

GENDERED DISINFORMATION: CHALLENGES FOR UKRAINIAN REFUGEES

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Disinformation remains one of the main tools through which the Kremlin seeks to consolidate its political power at the national level and exert influence over other states. The unstable rule of law institutions, the prominence of corruption, and the digital skills gap in Bulgaria have further shaped it as both **a target and a hub for cybercrime and pro-Russian disinformation** targeting vulnerable groups.¹ In the face of all threats present in the digital realm, **migrant girls and women bear a disproportionate impact** due to their intersectional identity, yet the gender dimensions of disinformation are not fully understood.²

Underage girls, war refugees, as well as girls and women advocating for democracy, women's rights and LGBTIQ people are among **the most vulnerable groups** to experience forms of online violence, harassment and abuse. Due to **targeted disinformation campaigns** at women and refugees in Bulgaria, such groups with intersecting identities face **significant increase of discrimination** in their everyday life, access to healthcare and public services, education, and housing as opposed to the years before the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Enablers and Amplifiers of Disinformation

Pro-Russian segments in Bulgarian social media networks are the main disseminators and amplifiers of disinformation narratives against women of Ukrainian origin in Bulgaria. The Facebook pages which predominantly share such content and gather the most

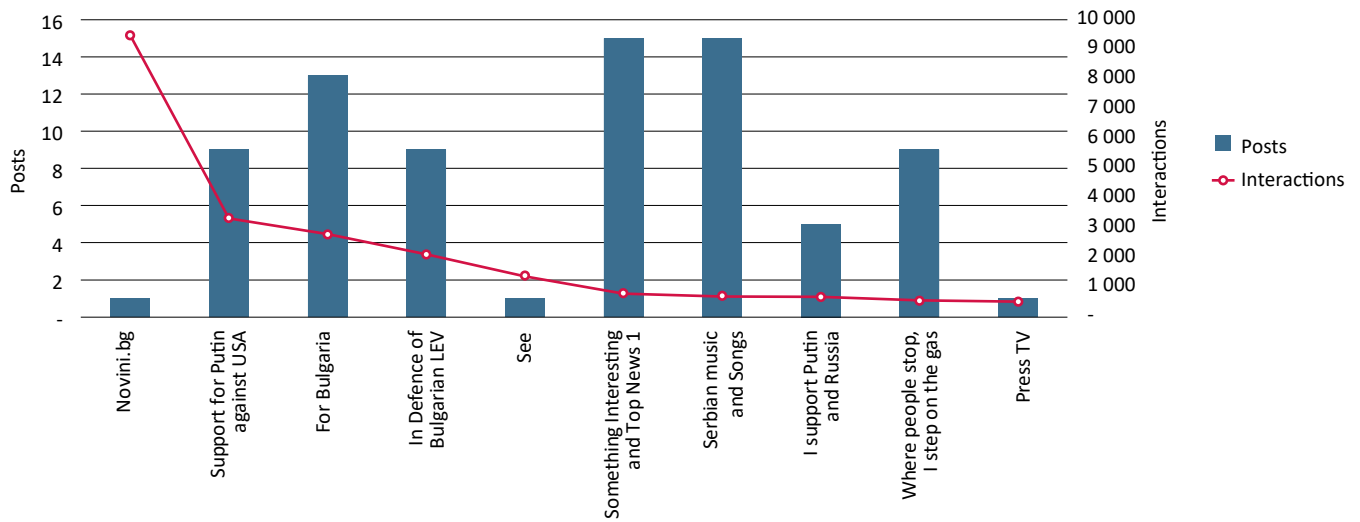
KEY POINTS

- Gendered disinformation **circulates through mixed-content social media groups and pages** combining patriotism, entertainment, and occasional political propaganda, making it more digestible for the audience and more difficult to detect and prosecute.
- **Bulgarian politicians** often replicate patriotic rhetoric and **avoid addressing gender and refugee-related issues**, including disinformation, due to fear of backlash from pro-Russian and far-right voters and other actors.
- Ukrainian **female refugees**, especially elderly women and children, **are highly susceptible to online scams, fake advertisements, and hate speech** due to language barriers and limited local legal knowledge.
- There is **insufficient support for victims of cyber-violence**, with limited resources available in languages other than Bulgarian. Under-reporting is widespread, driven by fear, shame, and mistrust in authorities.

¹ Stefanov, R., et al. (eds.), *Mind the Trap: Breaking the Anticorruption Deadlock in the Western Balkans*, SELDI, 2024.

² Center for the Study of Democracy, *Gendered Disinformation targeting Ukrainian Women Refugees in Bulgaria*, Policy Brief No. 148, August 2024.

Figure 1. Top 10 Facebook Pages Promoting the “Ukrainian Gold-Digger” Narrative



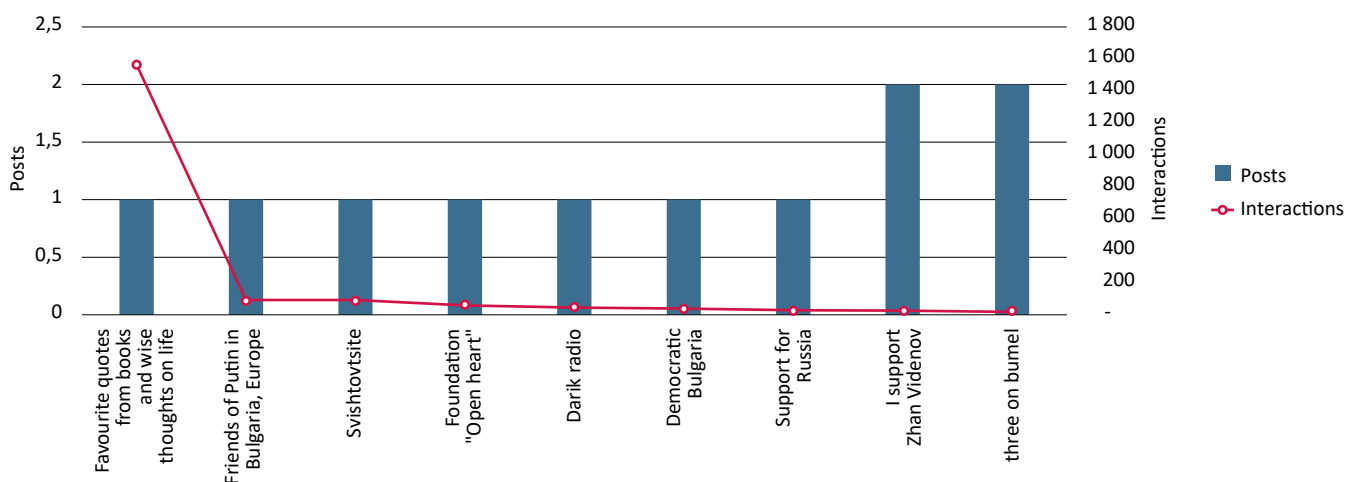
Note: The full content of the narrative reads “Ukrainian women are gold-diggers who are trying to seduce and marry Bulgarian men for European passports while Ukrainian men are at war”

Source: CSD data gathered from CrowdTangle (February 2022 - July 2024).

interactions include **support for Putin, Russia and anti-Euroatlantic stances** in their titles. They promote pro-Russian views such as leaving NATO, rejecting the accession of Bulgaria to the Eurozone, and the Kremlin’s supremacy in geo-politics and as the sole defender of “traditional values”. The shared content and the comments in these pages openly support Vladimir Putin’s rule, and the Kremlin’s actions, and

identify themselves as “patriotic” due to their anti-integrationist attitudes towards external and global processes. The content in these pages related to the war in Ukraine, justifies the Russian aggression by using the narrative that Russia “de-nazifies” Ukraine and **rejects any claims for national self-identification of Ukrainians** as a different national group from Russians.³

Figure 2. Top Facebook Pages Sharing the “Ukrainian Women and Sexually Transmitted Diseases” Narrative

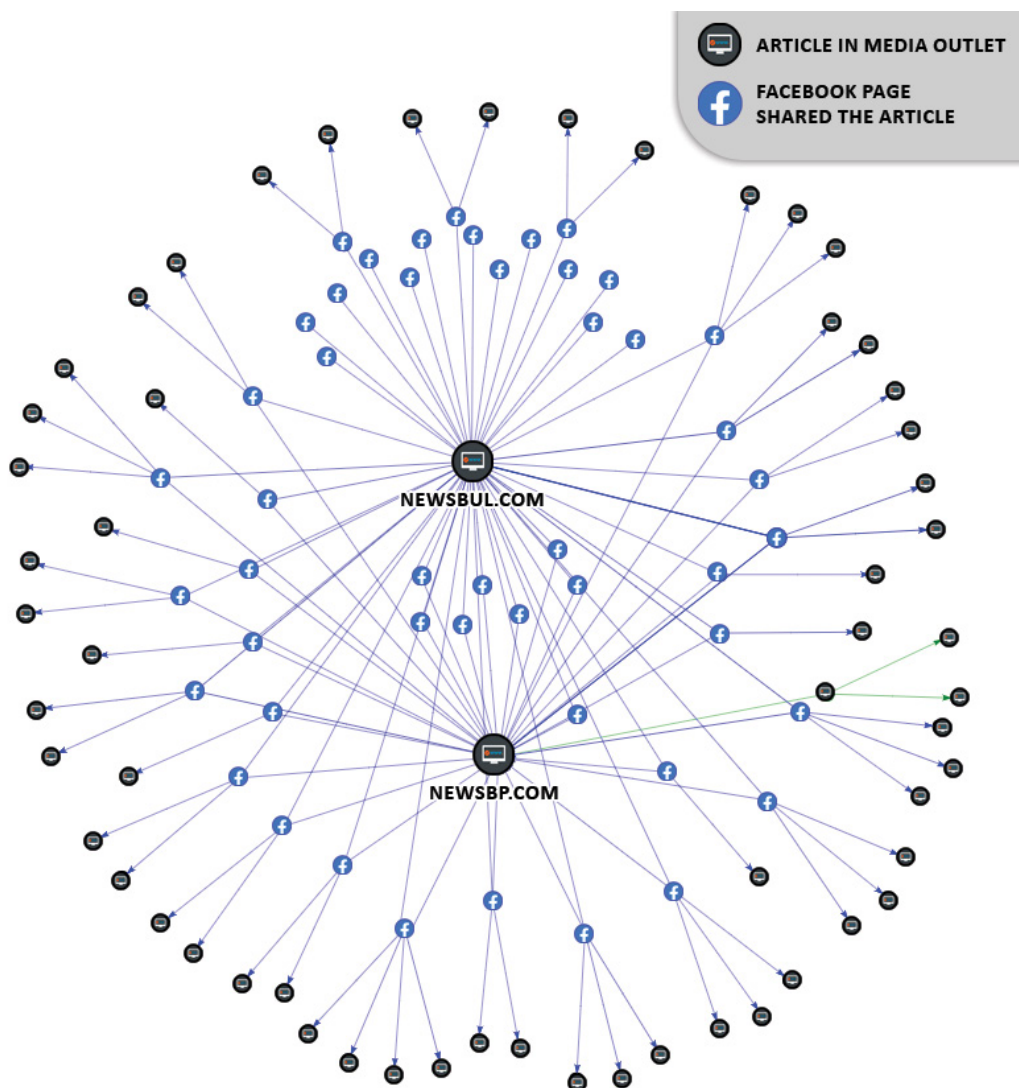


Note: The full content of the narrative reads “Ukrainian women bring deadly and sexually transmitted diseases, HIV”

Source: CSD data gathered from CrowdTangle (February 2022 - July 2024).

³ Atanasova, N., “Why do we leave Bulgaria?”, Ukrainian women tell [„Защо се махаме от България”: украинки разказват], Deutsche Welle, 24 May 2024.

Figure 3. Facebook Pages Amplifying the “Ukrainian Women Stealing Bulgarian Men” Narrative



Source: CSD data gathered with CrowdTangle (February 2022 - July 2024).

The same social media pages that disseminate disinformation against women who fled the war in Ukraine after February 2022, combine it with narratives about the “traditional” role of women and delegitimization of their contributions in society. **Radical far-right attitudes, misogyny, and sexism go hand in hand** effectively silencing women and misplacing the debate about gender equality by portraying it as a part of the **“gender ideology” narrative**.⁴ These narratives are present in a diverse range of social media pages despite that most interactions are gathered in the far-right and pro-Russian Facebook pages. The **disinformation narratives are covered and presented in**

any type of Bulgarian media outlets regardless of the political leanings of the readership of these outlets.⁵

Examination of the data extracted for the entire topic of Ukrainian gender-based narratives reveals that a **large cluster of 48 Facebook pages with over 1 million subscribers** exhibits coordinated sharing of the same news article from 3 different news outlets with the same interface.⁶ The majority of the pages rely on the tactic of serving mixed content based on patriotism, entertaining content, deep quotes, religion and

⁴ Center for the Study of Democracy, *Gendered Disinformation targeting Ukrainian Women Refugees in Bulgaria*, Policy Brief No. 148, August 2024.

⁵ As evidenced by the data that the CSD gathered from Facebook and the monitoring results from a diverse selection of online media outlets.

⁶ The three online news articles are titled “Boom of weddings with Ukrainian women in Bulgaria, which city has the most” shared by zabulgaria.eu, newsbul.com, newsbp.com.

other everyday themes with the occasional politically charged content. In this way the political portion is served in a more organic way to the user than by using obvious political pages.

While the two central nodes of the cluster, represented by two websites share the same copycat article, the peripheral nodes share a photo and a link to an external news article in the comments section. The practice of sharing the main piece of content in a comment seems to become more widely used as a method to drive more engagement by boosting the algorithm through clicking the buttons “show more” and/or “show comments”. This cluster pushes the narrative of the boom of marriages of Ukrainian women to Bulgarian men.

Some of the Facebook pages that serve as bridge accounts between mainstream clusters and the Bulgarian “pseudo-patriotic” pages include entertainment pages like Srabska muzika (Serbian music) and Televisiya 7/8 (Television 7/8) linked to the parliamentary represented political party of There is Such People. The narrative portraying Ukrainian women as a threat to Bulgarian women in the dating scene is largely **spread among Facebook pages that target female audience**, namely such that focus on lifestyle, quotes, romantic advice, cooking and self-improvement.

The Policy Context

Some Bulgarian politicians and civil society activists replicate **pro-Russian rhetoric**, such as the extremely sexually expletive, late far-right Russian populist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. For example, the co-founder and leader of the parliamentary represented, fringe party Velichie (Greatness) gathers a lot of publicity with his edgy comments and **hyper-sexualization** of women. Yet, such discriminatory, reductive and harmful behavior has not been limited only to the far-right or fringe parties in Bulgaria. The Speaker of the 48th Bulgarian Parliament from the mainstream center-right GERB party, unaware that the mics were still on, during the debates in parliament regarding the change of the legal framework for domestic violence, used a **cynical slur**⁷ to describe all women who spoke up as victims of domestic violence.

⁷ Chaldaykov, G., “Rashidov and “intimate relations” or Ursula’s box has been open” [Рашидов и „интимните връзки“ или Кутията на Урсула е отворена], *Trud*, 25 August 2023.

Anti-migrant and pro-Russian attitudes have been present in the electoral campaign of the pro-Russian, far-right party Vazrazhdane (Revival) in the seven consecutive (and counting) parliamentary elections in the past three years. The leader of the party regularly invokes the narrative of Ukrainian refugees living in Bulgaria at the expense of the “poor Bulgarian taxpayers”. He dubs them as **“tourists” instead of “refugees”** and claims that almost 100,000 Ukrainians continue to live in luxury hotels.⁸ According to the Government Information Service, the number of accommodated persons fleeing from Ukraine was 4,546 as of April 2024. He also threatened on Facebook that when his party seizes power, all Ukrainian tourists posing as refugees will be expelled from Bulgaria.

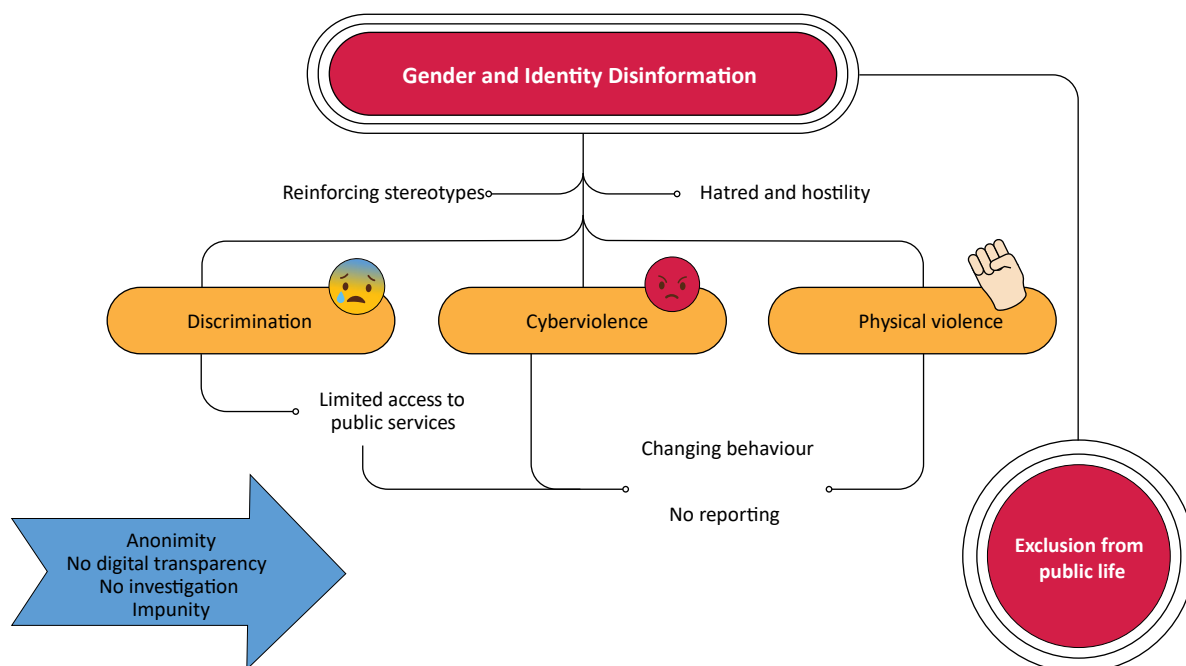
In addition, Bulgarian politicians largely avoid being associated with topics related to gender identities out of fear of being branded as promoters of the **“gender ideology”**, a culturally derogatory term in Bulgarian slang implying the propagation of nontraditional sexual identities and sexualized content. One of the consequences of this **toxic policy context infested with gendered disinformation** has been the rejection of the Istanbul Convention in Bulgaria back in 2018 and the lack of public support advocating for its ratification.⁹ The main proponent of this rejection was the female leader of the Bulgarian Socialist Party.

As a result, gendered disinformation remains outside the political agenda. There is no political will to introduce legislation and policy measures to fight identity-based disinformation, online abuse and hate crimes because policymakers themselves do not perceive it as disinformation and are neglectful of the real consequences of the issue. The **cognitive capture** of Bulgarian politicians and public servants frequently results in hollow patriotic claims that Bulgarian society is a model example of gender equality and tolerance, while **domestic violence is a serious issue across the country**. This cognitive bias by Bulgarian policy-makers and voters led to the adoption with a substantial majority of the **“anti-LGBTIQ propaganda” law**, which introduced an amendment in the education code forbidding discussions regarding nontraditional sexuality in

⁸ Lisitsov, L., “Is Kostadinov lying for “100 thousand Ukrainian tourists” in luxury hotels at the expense of Bulgarians” [Лъже ли Костадинов за „100 хил. украински туристи“ в луксозни хотели за сметка на българите], *ClubZ*, 20 August 2024.

⁹ CSD, *Gendered Disinformation targeting Ukrainian Women Refugees in Bulgaria*, Policy Brief No. 148, August 2024.

Figure 4. Gender and Identity Disinformation



Source: CSD.

schools, although no such issues existed.¹⁰ The new legislation evokes similar anti-LGBTIQ laws adopted by Russia and Hungary in recent years and the introduction of the respective draft bill in Georgia.

Considering that the **disinformation against the refugees targets two intersecting components, which are gender and national identity**, not only refugees from the war but all Ukrainian women fall victim to these campaigns and the discriminative attitudes that they forge. **Hostility and discrimination** have also been extended to all Ukrainian citizens in Bulgaria, especially **children and the elderly**, who are more vulnerable due to lower levels of media literacy, lack of knowledge of the local legal context and where to seek protection. They can easily fall victim to online fake alerts for services, fake job offers and discriminatory employment or service agreements. The invigorated hostile attitudes against refugees led to discriminatory attitudes by the public servants in healthcare and police, who can deny access and discriminate in the provision of aid and protection.¹¹

¹⁰ Mitov, B., "Cheap populism". The Deputies forbade LGBTQI propaganda among children with "Wikipedia texts" ["Евтин популизъм". Депутатите забраниха ЛГБТ "пропагандата" сред деца с "текстове от Уикипедия"], *Radio Free Europe*, Sofia, 7 August 2024.

¹¹ According to interviews among Ukrainian refugees conducted under this initiative.

The ultimate effect of gendered disinformation is that **the entire community of Ukrainian women has been vilified** since the start of the war. It is not only the refugees, but also those who settled in Bulgaria long time ago. According to Ukrainian women, there has been a great difference in the attitude they faced before the invasion, as they were not subject to discrimination and hostility before the start of the disinformation campaigns.¹²

Another extremely negative impact of the Russia-incited gendered disinformation campaigns following the start of the war in Ukraine has been their interlinking with a continuum of hateful speech online and hate motivated attacks and violence in real life. CSOs representatives who help refugees and migrants have been attacked in social media due to their staff being Ukrainian or their activities in relation to Ukrainians in need. Women and girls with Ukrainian descent, not necessarily being refugees, can be subject to physical abuse as the result of bullying attitudes especially in schools based on propaganda in social media.

¹² Interviews with CSOs helping refugees, Ukrainian citizens who help Ukrainian refugees, CSOs combatting human trafficking, representatives of law-enforcement agencies.

Box 1. Online harassment: The “Ukrainian” Miss Varna and the Russian Miss Universe Bulgaria

In 2023, Elizabeth Kravitz, a Bulgarian of Ukrainian descent, won Miss Varna, sparking backlash on social media fueled by pro-Russian disinformation. Critics claimed her Ukrainian heritage made her unfit for the title, despite her Bulgarian upbringing, fluent Bulgarian, and Bulgarian mother. Pro-Russian politician Yuliyán Gubatov of the Revival (Vazrazhdane) party alleged that her win was orchestrated by a pro-American government pandering to Ukrainian interests.¹³ His inflammatory social media posts were widely shared before being reported and removed.

Elizabeth later won the Miss Bulgaria title but was controversially disqualified over alleged rule violations, with no official evidence supporting the claims.¹⁴ Notably, this scrutiny contrasts with the lack of controversy surrounding Yulia Yurevic, another Ukrainian-Bulgarian winner in 2007.

Meanwhile, Yuliia Pavlikova represented Bulgaria in Miss Universe 2023 without attracting criticism, despite her minimal connection to Bulgaria. Born in Crimea, Pavlikova speaks only Russian, has never lived in Bulgaria, and claims a tenuous Bulgarian link through her father. She has publicly endorsed pro-Kremlin narratives, including disinformation about Crimea’s annexation.¹⁵ Russian media identified her as Russian, while Bulgarian media labeled her Ukrainian. Her prior participation representing Russia in global contests in 2019 and 2020 further highlights the inconsistency in public and political reactions to her representation of Bulgaria, which drew minimal attention from both media and politicians.¹⁶

Source: CSD data gathered via Sensika.

Cyber-Violence Against Women

There is **no single, comprehensive legal definition** of cyber violence in the Bulgarian legislation, nor is there a definition of gender-based cyber violence against women. Forms of cyber violence considered a specific offense in Bulgarian legislation are online grooming¹⁷ and online hate speech¹⁸ (incitement to violence through ICT means).¹⁹ In addition, in certain cases the jurisprudence in Bulgaria has extended the scope of violence to online incidents, for instance the list of punishable behaviors in the Criminal Code on stalking, which courts have broadly interpreted to encompass cyberstalking under the category of “all possible means of communication”.²⁰ Cyberviolence against women is part of ongoing EU legislative efforts. An upcoming EU directive to combat violence against women and domestic violence will mandate Member States to **criminalize specific online behaviors** such as cyberstalking, cyber harassment, and the non-consensual sharing of intimate images, with a strong focus on victim support and preventive measures.

While **sanctions for hate speech and discrimination** are enshrined in national law, they are **often inadequately applied**, especially in cases involving refugees or foreign women, where cultural and language barriers may further complicate the legal process. In particular, with regards to online hate speech towards refugees, the only sanctions perpetrators are typically subject to are restrictions by online platforms themselves, which reporting process and subsequent investigation and prosecution of such cases is ineffective.²¹ The detection and reporting of hate-speech and online abuse mainly **relies on the personal will of the victim** who is capable of reporting such online behavior. However, content moderation teams are understaffed and lack context-specific knowledge of derogative terms and specific mechanisms through which perpetrators work.

Public authorities dealing with cyber-crimes, note that the perpetrators usually target more than one victim and they seek other victims even if they get rejected or ignored by their target. Women refugees

¹³ StandartNews, “Big scandal. Revival jumped against Miss Varna” [Страшен скандал! Възраждане скочи срещу Мис Варна], 27 August 2023.

¹⁴ ABCNews, “Elizabeth Kravets appeals in court the taken away title” [Елизабет Кравец ще обжалва пред съда отнетата й титла], 5 June 2024.

¹⁵ According to the data gathered from Sensika, between May 2023 and January 2024, 749 articles mention Elizabeth Kravetz (657 of them quote the representatives of the political party Revival) in contrast to only 36 articles, which mention Yuliia Pavlikova.

¹⁶ The company [Bock Star Models](#) that organizes the contests and selects the winners appears to be popular with Russian speakers and linked to the Bulgarian underground. A Supreme Judicial Court’s final verdict [sentences](#) one of the managers of the company in the past to one year and a half in prison for participating in two organized crime groups for human trafficking for sexual exploitation in Bulgaria and abroad. Yuliia Pavlikova went on to become the national director of Miss Universe Estonia.

¹⁷ Bulgaria, Criminal Code [Наказателен кодекс], Art. 155a.

¹⁸ Bulgaria, Criminal Code [Наказателен кодекс], Art. 162.

¹⁹ EIGE, *Combating Cyber Violence against Women and Girls*, 2022.

²⁰ EIGE, *Combating Cyber Violence against Women and Girls*, 2022.

²¹ Lozanova, D., et al., *Mapping Out the National Context of Online Hate Speech in Bulgaria*, Sofia Development Association, 2017.

are a particularly exposed group to cybercrimes and violence. Perpetrators have targeted Ukrainian refugees in Bulgaria, who have reported cases for ads for transport services in the Black Sea region.

Box 2. Social media used for trafficking of human beings and sexual exploitation

EU Member States are increasingly identifying cases of job advertisements linked to trafficking of human beings for sexual exploitation and evidence of recruitment via social media platforms, as well as dating applications.²² The process often includes victims being blackmailed, through gathering “compromising” information about them—such as requesting nude photos or videos—and then using that information to force them into prostitution. Most commonly the victims to such crimes online are women.²³ From the 23 victims identified by a Bulgarian NGO in 2023, 54% were victims of sexual exploitation and 64% were women.²⁴

Support Measures for Victims of Cyberviolence in Bulgaria

Support systems for victims of cyberviolence in Bulgaria, especially women and refugees, remain **underdeveloped**. Crisis centers and hotlines, such as those run by NGOs like the Animus Foundation and Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation (BGRF), provide counseling, legal aid, and psychological support.²⁵ However, resources specifically addressing cyberviolence against women and refugees are scarce. Victims of online abuse often struggle to find tailored assistance. While a hotline exists for cybercrimes against children, no equivalent services are available for women or refugees. Ukrainian refugees mainly rely on **self-organized** Facebook and Telegram groups, along with civil society organizations such as ‘For the Good,’ ‘BG4UA,’ and ‘Ukrainian Hive,’ though none specifically target cyberviolence.

²² Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, *Online and technology-facilitated trafficking in human beings*, 2022.

²³ Interview with A21 Bulgaria.

²⁴ A21, *Impact report 2023*, 2023.

²⁵ [Website](#) of the Information Security Center.

The General Directorate Combating Organized Crime (GDBOP) investigates cybercrimes and provides awareness-raising content via its website and Facebook page, focusing on issues like pedophilia, sexual crimes against children, and romance scams. However, its efforts **lack enough gender-sensitive mainstreaming**, and gender-based cyberviolence is not recognized as a distinct crime category. While GDBOP highlights romance scams as a crime targeting women, this focus overlooks the broader range of online violence women face, such as sextortion. Similarly, cybercrimes against refugees are addressed only in the context of child protection.

In 2023, the Ministry of Interior and UNICEF signed a Memorandum of Understanding to protect children, including Ukrainian refugee children, which is reflected in the Ministry’s 2023-2027 National Program. However, no comparable initiatives exist for adult refugees or women, leaving significant gaps in addressing their vulnerabilities in digital spaces.

Box 3. Challenges in Reporting and Assistance for Refugees

Under-reporting of cyberviolence remains a significant issue, particularly among refugees and foreign language-speaking women. Barriers include fear of deportation, mistrust of authorities, language difficulties, and lack of awareness about legal rights.²⁶ Services in native languages are limited, with few interpreters available in crisis centers or police stations. Online reporting tools are primarily in Bulgarian, deterring non-native speakers. Social media platforms are a common venue for cybercrimes in Bulgaria, yet reports of incidents often face discriminatory attitudes from officials, fueled by war-related disinformation. Outside Sofia, victims must report incidents at local police stations, where officers often lack training in handling cybercrime, leading to many cases being ignored.

²⁶ UN Women, *From evidence to action: Tackling gender-based violence against migrant women and girls*, 2021.

What's Next?

Bulgaria's legislation lags behind the rapid growth of digital platforms, enabling online scams and violence, particularly against women and refugees, to go unchecked. Limited resources, a lack of criminalization for key cybercrimes, and insufficient public-private coordination exacerbate this issue. A multi-stakeholder approach is essential to bridge knowledge gaps among policymakers, journalists, and tech companies. Holistic measures must address vulnerabilities, empower victims, investigate perpetrators, and impose effective sanctions while fostering a safer, more inclusive cyberspace:

Strengthen Legislation and Enforcement

- Criminalize online harassment, cyber-bullying, and fake content, accompanied by training for law enforcement, prosecutors, and judges to address gender-based violence effectively.
- Amend hate crime laws to include gender as a protected characteristic under anti-discrimination and cybercrime legislation.

Enhance Victim Support

- Expand victim aid for vulnerable groups, such as refugees, with accessible resources at entry points (e.g., borders, municipalities).
- Address under-reporting of online violence through awareness campaigns and improved trust-building measures.

Improve Coordination and Regulation

- Facilitate cross-border collaboration between cybercrime units to reflect the transnational nature of cybercrimes.
- Create a multi-stakeholder task force of media experts, tech companies, law enforcement, and anti-discrimination officers to develop gender-based violence prevention measures.
- Include misogyny, transphobia, and intersectional abuse in social media regulation and address cross-platform circulation of harmful content.

Bolster Tech Accountability and Moderation

- Increase content moderation efforts, particularly during elections and key political events, with goals tailored to local contexts.
- Strengthen regulations for tech companies to prevent the circulation of banned content and support privacy-respecting research to study disinformation and abuse tactics.

Combat Disinformation

- Investigate and disrupt disinformation networks through proactive measures and improved coordination between tech platforms.
- Support media adherence to the Rule of Law through EU-funded initiatives like the European Democracy Shield.

Adopt a Gender-Sensitive Approach

- Recognize online violence as a form of censorship, where women adjust their behavior to avoid abuse.
- Promote diversity and empower women in digital spaces by addressing the replication of misogyny, sexism, and xenophobia online.