally.”

A pervasive victimhood narrative recasts men as oppressed by feminist norms and legal institutions. Group members complain, “we’re always the ones to blame” and insist that “the law is written for women.” This grievance politics legitimises coercion as defensive and corrective – “every woman can be re-educated – you just have to decide which one is worth it” – while displacing accountability onto women: “they enjoy making us monsters.” Incel/Red-Pill tropes further claim that most men are “invisible” because “women only want the top 5% of men,” which both fuels resentment and justifies intensified control.

The discursive field also mobilises nationalist symbolism to heroise domination: “a real man is like Levski¹¹¹ – strong, firm, and ready to sacrifice himself.” Anti-feminist conspiracy narratives are distilled in slogans such as “feminism kills,” alongside the assertion that feminists “cause the most suffering to women.” Taken together, these statements articulate a dangerous worldview in which control over women is not only justified but valorised.

By essentialising gender difference and **reframing aggression as evidence-based masculinity**, the community advances an ideological system that normalises violence, delegitimises equality, and positions patriarchal authority as both natural and necessary – an instance of digitally mediated gender extremism with particular resonance for young men seeking identity, community, and purpose.

Despite a petition of over 5,000 signatures,¹¹² the influencer’s channels remain active; only the “A Solid Man” Telegram hub appears to have been removed or relocated. Bulgaria’s hate-speech provision (Art. 162) does not cover sex and gender as protected characteristics, making most of this content not

¹¹¹ Vasil Levski (1837–1873) was a Bulgarian revolutionary who organised the national liberation movement against Ottoman rule and remains a central symbol of justice, sacrifice, and independence in Bulgarian society. Today, nationalist and far-right groups often instrumentalise his image and legacy to legitimise exclusionary or illiberal agendas.

¹¹² Peticiq.com, „Да спрем публичното насърчаване на насилие над жени от Зорница Гюцова“ [Let’s stop publicly encouraging violence against women by Zornitsa Gyutova], 13 May 2025.

sanctionable as illegal hate speech.¹¹³ Prosecutors could pursue public incitement to commit assault, but that offence is rarely used and often results in an administrative fine for first-time offenders. Until the EU directive on violence against women is transposed (deadline 14 June 2027) – to criminalise technology-mediated incitement based on sex – this enforcement gap could keep misogyny a profitable business model.

Box 4. Localised Red Pill Propaganda

A notable feature of the local digital ecosystem is the emergence of online media channels adapting global “manprovement”, red pill and Andrew Tate-esque content for a domestic audience. Several of these channels have attracted significant followings, with subscriber counts ranging from approximately 12,000 to over 52,000.¹¹⁴ The content is often presented in “lifestyle coaching” formats that promote a hyper-masculine ideal centred on acquiring wealth and status. These platforms are commonly monetised through paid subscriptions, online courses, and branded products aimed at a young male audience.¹¹⁵

Content analysis reveals several recurring narratives. A prominent theme is male victimhood, where romantic commitment is framed as a vulnerability exploited by women.¹¹⁶ The discourse is often rooted in gender dichotomies, depicting women as motivated by material gain (hypergamy) while advising men to adopt traits like emotional suppression and the pursuit of status. These ideas are reinforced through biologically reductionist tropes and typologies of “high-” versus “low-value” women, where a woman’s worth is linked to her sexual history and deference to male needs.^{117,118} Feminism is frequently framed as a threat to masculinity and social order, portraying it as a foreign influence.^{119,120} Gender equality is often dismissed as an unnatural concept, and assertive women are criticised for adopting “male” behaviours – ultimately, discussions that police female sexuality while promoting male entitlement.¹²¹

Commercially and opportunistically motivated influencers are successfully localising global manosphere ideologies, repackaging misogyny and anti-feminist narratives as marketable “lifestyle coaching”. Through the monetisation of content that promotes male victimhood, sexual hierarchies,

¹¹³ Koleva, D., „Ако не те бие не те обича”: Инсел културата в България“ [“If he doesn’t beat you, he doesn’t love you”: Incel culture in Bulgaria], *Mediapool.bg*, 23 May 2025.

¹¹⁴ See for example: *Stan and Nikola* (“Стан и Никола”; @impactbulgaria, 52.1K subscribers), *10/10 Podcast* (@10ot10podcast, 12.1K subscribers), and *Late Night Podcast* (@LateNightPodcast, 23.3K subscribers).

¹¹⁵ See for example: *Impactbulgaria.com*.

¹¹⁶ Impactbulgaria, „Дадох и ВСИЧКО - А тя ме ИЗОСТАВИ” / Червеното Хапче” [“I gave her EVERYTHING - and she LEFT ME” / The Red Pill], *YouTube*, 3 December 2020.

¹¹⁷ Impactbulgaria, „Избери мъдро жена си: егоистична гледна точка” [Choose your woman wisely: a selfish point of view], *YouTube*, 24 May 2021.

¹¹⁸ Impactbulgaria, „Бройката ИМА значение / Анализ на анкета” [The body count DOES matter / Survey analysis], *YouTube*, 15 July 2021.

¹¹⁹ 10ot10podcast, „Семействата Умират – ФАКТИТЕ #1” [Families Are Dying – THE FACTS #1], *YouTube*, 31 March 2023.

¹²⁰ LateNightPodcast, „Динамиката между мъжете у жените” [The dynamic between men and women], *YouTube*, 19 June 2021.

¹²¹ 10ot10podcast, „Женомразци ли сме?” [Are we misogynists?], *YouTube*, 21 May 2023.

and the dehumanisation of women, these actors are creating a potent and accessible pathway to radicalisation. They draw in audiences with promises of status and self-worth, then systematically expose them to a worldview that normalises the dehumanisation of women, celebrates male dominance, and recasts violence as a biological inevitability. As this analysis shows, such rhetoric is no longer confined to niche forums but is bleeding into mainstream entertainment, normalising sexism for a much broader audience.

WHAT'S NEXT

The findings of this report show that disinformation and gender- and identity-based disinformation in Bulgaria are not marginal phenomena but systemic vulnerabilities: under-resourced Bulgarian-language content moderation enables coordinated harassment and deepfake abuse; malign actors exploit refugee and gender identities to polarise society; mushroom websites and manosphere influencers monetise disinformation; and women in public life face intimidation campaigns that deter participation. These vulnerabilities persist because Bulgaria lacks a coherent national counter-disinformation framework, while civil society and independent media remain chronically underfunded.

In her State of the Union Address from September 2025, EC President Ursula von der Leyen announced a new set of EU policy initiatives aimed at tackling FIMI and disinformation more decisively, including the urgent set-up of the **European Democracy Shield**¹²² to boost collective capacities to monitor and detect information manipulation and disinformation, as well as a **European Centre for Democratic Resilience** that brings together expertise and capacity across member states and neighbouring countries.¹²³ Finally, a new **Media Resilience Programme** will counteract media capture¹²⁴ by supporting independent journalism, local media and media literacy.

At national level, policy makers need to move quickly and decisively to bring the underdeveloped legislative, institutional and policy framework up to standard and bridge the gap between existing capacities and the scale of hybrid threats targeting the country and the EU as a whole. For Bulgaria to become an active contributor to collective defences against FIMI within the Union, several immediate actions should be prioritised, including taking critical thinking and digital literacy education seriously, leveraging EU-level regulatory instruments to oblige platforms to publish standardised, sex- and age-disaggregated transparency data, and mandating rapid, linguistically-competent takedown mechanisms for online abuse. Only a coherent and horizontal cross-sectoral policy adhering to EU standards to build public immunity against disinformation can reduce its spread, including polarising identity narratives. To realise this, the government and civil society must coordinate their efforts to:

- **Strengthen the implementation of the DSA at national level**
 - Prioritise the empowerment of the national digital services coordinator (DSC) – the Communications Regulation Commission – to exercise

¹²² Center for the Study of Democracy, *Forging the European Democracy Shield*, Policy Brief No. 159, May 2025.

¹²³ European Commission, *2025 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen*, 10 September 2025.

¹²⁴ Center for the Study of Democracy, *Supporting Media Freedom in Europe*, Policy Brief No. 150, November 2024; Stoyanova, M., Trifonova, G., and McLaren, R., *Media Financing in Europe: Media Freedom, Market Failure and Instruments for Funding Independent and Pluralist Media*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2024.

effective control over online platforms in accordance with the requirements of the DSA.

- Issue national guidance for platforms, including expectations for risk assessments, cooperation during elections, and transparency standards aligned with other EU DSCs.
- Support fact-checkers and launch a Trusted Flagger program by expanding funding through independent mechanisms and inviting credible organisations to strengthen local capacity for rapid content verification.
- Ensure researcher access to platform data by implementing Article 40 of the DSA proactively, enabling academic collaboration, and publishing an annual report on disinformation trends and platform compliance.
- The integration of the Code of Practice on Disinformation into the DSA enforcement regime should be leveraged to demand linguistically competent moderation from Very Large Online Platforms. The European Centre for Democratic Resilience should monitor compliance in small-language contexts like Bulgarian.
- **Introduce targeted measures against FIMI**
 - Integrate a governance-focused state capture framework into the European Democracy Shield initiative of the European Commission¹²⁵ to strengthen democratic resilience against hybrid threats and enhance the EU's capacity for proactive, systemic defence.
 - Create a permanent counter-disinformation task force to coordinate national strategy, institutional roles, and crisis response across government, civil society, and media.
 - Integrate counter-disinformation efforts into national security and foreign policy by mandating the State Agency for National Security and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to expose foreign influence campaigns and issue public alerts, while aligning with NATO/EU StratCom for early warning and feeding intelligence into the EU's new Centre for Democratic Resilience and the European Democracy Shield to strengthen coordinated awareness and response.
- **Curtail the financial ecosystem sustaining disinformation**
 - Limit financial incentives for producers of disinformation through regulation of political advertising and influencer marketing, as well as through auditing of advertising networks. Mechanisms should be introduced to cut off transnational sources of funding for disinformation networks. At the EU level, the integration of political advertising rules into the DSA and the Commission's financial transparency initiatives must be harnessed to choke off these funding streams.

¹²⁵ European Commission, *European Democracy Shield*.

- **Establish a framework for media literacy**
 - Equip society with the necessary media and information literacy skills by integrating critical thinking modules into school curricula from an early age and launching nationwide public campaigns targeting all age groups. This should involve coordinated efforts between the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Culture, civil society, and local institutions, drawing on successful EU models to build societal resilience against disinformation.
 - The EU's Media Resilience Programme provides a vehicle for embedding critical digital literacy into schools and public campaigns. National education authorities should coordinate with this EU programme to tailor curricula that address gender-sensitive manipulation tactics documented in this report.
- **Adopt a gender-sensitive strategy**
 - Adopt technology solutions with a gender-sensitive approach via public-private partnerships with the IT sector to detect and investigate recurrent disinformation and the actors that produce and amplify it.
 - Recognise gender and identity disinformation as a form of censorship and intimidation, where women adjust their behaviour to avoid abuse.
 - Promote diversity and empower women in digital spaces by addressing the replication of misogyny, sexism, and xenophobia online.
- **Strengthen young people's resilience to manipulation and online harm**
 - Develop youth-specific prevention programmes, combining peer-led initiatives with participatory dialogue on grievances and positive identity formation. The Commission's priority to expand youth digital literacy and online safety can help fund and scale these interventions.
- **Facilitate next-generation EU-wide societal resilience measures**
 - Address audience vulnerabilities through evidence-based interventions, psychological resistance to manipulation, supported through EU-level funding to ensure autonomy from state capture and enable continuous, scalable civil society-led action.
 - Establish a centralised knowledge hub, including via the future European Center for Democratic Resilience, to consolidate and disseminate actionable evidence, guidelines, and best practices on resilience-building interventions, ensuring timely access for practitioners and policymakers across member states.
 - Adopt citizen-centred approaches to democratic resilience by combining institutional support with locally tailored strategies that foster independent media and democratic participation as core tools for long-term resistance to disinformation.¹²⁶

¹²⁶ European Commission, [State of the Union 2025](#).

- **Foster responsible media and journalistic practices**
 - Prioritise strong and sustained support for independent and local media in Central and Eastern Europe to guarantee citizens' access to reliable information and address the disproportionate impact of disinformation, which severely undermines public trust and democratic debate in the region.¹²⁷
 - Transparency of media ownership and funding must be ensured, and ethical and responsible reporting must be encouraged through self-regulation and support for independent journalists, including through the new Media Resilience Programme as a core vehicle for channelling EU funds into local journalism, particularly in rural “information deserts”.
 - Promote digital responsibility and online safety among content creators and influencers by providing targeted training that foster accountability, equip them to recognise and report harmful practices, and ensure their online behaviour promotes positive social impact.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

