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A research paper
submitted
to
the International Communication Division of AEJMC
by

Elza Ibroscheva, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Department of Mass Communications
Dunham Hall, Mailbox 1775
Southern Illinois University
Edwardsville, IL 62026
tel: (618) 650-5628
e-mail: eibrosc@siue.edu

&

Maria Raicheva-Stover, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Mass Media Department
Washburn University
Henderson Learning Center #312
Topeka, KS 66621
Tel: (785) 670-1802
e-mail: maria.raicheva@washburn.edu

RUNNING HEAD: ENGENDERING TRANSITION

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This paper examines how the changes after the fall of the Berlin Wall have affected the presentation of female politicians in Eastern Europe. Textual analysis of the highest circulation daily in Bulgaria was used to examine how female politicians were portrayed during the 2005 parliamentary elections. The results unequivocally indicate that portrayals of women politicians are refracted through the prism of gender stereotypes. The overall conclusion is that gendered media portrayals of women politicians lead to the creation of a social climate tolerant towards and in fact, encouraging, of sexism in every aspect of life.

Before the fall of the Berlin Wall, gendered identities as expressed through gender differences in Eastern Europe were politically masked. Socialism as we knew it legislated gender equality through what were effectively gender-blind ideological lenses (Kligman, 1996). Linguistically and rhetorically, any essential difference, whether it be gendered, ethnic, class-based or national—was masked in the language of a homogenized equality recognizable in a “new socialist man” (Lapidus, 1978).

The saying that the Berlin Wall fell on women’s shoulders has proven to be an accurate statement for virtually all post-communist states in transition, where the revival of old religious and cultural norms of patriarchy along with an overwhelming bombardment of sexualized images of “mothers, beauties, and submissive sheepish women” emerged out of the cultural void of communist propaganda and immediately became role models (Sarvanka, Mihalec, & Sudar, 2002). Today, while the particulars of women’s status differ from country to country, patterns of marginalization and increasing social and cultural pressures are obvious: diminished labor market access, increasing vulnerability to crime, loss of family-oriented social benefits, exceedingly low parliamentary presentation, and irresolvable social pressures. In many countries of transition, the feminization of poverty has been striking. For example, every second woman (and every third man) in Bulgaria lives in poverty – 73.3 percent of the women feel they are poor to a certain extent (Daskalova & Filipova, 2004). More importantly, of the 26 million jobs that have disappeared in Eastern Europe since 1989, 14 million were held by women (1999 UNICEF Report, *Women in Transition*).

The dramatic changes in the welfare of women during the post-communist transition affected not only their ability to handle the burden of economic responsibilities and domestic

duties, but also found immediate manifestation in the participation of women in the political discourse. During the years of communist, one-party rule, for instance, the proportion of women Mps in the Bulgarian Parliament fluctuated between 5.7 percent and 21.7 percent, which was impressive in comparison to women's parliamentary representation in most western countries (Sloat, 2005). However, these figures stood for 'tokenism of the worst kind' (Einhorn, 1993, p. 151), since the real decision-making power was in the hands of the Central Committees and the Politburos of the Communist Parties and it is important to note that in the 1980s, women were absent from Politburos in almost all Eastern European countries, but specifically so in Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia (Einhorn, 1993, p. 152). This evident discrepancy between real political representation and simulated equality is just one of the many ways in which communism artificially sustained a sense of women's roles in political and social life.

Today, the masculinization of democracy has been particularly visible in the political representation of women in the echelons of power. As Saxonberg (2000) points out, in contrast with Western Europe, female representation in the parliaments of Eastern Europe has decreased markedly in the last decade—by as much as 27.1 percentage points in Romania. The East European countries that were once near the top in the world rankings of female representation are now far behind Northern Europe and even behind many Third World countries. Estonia, the top, by economic development indicators, post-communist country, is in 30th place—right below Uganda; for some of the more industrialized post-communist countries, international comparisons become downright embarrassing. Hungary, for example, which had a respectable 21percent rate of female representation in the communist era, now finds itself in 88th place, below such poor countries as Botswana (Saxonberg, 2000).

In addition to dwindling parliamentary representation, Eastern European women face another formidable, yet more subtle obstacle in their struggle to assert their position in society and define their new, post-Soviet identity—an overwhelmingly growing gender bias in the media. Female politicians worldwide have charged that their media coverage is more negative than their male colleagues', focuses more on appearances than on issues, and reinforces masculine and feminine stereotypes (Kahn, 1996; Herzog, 1998; Robinson & Saint-Jean, 1991). However, this has been a particularly evident trend in Eastern Europe where both the sudden loss of state-protected privileges and the resurgence of patriarchal norms and values have led to the prevalence of over-sexualized and unflattering images of women in the media. With a media system in transition, which meanders between sensationalism and complete rejection of state control over content and distribution, intellectual journals are now readily found nestled among pornographic magazines, newspapers compete through “sexying” up news stories, and reporters use gender-biased language to win audiences and earn advertising revenues.

How have all these changes affected the presentation of female politicians in the Bulgarian media? To answer this important question, this study sets two goals: first, to examine the images of Bulgarian female politicians in the media and second, to analyze the role of the media in perpetuating gender stereotypes in their coverage of political discourse. In particular, this study examines the press coverage of women politicians who participated in the last parliamentary elections in Bulgaria and whether that coverage contributed to gender discrepancies in their representation. While several studies have attempted to assess the factors affecting political representation of women in the former communist bloc (Matland & Bojinova, 2004; Sloat, 2005; Chiva, 2005), none of them examines the role of the media in this process. This is one of the few studies exploring media coverage of Eastern European women in politics,

and as such becomes an important investigation of the images, roles, and status of female politicians in post-communist societies.

Historical Overview

In Bulgaria, the legal equality of men and women was officially proclaimed in October 1944 with a passage of a special law. As a result of new equal opportunity policies instituted by the communist government, women's opportunities in educational and professional development were substantially expanded. Women recorded a massive entry into some very prestigious profession, previously reserved as a sphere of exclusively male dominance. Simultaneously, however, there was a growing awareness that instead of alleviating the burden of women in the home, the artificial policies of emancipation and equal participation in the labor force added a second, even heavier load, on the shoulders of Bulgarian women and women all over Eastern Europe. In fact, during communism more than ever before, the burden of paid work added to the burden of domestic work, while traditional patriarchal norms and behavioral pattern persisted, widely supported by an overwhelming masculine version of socialism.

Nevertheless, the model of full female employment in the labor force proved to be effective—in 1989, women accounted for 50 percent of the labor force, up from 24 percent before World War II (Kostova, 1998). Similarly, the political involvement of women in the socialist period was also driven by the motivation to solve labor problems. In fact, the first socialist women's political party in the country, The Bulgarian National Women's Union, was established in 1945 to mobilize women's support for the establishment of agricultural cooperatives and state enterprises and for the fulfillment of the nation's economic plans (Kostova, 1998). However, while statistical data from the socialist period showed that women

were somewhat proportionally involved in the leadership of various political organizations, they were nonetheless left with very little opportunity to organized independently and define their own interests.

A number of important political, social and economic changes have influenced the status of women in politics in Eastern Europe after the collapse of communism. While the existing super-structure of the communist regime was not immediately destroyed, women's privileges as guaranteed by this very same super-structure began to steadily dwindle immediately after the fall of communism. In fact, a number of Eastern European countries, particularly those where the end of communism also revived the powerful authority of the church, witnessed what feminist scholars called a "transitional backlash"—an attempt to subordinate women and return them to the traditional model of society and family (Titkow, 1998). In Poland, the most evident demonstration of this trend has been the virulent attempt of the state to restrict women's reproductive rights, which has dealt a significant blow to the achievements of Polish women under socialism. In the Balkans, the impending war in the former Yugoslavia further contributed to the deterioration of the status of women in both the political and social arenas of public discourse. So much so, that in 1993 Croatian journalist and author Slaveka Drakulic wrote the following in response to a request by Nannette Funk, one of the leading Western authorities on Eastern European women's studies, to contribute to a publication she was compiling at the time on women's impact in the post-communist societies of Eastern Europe:

“Women's influence in public discourse? For God's sake, what does she mean? There is hardly any public discourse, except the one about politics. Women don't have any influence, they barely even have a voice. All media are non-feminist, there are no feminist media. All we could

talk about is the lack of influence, of voice, of debate, or a feminist movement” (quoted in Nixon, 2001, p. 210).

Drakulic voiced the frustration of women all across Eastern Europe, who while witnessing the crumbling down of an oppressive system of communist control, also recognized that this system was replaced by an equally oppressive and even more chaotic system of economic hardship, blatant discrimination and exploitation. Similarly, Watson (1993) argued that it is no coincidence that the process of democratization in Eastern Europe has led to the exclusion of women. In her analysis, the slogan of the Independent Women's Forum in the Commonwealth of the Independent States (CIS) countries—democracy without women is no democracy—is just wishful thinking. Actually, democratization and marketization are and have by definition been launched to the detriment of women: through an increased separation of the public and the private spheres and a polarization of sex roles. “(T)he creation of a civil society and market economy in Eastern Europe fundamentally entails the construction of a ‘man’s world’ and the propagation of masculinism in the public sphere” (Watson, 1993, p. 472).

Women Politicians in Bulgaria

As a result of the last parliamentary elections on June 25, 2005, 50 women became Mps thus giving Bulgarians a 20.8 percent female representation. As Table 1 demonstrates, Bulgarian women have taken some steps towards visible representation in the political discourse with mixed measures of success. The most significant achievement came in 2001, when women accounted for close to 26 percent of the parliamentary seats, a significant jump from merely 11.2 percent just four years before, securing Bulgaria the top position among all Eastern European countries in number of female Mps in parliament.

Table 1 here

It is important to note, however, that the 2001 elections were not characteristic of the usual political dynamics in the country. In 2001, the former Bulgarian king in exile, Simeon Saxecoburgotski, returned to Bulgaria, creating his own political party, National Movement Simeon Second (NDSV) which attracted a huge following among women, young, successful Bulgarian expatriates and influential figures from the world of business and finance. Because Simeon Saxecoburgotski registered his political movement with the Bulgarian Women's Party before the 2001 election, he was committed to bringing a number of women into parliament. He compiled a list of women from varied walks of life and experiences, including both highly respected businesswomen and inexperienced fashion models. Because of NDSV's unexpectedly sweeping election victory, the number of women in parliament was truly impressive—26 percent of members of parliament and 35 percent of NDSV's members were women.

However, as Ghodsee (2003) points out in her research, the real percentage of women's representation in Bulgarian parliament was less than 10 percent according to female members of the opposition, as the majority of female parliamentary members of NDSV were, what they called, "mere fillers" of prearranged political quotas. Moreover, as Ghodsee discovered, women in Bulgarian parliament do not feel as if Bulgarian women are their constituencies; Bulgarian women do not tend to vote along gendered lines. In fact, as several public opinion surveys conducted by the Bulgarian National Statistical Institute (2003) show, over 47 percent of respondents believed that voters preferred to vote for men rather than for women, where only 29 percent believed that there is no such preference when casting a vote (cited in Daskalova & Filipova, 2004). What is more, as Ghodsee discovered in her interviews with female politicians,

women politicians are even less sympathetic to lobbying on women's issues than men show no willingness to cross party lines in order to vote together on even hypothetical women's issues.

Political participation aside, very little has been written on the media's role in perpetuating stereotypes of female politicians in Eastern Europe. One such study by Popescu (1997) approached the issue of the biased media coverage of women as a result of the inherent male bias of the journalistic profession and the socialization of reporters into the predominantly misogynist ideology of the newsroom. Popescu observed that newspapers deal with women's emancipation by advertising strip-tease clubs where the clients are women, while, in adjacent news items on the same page, abortion is approached almost cynically, mainly because many journalists are men. Popescu also asserted that generally, when newspapers portray women's profiles, it is usually in the context of domesticity, not as directing a business or having political power. Strong women are generally demonized, although they all declare they are not feminists and thus speak as persons, not women. Indeed, to be a feminist is considered even by such strong women as shameful and subversive in an immoral way, or as a residue of communist politics. Powerful women are also suspected of "being men" beyond metaphorical representations, or androgynous, such as, for instance the former Turkish premier, Tansu Ciller, Margaret Thatcher, or Madeleine Albright (Popescu, 1997).

Theoretical Framework

The role of the media becomes crucial in the formation of voters' opinions and perceptions, given that few people have the chance to meet in person candidates aspiring for political office. Most people learn about the political candidates from media reports, not first-hand experiences. Differential media coverage, as Kahn (1992) observed, could carry "real

consequences for voter information and candidate preference “(p. 498). In this context, media’s role in presenting or “framing” political candidates deserves special consideration.

The practice of assigning meaning and organizing reality is a central theme of a theoretical approach to news called framing analysis. The originator of the concept, Erving Goffman, assumed that framing could be subject to all forms and levels of human experience (Goffman, 1974). When Goffman's concept was first applied to the study of mass communication, it was ascribed a functional role. News was given the role of a “frame through which people learned about the world” (Tuchman, 1978, p. 192). Media frames served the purpose of “transforming amorphous occurrences and happenings into definite events through their salience and selection functions” (Tuchman, 1978, p. 192; Entman, 1993). Frames, therefore, help individuals interpret reality by paying more attention to (i.e. selecting) specific aspects of it and subsequently making them more prominent (i.e. salient) (Entman, 1993). Framing theory also suggests that, with their salience and selection functions in action, media frames could present an issue in favor of one side as opposed to another. According to McQuail (2005), framing practices could include use of “certain words or phrases, making certain contextual references, choosing certain pictures or film, giving examples as typical, referring to certain sources and so on” (p. 378-379).

Media framing, therefore, can serve as a "potent discursive technique" in which the media promote the social discourse of the elite as the "normal" public discourse (Gamson, 1992, p. xi). Conceptualized in this way, frames become the social structures that organize meaning to serve a particular interest or point of view (McQuail, 2005). Applied to media coverage of female politicians, the frame analysis would imply that reporters could create differential frames in their

coverage of for male and female politicians, which is very much in line with a decades-long tradition of marginalizing women politicians in Bulgaria.

Moreover, this assumption has given grounds to the theoretical thesis of gender mediation (Sreberny-Mohammadi & Ross, 1996). The gendered mediation thesis rests on the assumption that “the way in which politics is reported is significantly determined by a male-oriented agenda that privileges the practice of politics as an essentially male pursuit. The image and language of mediated politics, therefore, supports the status quo (male as norm) and regards women politicians as novelties” (Ross & Sreberny, 2000, p. 93). The gendered nature of news can be traced to the “gendered structure of news production” (van Zoonen, 1994, p. 43). Indeed, television news has been likened to a “masculine soap opera” (Fiske, 1987, p. 308), constructing politics as if it were a battle, a boxing match, or a horserace (Gigengil & Everitt, 2003). As such, the news is not simply reflecting the fact that politics is still very much a man’s world, it is playing an active role in perpetuating a stereotypically masculine conception of politics and politicians (Rakow & Kranich, 1991; Peake, 1997).

Methodology

This study employed textual analysis to determine what type of press coverage Bulgarian women politicians receive. Textual analysis evolved from a long tradition of traditional literary and linguistic analyses of texts (McQuail, 2005). Fiske (1987) gave the term text a broader definition by stating that “texts are the product of their readers” (p. 14), where readers become the producers of texts and meanings. According to Fiske (1987), a media piece becomes a text “at the moment of reading, that is when its interaction with one of its many audiences activates some of the meanings/pleasures that it is capable of provoking” (p. 14). A text, in this sense, can

be polysemic, thus producing a multiplicity of meanings depending on the social conditions of reception (Fiske, 1987). Yet, Fiske is quick to point out that the interpretations of text occur within rigid social structures and that polysemy is “bounded and structured” (p. 16).

Interestingly, within his discussion of television texts, Fiske (1987) provided an insightful discussion of soap operas as a “feminine culture in constant struggle to establish and extend itself within and against a dominant patriarchy” (p. 197).

The choice of a less “objective” methodology in comparison to quantitative content analysis was done with the intention to discern the implicit meanings, themes and patterns used to describe women politicians. It is a technique that eschews quantification in favor for an inductive search of deep social and historical meanings and interpretations. As Stuart Hall (1975) eloquently reminded the readers of a study of British newspapers and social change:

Content analysis is at its strongest where *manifest content* is being analysed, and where the verifiability of any proposition with respect to content has to be supported by ‘objective’ criteria...Literary-critical, linguistic and stylistic methods of analysis are, by contrast, more useful in penetrating the latent meanings of a text, and they preserve something of the complexity of language and connotation which has to be sacrificed in content analysis in order to achieve high validation (emphasis in original, p. 14-15)

In order to develop a full understanding of how female politicians were portrayed, the authors collected and reviewed selected issues of the top Bulgarian newspaper. The press was preferred over television because it tends to be the main venue for in-depth political information, especially in pre-and post-election periods and because Bulgarians generally are very avid

newspaper readers— an astonishing 850,000 members of a population of less than 8 million people read a newspaper on daily basis.¹ The readership interest is concentrated on two national dailies, *Dneven Trud* (Daily Labor) and *24 Chassa* (24 Hours) that garner a combined readership between 70 and 50 percent of all adults 18 and older (see Table 2).² For the purpose of this study, however, only *Trud* was analyzed. *Trud* and *24 Chassa* are owned by the German press group Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung (WAZ), which offers simultaneous advertising arrangements for both newspapers (Popova, 2004). Although WAZ asserts the editorial independence of the two newspapers (European Federation of Journalists, 2004), there are more similarities in their layout and content than differences. The daily that places third in circulation, *Standard*, has been in the hands of Russian businessmen Michael Corni since 2000, who at that time was also the official owner of the first GSM operator (Popova, 2004). There were plans in 1998 to add *Standard* to the WAZ group, but the attempt failed (Popova, 2004). Nevertheless, in the spring of 2000, WAZ signed a special agreement to combine its advertising tariffs with six dailies, including *Standard*.³ Table 2 represents the distribution of readers for the top three Bulgarian newspapers for the period June, 2000 – June, 2005. Table 3 shows the average daily circulation and ownership shares for *Trud*, *24 Chassa* and *Standard* for 2003.

Tables 2 and 3 here

The sample of articles analyzed in this study is comprised of all *Trud* issues for the period May 28-July 23, 2005. The sampling period was selected to cover 28 days before and after the

¹ Based upon readership data provided by the *Alpha Research*, available at <http://www.aresearch.bg>.

² Based upon readership data provided by the *Alpha Research*, available at <http://www.aresearch.bg>.

³ Under that special agreement, companies advertising with *24 Chassa* and *Trud* are also offered additional discounts for *Duma*, *Zemya*, *Pari*, *Standard*, *7 Dni Sport* and *Sega*.

2005 parliamentary elections. Both authors read and analyzed the electronic versions of *Trud*, which are the exact reproductions of the full-color, print versions. The analysis included content from the entire newspaper, including headlines, articles, profiles, editorials, pictures and cartoons. Content using gendered nouns or adjectives, metaphors, descriptions of the candidates' psychological or physical characteristics or their competency were underlined and, using an inductive approach, was gradually arranged into five emergent categories – physical appearance, credentials and performance, attributions, gender of the reporters and photographs.

Results

Physical Appearance

One point stands out in the pre-election coverage of women candidates for Mps—coverage was scarce, and if present, it was invariably refracted through the prism of gender stereotypes. This is how one *Trud* article introduced the female candidate for one of the regions: “The tax service specialist finally gathered the courage to participate in the elections as an independent candidate. The 52-year-old Vesselina Bozhykova, mother of two kids, gave the start to her campaign...in her apartment. In this way she wants to show that her house is open to everybody and she has nothing to hide from the voters” (*Trud*, June 11, 2005, p. 14).

The only extensive profile of a woman politician in the pre-election coverage of *Trud* featured the “beautiful girl” Denitza Dimitrova, who at 27, was personally invited by the Prime Minister to join him in the “election whirlpool” (*Trud*, June 14, 2005, p. 17). The article described her as a disabled woman who would win the elections with the same “charm, intelligence and aura” that won her the title of “Miss Spring 2004” for disabled women. Denitza’s qualifications, an accounting degree with honors and knowledge of four languages,

were virtually drowned by detailed descriptions of her love for flowers, her ability to maintain an impeccably clean kitchen and her weakness for Internet surfing. The “charming girl” had nothing to say about her stance on political issues besides that, if elected, she would like to work on social matters and better representation of people with disabilities (*ibid.*).

An article published after the elections spoke of Bulgarian female politicians as “the girls of parliament,” downplaying the level of maturity, expertise and political clout Bulgarian female politicians bring to the table. “There is going to be grace, charm and vanity, because gals from a wide range of occupations - from politicians to fashion models - are riding atop of many election tickets,” the author wrote, trivializing not only the immense effort put forth by female candidates to enter the electoral race, but also clearly implying that women politicians win because of their attractiveness and charm and not because of their qualifications and preparation to guide domestic and international policy decisions (*Trud*, July 21, 2005, p. 17). A series of commentaries focusing mainly on the physical appearance and style of the new members of parliament entitled “Vanity Fair” appeared in *Trud*, describing the reaction of the male members at the sight of their female counterparts—the men were described as “resting their eyes,” “washing their faces in the sight of beauty,” “pleasantly distracting themselves,” “stumbling over signs of beauty” (*Trud*, July 21, 2005, p. 17). Although the article did not identify an author, the style was clearly gender-biased—women member of parliament were described as, “striding on the red carpet,” “super elegant,” having “delicate faces” (*ibid.*). As the authors concluded, “if beauty is said to save the world, then this year’s parliament is certainly in safe hands” (*Trud*, July 21, 2005, p. 16).

At the same time, if a female politician fails to exhibit what are deemed as highly desirable physical characteristics of femininity, the press takes immediate notice. An interesting

case at hand is Ekaterina Mihaylova, who suffered a severe media backlash in her first term as one of the leaders of the Union for Democratic Forces. Mihaylova, who often stood shoulder to shoulder with Nadezhda Mihaylova, the head of the right-wing United Democratic Forces (UtDF) and former foreign minister, was often ridiculed for her lack of grace, beauty and style. In fact, the media coined a rather condescending nickname for Ekaterina Mihaylova—*Klasnata*—a derogative term used to describe a rigid, communist teacher, whose ideologue behavior and lackluster appearance would plague her leadership skills and political abilities. Interestingly, in the 2005 elections Ekaterina Mihaylova underwent a dramatic makeover of her image and demeanor, appearing more feminine and less threatening, which immediately attracted the attention of the media, placing her among the frontrunners for nomination in her political party. The press, following closely her remade image, noted that Mihaylova is finally looking “more human, more down to earth”, “visibly beatified,” thus implying for a female to exhibit the same qualities which are found admirable in male politicians, is a risky move which can potentially damage one’s political career (*Trud*, July 21, 2005, p. 16). Ironically, her political qualifications were legitimized by nothing short of a fashion make over, topped with the appropriate media blitz.

A sidebar story in the same style section of the paper focused on the oldest female Member of Parliament and leader of the People’s Union, Anastasia Moser. In describing her personality and preferences for hair style and conservative clothing, the article makes a bleak mention of the fact that as the only female member of this parliamentary group, she has also been its leader for the past 6 years, yet spends a disproportionate amount of time discussing her presence in the Union as the only sign of elegance and class. Moser’s political wisdom and extensive experience, therefore, give way to a lengthy discussion of her conservative hairstyle

and dress, implying that a clear connection must be established between a woman politician's appearance and her personal ideology and political agenda.

In a similar vein of sexual innuendos, female politicians themselves partake in the process of gender stereotyping. For example, Dora Yankova, the mayor of the city of Smolyan who was one of the few women invited to participate in the negotiation of a ruling coalition between the King's movement the winners of the election, Coalition for Bulgaria, said, "it's natural to be courted by the member of parliament," likening the process of political negotiation with the opposing political factions to a dating game—a metaphor the press finds easily adaptable to their style of reporting (*Trud*, July 10, 2005, p. 10-11).

Credentials and Performance

The analysis revealed that when women's credentials are discussed, the press does make a mention of the educational and professional preparation of the female politicians. Indeed, all women candidates for the parliament had more than satisfactory qualifications as lawyers, doctors, accountants or engineers. Yet their qualifications, when included, seem to always appear in the context of their femininity. For example, in two consecutive articles ran on Maria Kapon, voted as Miss Parliament (by a jury of four male journalists and one female political party speaker), the reporter makes a mention of her extensive line of professional credentials—an economist, production manager and physics engineer, she has worked in a variety of important position both in the business world and in industrial production. However, most of the report is focused on her important family affiliation of being married into a famous family and being a great wife and a mother. Kapon is described as "blonde but not in 'the blonde' jokes sense of the words", "the fist in the velvet glove", "the blonde fury", and "having aristocratic taste" (*Trud*, July 15, 2005, p. 12). Similarly, in an article discussing the political qualifications of the newly-

elected fore runner of the Union of Democratic Forces, Eleonora Nikolova, she is described as “window display case” of over twenty eight years of successful marriage” (*Trud*, July 23, 2005, p. 15), implying that her ability to juggle both her professional responsibilities and the responsibilities of family life are significant indicators of her ability to perform on the political scene as well.

On the other hand, when men are discussed in terms of their family status, the only coverage encountered glorifies the eligible bachelors of the parliament, celebrating their bachelor status as a privilege and sometimes jokingly encouraging young women to “compete” for the attention of the newly appointed Mps. For instance, in a full-page article in *Trud* entitled “The New Parliament’s Eligible Bachelors,” the lead paragraph informs that “there are not many princes in the new parliament, but there are certainly plenty of Cinderellas” (*Trud*, July 11, 2005, p. 21). In the same article, the fact that nine of the members of parliament are single is further emphasized and praised as “good news” for all the girls who are looking to get settled down. This type of trivializing language used by the press in their reporting of the marital status of male politicians culminated in a brief article featuring one of these eligible bachelors, Ramadan Atalai, a member of the ethnic Turk’s Movements for Rights and Liberties, who announced jokingly a competition for “a potential wife”—she has to have top-model measurements, can be a Christian and preferably owns her own apartment in the capital city (*Trud*, July 15, 2005, p. 4).

The textual analysis revealed that character and personality traits were intrinsically linked to the highly gender-biased language employed by Bulgarian reporters in their coverage of female politicians. Frequently, discussion of personality traits and general character become equated and virtually replace any talk of actual professional competencies and political platforms. For instance, in an interview with one of *Trud’s* most renowned female journalist

Valeria Veleva, Vladimir Karolev, economist advisor to NDSV, criticized the performance of the former deputy Prime Minister Lidia Shuleva as the campaign manager for the party's election effort. He accused her of mishandling the public relations effort of the party and for her failure to conceptualize and wage a modern election campaign. When discussing her character, Karolev spoke of her "positive qualities," namely, her workaholic attitude to her job and her loyalty, both qualities which according to him, "are good, but not sufficient conditions to be an effective leader" (*Trud*, June 30, 2005, p. 11). Thus, even when character traits are discussed in connection to a female politicians' competency, they are usually presented as necessary, but in no case, outstanding characteristics which will qualify them for a position of party leadership.

Moreover, when female politicians' performance is discussed, their strengths are often closely linked to their ability to exhibit masculine qualities, implying that a successful woman politician is successful mainly because she is unfeminine. Thus, for instance, the former regional governor Maria Neikova was described "fighting like a man" against the challenges of recent floods in the area, while at the same time, she expressed as her greatest wish the chance to take sometime to herself, if time permits (*Trud*, July 6, 2005, p. 4). On another occasion, an analysis of the political viability of the leader of the Union of Democratic Forces, Nadezhda Mihaylova, gave her credit as the "owner of the most charming smile amongst the parliamentary ladies," but stated that one of her leadership weaknesses, "which are not unusual for women leaders," was her ability "to downplay rational arguments in favor of emotional ones, especially when it means forming a circle of favorites. Nadezhda likes to flirt. Allowing flirtations with her political partners, sometimes subjecting her political behavior to her intimate attractions, Nadezhda makes wrong assessments not only of their capabilities, but also about their realistic professional chances." The analysis concluded that "In fact, it is not true that a female leader has significantly

less chances at making it in the typically male world of big politics. Yet she has to be in the class of Margaret Thatcher, or to possess the character and energy of the current [now former]

Ukrainian Prime Minister Julia Tymoshenko” (*Trud*, June 1, 2005, p. 10)

As research has previously indicated, female candidates receive less coverage on political issues than their male counterparts and when they do, they are covered and quoted less likely in support of their stand on an issue (Devitt, 2002). In the case of the Bulgarian press, even when female politicians are asked to discuss their position on issues of political importance, their responses are often trivialized and reflected through the prism of sensational language. For example, when the negotiation process of establishing a ruling coalition after the elections began, *Trud* speculated that the former deputy Prime Minister under NDSV’s government, Lidia Shuleva, be nominated by her party as the Minister of Defense, a post which has never been occupied by a female minister before. To turn this into a curious precedent, the newspaper ran a front page photo of Shuleva, holding a machine gun, appearing as inept in handling a weapon as Michael Dukakis appeared uncomfortable wearing a helmet and navigating a tank. Shuleva was never selected for this post, but a number of other female Mps were indeed nominated for inclusion in the structure of the newly proposed government, all occupying what have been seen as “natural” feminine areas of politics—EU integration, youth and sports, labor and social relations, with one exception, foreign affairs⁴.

Attributions

One recurrent theme throughout *Trud*’s coverage of female politicians was the trivializing and familiarizing language used to refer to them. Female politicians were regularly

⁴ Foreign affairs, a position traditionally reserved for male competency, has been successfully occupied by a female minister, Nadezda Mihaylova, whose term in office was celebrated as one of the more successful ones in the post-communist transition of Bulgaria. During the period of her reign, she was often referred to as the “Pretty Nade” and her ability to achieve diplomatic success was often attributed to her attractive physical appearance and her personality, rather than to her competency, education or previous experience. Similarly, as Sarnavka, Mihalec, & Sudar (2002), pointed out that in Croatia, a member of parliament from the opposition stated that the minister of European Integration was certainly listened to “because she was a woman.”

referred to by first name only, as opposed by first and last name, or by last name alone. For example, from 64 mentions of the leader of the Union of Democratic Forces, Nadezhda Mihaylova, 38 mentions, or 59 percent of all news reports after the elections referred to her as “Nadezhda”, while two stories referred to her as “Hubavoto Nade,” or “Pretty Nadia” which is an abbreviated, diminutive version of the name Nadezhda, linguistically reserved for use only by relatives and very close friends. In fact, in a brief article on media coverage of the last elections, *Trud* reported that the Prime Minister Simeon Saxecoburgotski and Nadezhda Mihaylova were the top two politicians the press “likes to keep an intimate tone with,” which the report concluded indicates “lack of distance and respect” (*Trud*, May 29, 2005, p. 7).

More often than not, however, when male politicians are referred or attributed in news stories, they are addressed in a more formal manner or assigned names of social importance and high symbolic nature. For instance, Ivan Kostov, former prime minister and leader of the powerful parliamentary faction Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria, is informally referred to as the “Commander,” while the leader of the ethnic Turkish party, known as the Movement for Rights and Liberties, is endearingly called by the press the “Falcon,” clearly bestowing both male politicians a position of symbolic power and even physical superiority. On the other hand, female politicians when informally referred to in news reports, are reduced in their symbolic positioning and social clout to appear less threatening and more fitting within the gender stereotypes adopted by gender conventions of the post-communist transition.

Gender and the journalistic profession

The textual analysis revealed that the majority of articles written about female politicians were written and reported by female reporters or had no author with the assumption that a group of people contributed to that same piece. The elections coverage was usually indicated with a

specially-created graphic “Parliamentary Elections 2005” adorned with an appealing image of the Parliament building and the year 2005. In accordance with beat reporting practices, the names of four female reporters kept reappearing as authors of most of the reports. This is not only indicative of the fact that the journalistic profession is popular among women in Bulgaria, but also points to the extent to which female journalists partake in the process of gender stereotyping. The tone of the reports and their gender-biased language were not mitigated by the fact that they were written by female reporters.

In some instances, it seemed that gender similarities allowed for added familiarization and trivialization. Two glaring examples are the profile of Denitza Dimitrova and the introduction of the tax specialist who “braved” politics. In both cases the pieces were written by two of the beat female reporters who contributed to most of *Trud*’s election coverage. In contrast, most of the analyses and commentaries were written by men and as such evidenced the trend toward sensationalization and “sexying” up of the language. The analysis of Nadezhda Mihaylova’s political credentials, for example, was written by a male reporter. While mixed teams of reporters were also present, there were no differences in the frames used to cover female politicians. The gender of the reporter seemed to exert no effect on the stereotypical mode of writing and reporting.

This observation foregrounds the prevalence of hegemonic ideologies that circulate widely in Bulgarian press newsrooms. The presence of gender-biased portrayals of women politicians only points to the fact that women journalists become universally socialized in the conventions of the profession (McQuail, 2005). They often accept their roles willingly, without critically examining or questioning the damaging effect of using such gender stereotyping language and portrayals.

Photographs of women politicians

The analysis also indicated that women politicians received significantly less photographic coverage than their male counterparts, and that when they did, it was invariably framed within the standards of Western heterosexual femininity. In general, politicians who were more photogenic, i.e. younger, better looking, received more than the usual mugshot (44 percent of the time). Photographs of women politicians performing their regular duties were a rarity unless they provided for a nice opportunity to reinforce the discrepancies between the two genders. Thus women politicians were usually shown as giving awards to college students, riding bikes with 4-year-olds, wearing traditional Bulgarian outfits, dancing, making pottery or playing the violin.

Out of 110 photographs of women politicians, there were only four that made it to the front page. The only front-page photograph before the elections was that of Nina Chilova, the Minister of Culture, and it was placed right next to a photo of Nikolai Svinarov, who was the Defense Minister (*Trud*, June 3, 2005, p. 1-2). The big headline above the photos read “Two Chilovas are Equal to One Svinarov” not only suggesting that Chilova was half the weight of Svinarov, but also alluding that she was half the politician as well. The article on page two explained that Chilova’s drastic weight loss of 5 kilograms (10 pounds) in the last three months was due to her hard work, suggesting that the job was probably too demanding for her. The reporters continued their speculations about the minister’s weight in the following denigrating way: “The weight loss of the already skinny minister is so obvious that even her colleague Nikolai Vassilev was swearing in front of our reporters that she had lost 7 kilograms. But he did not reveal how he knew her weight” (*ibid.*)

The other three front-page photographs of women politicians followed the already established frame of reference—a cutout of Lidia Shulova holding a gun and appearing inadequate, and two photographs of Anastasia Mozer “in action.” One showing how she “receives orders from the Commander” (Kostov) and the other revealing her transgression when she attempted to cast a vote in the parliament with somebody else’s card.

In some instances the stereotypical coverage women politicians received was reinforced by striking choices of imagery. In a short article about the visit of two parliamentarian hopefuls to an agrarian exhibit, the readers were presented with a picture of a cow with a big ribbon coupled with a discussion of how there were “positive fluids” between the candidates and the “tame cow” (*Trud*, May 29, p. 5). In sharp contrast, the rest of the page shows male candidates participating in marathons, driving sports cars, donning soccer t-shirts or simply posing majestically.

Discussion and conclusions

It is beyond doubt that women occupy far less prominent space than men in both political power and representation around the world. In Eastern Europe, this phenomenon has intensified with the collapse of the Berlin Wall, which brought about an unprecedented masculinization of the democratic transition. This, on the other hand, has been accompanied by widespread use of stereotypical images and representations of women in the press which in turn, lead to the creation of a social climate tolerant towards and in fact, encouraging, of sexism in every aspect of life. As Sarnavka, Mihalec, and Sudar (2002) point out, even when women achieve a measure of political success by joining the parliament, they are still not safe from insults and humiliation based upon their gender. In addition, media stereotypical depictions perpetuate gender norms that deny the

complexity of both women's issues and women's interests. While women's interests and issues are extremely varied and complex, the media generally fail to capture this diversity. As Mead (1997) points out, this is not an unusual phenomenon. Rather, she argues, women are forced into clichés well past their use-by date and the media often ignore the discrimination women face today. "It is more likely that media reporters will comment on women's personal appearance, discussing their hairstyles, weights, clothes, shoes or glasses. There is generally less comment on "men's beer bellies, suits, size and family roles" (van Acker, 2003, p. 117). Therefore, media portrayals continue to rely heavily on stereotypes and predictable gender conventions which do not allow for a well-rounded and thoughtful analysis of the role of women in the political discourse.

What is even more, when women politicians are often victims not only of gender-biased and stereotypical portrayals in the press, but also of sexist violations at the work place. One recent example comes from Sarnavka, Mihalec, and Sudar (2002), who reported on a disturbing incident that took place in the Croatian parliament in 2001. Anto Kovacevic, a then member of parliament, directly attacked a woman colleague, Vesna Pusic, during a Parliamentary session. In an attempt to interrupt her speech, which he disagreed with, he said, "Don't think with your head, you were made for bed!" The woman in question left the session in protest while the politician who insulted her (and who is a member of the Parliamentary Committee for Human Rights) was not asked to leave by the presiding chairperson--as we believe he should have been (Sarnavka, Mihalec, and Sudar, 2002).⁵

Several weeks after this incident, the parliamentarian who made the jokes about his fellow female politician was invited as a guest on one of the most popular talk shows, which is

⁵ On many Internet discussion forums, Anto Kovacevic was supported by additional rude remarks about Vesna Pusic's womanhood.

hosted by a woman. He repeated his insults on the show, bringing with him a mattress to illustrate his point that the female politician (and women in general) are primarily "made for bed and not for the head" (Sarnavka, Mihalec, and Sudar, 2002). As this was one of those entertainment talk shows with a light, un-serious tone and character, his insults were minimized by the show's atmosphere. The female host giggled at his insults, and the audience in the studio partook in the humorous sketch accepting and further normalizing such verbally and emotionally harassing behavior.

While this incident is specific to the Croatian parliament, the gender-biased language and often pornographic treatment of women's roles in public discourse is not. Bulgaria, just like Croatia, is witnessing not only a highly sexualized and often, offensive language and treatment of women in the parliament, but this treatment translates to women reporters as well. For example, at the opening session of the newly elected parliament, the oldest Mp, Kosta Tsonev, a well respected and widely loved actor from the Tsarist Party who serves an honorary speaker, had this to say to a young female reporter when asked how it feels to be the oldest member of parliament: "If I were only 25 years younger, you wouldn't be holding this microphone right now, but something else of mine" (quoted in *Trud's* rubric "Overhead in the Hallway," July 12, 2005).

Thus far, the transition has not been overly kind to women. State paternalism and masculine democracies form the cultural-political framework within which identities are gendered in differently formed public and private spheres. Without fundamental restructuring of gender relations in both private and public discourse, women's full exercise of their newly granted citizenship rights will be artificially limited by their child-bearing and rearing responsibilities as these impact on employment, political participation, reproductive life, family

life, and so forth. Democratization of gender relations in the political sphere is a sorely needed, but sadly neglected, aspect of social transformation which contributes importantly to the shaping of gendered identities.

Indeed, a fundamental shift in both gender norms and media conventions is needed to bring about the beginning of a new era of democracy--one in which equality of the sexes is more than an utopian idea. While society's gender lens has been significantly blurred by an intoxication with masculine power and determination, it is important to note that in Eastern European societies, women are equally responsible and silently contributing to the creation of the barriers of sexism and gender inequality. More importantly, the media, a significant number of which is represented by female reporters and editors, support sexism by portraying women politicians in a manner that discredits their political importance and influence. Thus, we often read interviews and pictures in which women politicians speak about their favorite recipes, talk fashion and shopping tips, share their wardrobe secrets and preferences in undergarments (Sarnavka, Mihalec, and Sudar, 2002). In order for this change to ensue, women should cease to participate in the marginalization of their own representatives, first and foremost, by challenging and transforming media conventions and newsroom rituals in favor of a more balanced and impartial approach to covering both women politicians and women's issues.

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Who are they familiarizing with? With Simeon and Nadezhda. (May, 29, 2005). *Trud*, p. 7. Retrieved March 11, 2006, from <http://www.trud.bg>

Table 1

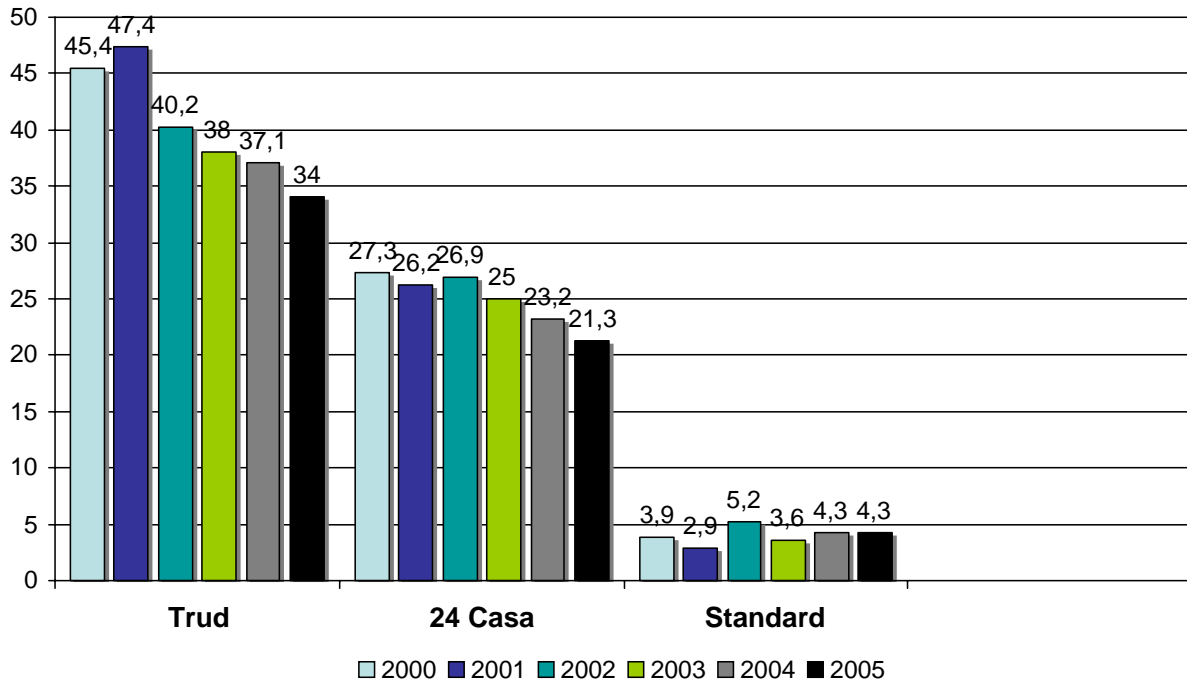
Women Members of Bulgarian Parliament

Years of Parliament	Number of MPs	Number of Women MPs	Percentages
1945-1946	279	16	5.7%
1946-1949	465	38	8.1%
1950-1953	239	36	15.0%
1954-1957	249	39	15.7%
1958-1961	254	41	16.1%
1962-1965	321	65	20.2%
1966-1971	416	70	16.8%
1971-1976	400	75	18.7%
1976-1981	400	78	19.5%
1981-1986	400	87	21.7%
1986-1990	400	84	21.0%
1990-1991	400	34	8.5%
1991-1994	240	34	14.1%
1995-1997	240	31	12.9%
1997-2001	240	27	11.2%
2001-2005	240	61	26.0%
2005-current	240	50	20.8%

Source: *Gender Project for Bulgaria Foundation*, 2004 (cited in Daskalova & Filipova, 2004).

Table 2

Readership (in percentages) for the top three Bulgarian newspapers for the period June, 2000 – June, 2005.



Source: Monthly data from www.aresearch.bg.

Table 3

Average daily circulation and ownership shares for *Trud*, *24 Chassa* and *Standard* for 2003.

Title	Ownership share	Circulation
Trud	WAZ (70%)	320,000
24 Chassa	WAZ (100%)	150,000
Standard	Standard News AG	30 -35,000*

Source: Popova, V. (2004). *Bulgaria. In Media ownership and its impact on media independence and pluralism* (pp. 94-116). Retrieved September 21, 2004, from http://www.mirovni-institut.si/media_ownership/bulgaria.htm

* The circulation numbers for *Standard* are based on information on number of printed copies, not actual sales.