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Bulgaria

It was never about the Istanbul Convention

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The debate over the ratification of the so called "Istanbul Convention" in Bulgaria, as in some other countries in the region, became a huge public scandal and probably the most important political matter of 2018. Originally intended to provide states with a framework for prevention and reduction of domestic violence against women, the document has become a byword for a conspiracy against the Bulgarian people and their supposed "traditional values" violated by foreign liberal powers through the use of "gender ideology". On the 27th of July the Constitutional Court, referred to the matter by 75 deputies to the National Assembly, ruled that the Convention is incompatible with the constitution. The ruling revealed what the actual struggle was about.

Chronology of a battle foretold

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/anti-ik.jpg>]

Photo of a protest against the Istanbul Convention by PIK. People, predominantly women hold plaques that state "There is no third gender", "Bulgaria pure and holy republic", "The gender convention = violence against normal people", "There is no (social) gender", "OUT(Down with?) the Istanbul Convention".

It all started before it was even clear what was at stake: whether it was all about the Convention of the Council of Europe for the prevention of violence against women and domestic violence or about the "Istanbul convention". [1] As Alexey Pamporov jokingly noted in January, we could spare ourselves some trouble if the document were called the "Constantinople Accords". [2]

Unfortunately, already in December it was not amusing anymore. At that point one of the parties in the governing coalition - right-extreme VMRO - explained that the Convention was about letting in Iranian transvestites, teaching sex change, an international conspiracy against the Bulgarian nation and other nightmares that haunt the conservative mind. [3]

Someone might say - I, for one - that to go against such a stance by quoting legal documents, statistical data and scientific definitions is to siege a castle with candies. Yet that is what a part of the defenders of the Istanbul convention have done with stubborn consistency. They got stuck in the legalities of the matter and at the end no expertise, communication techniques or protest mobilisation helped. Not truly realising how alien their technocratic lingo of human rights sounds to the Bulgarian public, the NGO elite and liberal intellectuals refused to play by the rules of their opponent even in this debate. Their unswerving faith in the constructive debate and legal order mislead them irreversibly.

Part of the defence of the Istanbul convention went even further. "Opinion leaders", inconsequential political figures from the more liberal elitist right as well as guardians of the legal order and the European idea, who to this day swear by the civilizational values of Europe, blame the 'Euros mentality' of the "average Bulgarian" who is as if 'Euros preconditioned' to beat his woman, and explain to the 'Euros lowly folks' what "gender" means. Those who took up such strategy embodied the tremendous failure of the defence of the Istanbul Convention as a whole, more so than its other proponents armed with dry technocratic lingo.

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Every time the defenders blamed the opposition of "uneuropeanness", the latter had two safe options - either to say that they did not want "Eurogay values" (an old narrative that springs up time and again - the last time when there was a panic that paedophilia is to be legalised); or if they are more sophisticated (like some politicians) to follow the discourse exemplified best by VMRO MEP Angel Dzhambazki: [\[4\]](#) [\[5\]](#)

"I want the Bulgarians, as the heirs of an ancient European civilisation and as people who have a significant cultural and historical contributions, to be a part of the Western European Union of values. [...] Do you know why the propaganda against the EU is effective? Because it points at the stupidities. [...] Because the liberal elites are incapable of a proper response, as they teach disordered models to their own societies, they distort the feelings and will of the people to fight, to survive."

The same approach was adopted by "the first party to put the emphasis on the membership of Bulgaria in the European Union" - the Union of Democratic Forces (SDS). [\[6\]](#) For them, "thanks to the strong family traditions, thanks to the values taught by the Christian faith, the Bulgarian people and spirit survived five century of Ottoman slavery and half a century under the chains of communism-atheism. We cannot easily turn our backs to those values and to support the beginning of their erosion through the acceptance of one document."

In this regard, every argumentative looping that it is Christian to adopt the Istanbul convention became meaningless from the get-go. [\[7\]](#) Not only because of arguments as the aforementioned, but because of the position of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and of the active campaign of US-sponsored evangelical organisations that continues to this day through a series of small, but well organised protests in front of central state institutions, demonstrations such as the "March for the family" and various media channels. [\[8\]](#) [\[9\]](#) [\[10\]](#)

Every time the defenders of the Istanbul Convention claimed that it would deliver a salvation for the sinful character of the "Bulgarian" - otherwise, supposedly a non-European by nature and thus prone to barbarian behaviour - the opposition had three safe options: 1) to claim that "more domestically violent" societies had adopted the Convention (thus it is not about prevention); 2) to explain that Bulgaria has a decent enough legal framework and if needed, we could better it ourselves; but 3) to promise they would never succumb to external pressure and to allow meddling with the state's sovereignty. [\[11\]](#) [\[12\]](#) The last one was the decisive argument of the Bulgarian President Radev (by constitution the embodiment of the national unity), who claimed that it is strictly the decision of the Bulgarian state and that it should not be taken away by mysterious foreign agents. [\[13\]](#) Thus between startling demophobia of the elitist right and the warm populist embrace of the nationalists of all political creeds and parties, it is not surprising that more people preferred the latter. [\[14\]](#)

Every time the defenders of the Istanbul Convention got bogged down in explanations of the meaning of the word "gender" and claimed that in the document's texts there was nothing about a third gender, the opposition had at their disposal the vast systemic propaganda, spreading out from the US to Russia, that dated back to the early 1990's to today: a profoundly foreign invention that for less than a year took over sovereign Bulgaria as well. [\[15\]](#) The key term, "gender ideology", that denotes every assumed "passed down" action to change the traditional gender roles and relations was used by all sorts of prominent political figures and commentators and even ended up in the arguments for the decision of the Constitutional Court from 27.07.2018. [\[16\]](#) According to the Court, the Istanbul Convention contradicts the constitution. Possibly according to those judges, the conspiracy is not unimaginable. Some kind of a definition from the books of western scholars against the popular intuition that a mighty foreign power is against traditional life. Well, the domestic powers rose to defend the population. And succeeded.

Today, exactly seven months after their first position regarding the convention, VMRO are celebrating the victory as theirs. [\[17\]](#) Kornelia Ninova, the Chair of the Bulgarian Socialist Party and currently elected Vice President of Socialist International forgot women's struggles, to which her own party decades ago and Ninova herself just two years ago, have contributed, declaring that she was happy. [\[18\]](#) And justifiably - she and all others in the opposition

camp against the Istanbul Convention did not have to defend themselves or to engage actively, they only had to wait. The Constitutional Court's decision proclaimed formally that there was no point for the struggle to continue.

What should be (or have been) the issue

In this struggle there was simply no space for two critical perspectives that could have possibly shifted the balance of power.

On one side, almost nobody mentioned that the Convention of the Council of Europe on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (a decent legal document that could have actually synchronised the Bulgarian legislation's existing framework that safeguards women and children), is a politically and socially problematic document. As Zana Tsoneva commented, "the convention is filled with the neoliberal spirit of the so-called carceral feminism or the mobilisation of the repressive institutions of the state in the tackling of the gender-based violence and inequality. However, interpersonal violence cannot be addressed with state violence." [19] That is an aspect which could yield a more productive and noticeably less polarised debate. Unfortunately, the actual qualities of the Istanbul Convention were not the subject of discussion outside the snide remarks of the opposition that they would have supported this nice document were it not for the "gender" issue. At the same time even the moderate right that supported the convention did not manage to go beyond their defensive position.

On the other side, there was no debate on the conditions that produce violence, which consequently had to be mediated in international treaties. There were no concrete discussions beyond violence. There were hardly any questions about the traditionally subservient role of women and children, and where that occurred (predominantly in the discourse of NGO's and their mobilisations), the rhetoric was quite bland and it talked down to the general public. There were no debates on the use of minorities as second-hand people - of sexual and gender minorities as scapegoats for every conservative populist or for the ethnic minorities for their cheap labour. There was no talk about the all-encompassing inequality and alienation in the Bulgarian society, where people living in poverty-stricken neighbourhoods, cities and families with a broken social fabric cannot afford the luxury of protecting each other. Mariya Ivancheva and I attempted to talk about all this in January. [20] Unfortunately, by that point we already knew it was too late. The public discourse had long silenced any mentions of the dire problems of inequality and exploitation as material and not a civilizational or mental problems and their exclusive role in propelling class and gender violence. On the rare occasions when those topics show up in media, they appear as statistics (from Eurostat, for instance) and nothing more. Bland data, which part of the defenders continue to use with the blind trust that statistics can change the public opinion. The problems mentioned are not something new, they are not in the programmes of parties or experts, apparently they do not deserve attention - and that is a point of depressingly wide agreement between the two camps.

The groups opposing the Istanbul Convention took a stance for "the people", however conservative and problematic it may be. That is still a novel approach that most people have not experienced in their lives as political beings in post-1989 Bulgaria. Conversely, the more vocal and aggressive defenders of the Istanbul Convention with the stale inertia of their anti-communist roots and /or their inevitable relations with the neoliberal order/, clung to the rhetoric of the West against the East, Europe against non-Europe, democracy against non-democracy, the enlightened elite against the simpletons. It is time to admit that they lost.

The moment was carefully chosen, including the delayed session of the Constitutional Court. The parliament is off for their summer holiday. [21] In autumn the MPs will be able to quietly rearrange on the ideologically cleansed board. Conservative elites proved that they are now better in the game of public debate than their liberal opponents and expectedly gained more of the public's trust that they can now trade in their inter-party and interpersonal squabbles. GERB, the ruling party of Prime Minister Boyko Borissov, who formally supported the Istanbul Convention have no

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interest in facing up to everyone else and now, more than ever, will fit loudly in the conservative rhetoric of the dominant political discourse. This was a sentiment shared by the political vultures of the current leadership of BSP, which led them to easily betray the women struggles (even in their nominal form).

After Friday any topic regarding equality between people in whatever regard in Bulgaria will be even more difficult. The losers are not only women or minorities, but everyone whose labour or bodies are exploited.

At the end, it was always about an ideological battle with a tremendous stakes, under which smoulders the old struggle between groups with disparate social, cultural and economic capital and incompatible interests. This international legal document was only the concrete occasion for the scandal, that could have happened in other forms and at another point in time. It was never about the Istanbul Convention. In fact, such a convention never existed.

[The article first appeared in Bulgarian, published by DVersia journal](#), and was kindly translated into the English by Hristo Bozhkov.

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[LeftEast](#)

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[1] <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/home?desktop=false>

[2] <https://www.facebook.com/pamporov/posts/10156038054155816> -> <https://www.facebook.com/pamporov/posts/10156038054155816>

[3] <https://offnews.bg/politika/vmro-mezhdunarodni-lobita-natiskat-balgaria-da-uzakoni-tretia-pol-671890.html>

[4] <https://www.mediapool.bg/sled-dzhendara-vmro-se-pochuvstvaha-zaplasheni-i-ot-pedofiliyata-news280849.html>

[5] <https://offnews.bg/interviu/angel-dzhambazki-az-sam-balgarski-nacionalist-evropa-e-moiat-izbor-649660.html>

[6] <http://www.sds.bg/articles/8402-sds-da-ne-ratifikirame-istanbulskata-konventsija>

[7] <http://kultura.bg/web/%D1%84%D0%B0%D0%BB%D1%88%D0%B8%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%8F%D1%82-%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%B%D0%B4%D0%B0%D0%BB-%D1%81-%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B1%D1%83%D0%BB%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0-%D0%BA%D0%BE/>

[8] <http://www.bg-patriarshia.bg/news.php?id=254101>

[9] https://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2018/02/17/3130749_djuzus_sreshtu_djendura_-_pred_kogo_otstupi_borisov_za/

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- [11] <https://frognews.bg/novini/djambazki-istanbulskata-konventsia-ratifikatsirana-turtsia-tam-ima-7000-ubiti-jeni-sapruzi-prez-2017.html>
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- [16] <http://constcourt.bg/bg/Acts/GetHtmlContent/f278a156-9d25-412d-a064-6ffd6f997310>
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- [18] https://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2018/07/27/3288315_vupreki_tejiia_boi_vurhu_bsp_ninova_e_shtastliva_ot/
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