

MPs with Skirts: Or How the Popular Press in Bulgaria Portrays Women Politicians

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Abstract

This study focuses on how the changes after the fall of the Berlin Wall have affected the presentation of female politicians in Eastern Europe. To put the discussion in a comparative perspective, the study first provides UN Gender Empowerment Measures for selected Western and post-communist countries for 2006 and 2007/2008. Then the study proceeds with a textual analysis of top two circulating daily newspapers in Bulgaria, *Trud* and *Standart*, to examine how female politicians were portrayed during the 2005 parliamentary elections. The analysis indicates that press coverage of female politicians is refracted through the prism of gender stereotypes, which, in turn, exhibits signs of the post-communist masculinization of democracy. What is more, this study found that women politicians as well as the female reporters who cover them willingly partake in the gendered mediation of the Bulgarian female politicians, therefore acting, as Julia Kristeva argued, as the strongest supporters of the existing, albeit oppressive, social order. The overall conclusion is that gendered media portrayals of female politicians lead to the creation of a social climate tolerant towards and perhaps, encouraging, of sexism in all aspects of social life.

Introduction

During the years of communist rule, one thing the Soviet totalitarian regimes paraded readily in their ideological propaganda was the gender equity principles upon which the new socialist project in the East was supposed to thrive. However, while the communist doctrine of gender equality called for full employment of both sexes as well as generous social benefits for women and a quota representation in the Communist Party (Daskalova & Filipova, 2004), these advances stood for “tokenism of the worst kind” (Einhorn, 1993, p. 151). The net result of the communist measures for gender equality was an oppressive model of pseudo-emancipation where participation of women in the political and social spheres was mainly symbolic or perfunctory at best.

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the ensuing democratization did not translate in any real gains in the status of Eastern European women. Instead of dealing with the tyranny of a totalitarian regime, women had to deal with diminished access to the labor market, increasing vulnerability to crime, including human trafficking and forced prostitution, loss of family-oriented social benefits, resurgence of traditional values, but more importantly, a weak parliamentary representation accompanied by a boom of oversexualized portrayals of women in the media.

Among these challenges, the growing gender bias in the media poses a formidable, yet largely subtle obstacle in the struggle of Eastern European women to assert a leading position in society. Studies of the politics, gender and media dynamics worldwide reveal that media coverage of female politicians is more negative, tends to focus more on appearance than issues and, in general, reinforces deeply-rooted social stereotypes (Kahn, 1992, 1994,1996; Herzog, 1998; Ross, 2002; Robinson & Saint-Jean, 1991; Ross & Sreberny, 2000). In Eastern Europe, and Bulgaria in particular, these trends have been further amplified by a media system in transition, which meanders between sensationalism and complete rejection of state control over content and distribution. It is a system where intellectual journals are readily found nestled among pornographic magazines and where newspapers compete for readers by offering luxury cars as prize drawings (Popova, 2004).

The purpose of this study is to explore how, in the climate of transition, the Bulgarian popular press represents female politicians. To that end, the study examines how the two top circulation dailies – *Trud* and *Standart* – portrayed women politicians in the last parliamentary elections of 2005. This specific election was selected as it marked the highest numbers of women candidates for parliamentary seat in the post-communist transition. The underlying goal is to detect what type of frames these newspapers used in their coverage of women politicians and how these frames might be indicative of

the general climate of the post-communist gender discourse and the identities that it espouses.

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. Media frames serve the purpose of "transforming amorphous occurrences and happenings into definite events through their salience and selection functions" (Tuchman, 1978, p. 192; Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974). 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.

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 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 gendered 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 political players (Devitt, 2002; Rakow & Kranich, 1991; Peake, 1997).

Gender, politics and media in Eastern Europe

Perhaps the best measure of the status of women in transitional societies can be found in the annual UN Human Development Reports. These reports use a *Human Development Index* in 177 countries, looking "beyond GDP to broader definition of well-being," and can be used to capture inequalities in human development between countries and regions (UN Human Development Reports, 2006, p. 269). The Human Development Reports started using a Gender-Related Development Index (GDI) in 1995 and since then it has become a monitoring tool for gender-related human development. One particular measure within the GDI, the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), is of special interest to the present discussion. It uses four indicators – (1) percentage of women in Parliament, (which represents the parliamentary representation index), (2) percentage of female legislators, senior officials and managers, (3) percentage of female professionals and technical workers, (combined 2 and 3 form the economic participation index) and (4) ratio of estimated female to male-earned income (which represents the income index)– to create what the report calls "a measure of agency" (p. 279-280). Table 1 shows the GEM ranks as well as the percentages of two of the indicators for selected Western and post-communist countries for 2006 and 2007/2008. The data unequivocally indicate that although some post-communist countries receive a high ranking in GEM, women are still weakly represented in government or positions of power. Moreover, the data also show that a number of post-communist countries, including Bulgaria, registered a drop in their latest GEM rankings. Since the GEM ranking represents the average of the three indices, any slight change in the above indicators could influence the ranking of a country. In the case of Bulgaria, its GEM ranking was influenced by a one-percentage drop in its percentage of female professional and technical workers (not represented in the table). The consistently high ranking of countries like Sweden and Norway, on the other hand, is primarily due to the fact that these countries have introduced electoral quotas, which have made significant advances in the political participation of women (UN Human Development Report, 2002). Yet the results need to be given some careful consideration. The technical notes to the report emphasize that since "the GEM includes the absolute average level of income in a country, [it] means that only rich countries can achieve high GEM score" or that a "poor country cannot achieve a high value of GEM even if earned income is evenly distributed" (p. 280). The authors also note that because the differences between the

overall HDI and GDI, for example, tend to be small, it might create the “highly misleading impression that gender gaps are largely irrelevant” when in fact they are not. What is more, those indicators might be relatively high since they “do not capture some important dimensions of gender discrimination” such as care work or violence against women (p. 279-280).

Table 1 *GEM Ranks, Seats in Parliament Held by Women and Female Legislators, Senior Officials and Managers for Selected UN Countries for 2006 and 2007/2008*

Country	GEM Rank		Seats in Parliament held by women (% of total)		Female legislators, senior officials and managers (% of total)	
	2006	2007/08	2006 ^a	2007/08 ^b	2006 ^c	2007/08 ^d
Western countries						
Norway	1	1	37.9	37.9	29	30
Sweden	2	2	45.3	47.3	31	30
Iceland	3	5	33.3	31.7	29	27
Denmark	4	4	36.9	36.9	25	25
Belgium	5	7	35.7	35.7	30	32
Finland	6	3	37.5	42.0	28	30
Netherlands	7	6	34.2	36.0	26	26
Australia	8	8	28.3	28.3	37	37
Germany	9	9	30.5	30.6	35	37
Austria	10	13	32.2	31.0	28	27
Canada	11	10	24.3	24.3	36	36
United States	12	15	15.0	16.3	42	42
United Kingdom	16	14	18.5	19.3	33	34
Post-communist countries						
Lithuania	25	25	22.0	24.8	42	43
Latvia	27	38	21.0	19.0	42	42
Czech Republic	28	34	15.7	15.3	28	30
Poland	30	39	19.1	19.1	34	33
Estonia	31	31	18.8	21.8	35	37
Slovenia	32	41	10.8	10.8	34	33
Croatia	33	40	21.7	21.7	23	24
Bulgaria	37	42	22.1	22.1	33	34
Romania	59	68	10.7	10.7	29	29
Russian Federation	62	71	8.0	8.0	38	39

Source: Human Development Report 2006, Human Development Report 2007/2008

^a Data are as of 31 May, 2005, unless otherwise specified.

^b Data are as of 31 May, 2007, unless otherwise specified.

^c Data refer to the most recent year available during 1992-2004.

^d Data refer to the most recent year available during 1994-2005.

Political participation aside, very little has been written on the media's role in covering female politicians in Eastern Europe as well as perpetuating gender stereotypes that might negatively impact voter's electoral choices. While several studies have attempted to assess the factors affecting political representation of women in the former communist bloc (Kostova, 1998; Matland & Bojinova, 2004; Sloat, 2005; Chiva, 2005), none of them examined the role of the media in this process. One of the few studies that shed light on the media coverage of female politicians in Eastern Europe is Danova's (2006) contribution to a recent report on stereotypes of women in Bulgarian media, published by Mediacentar in Sarajevo. In her critical comparison of two Bulgarian newspapers' coverage of female politicians, Danova explored the ideologically motivated discourse, aimed at redrawing the gender boundaries of the post-communism transition. She argued that female politicians are presented as private consumers rather than public figures—a result of a post-modern globalizing discourse. While she does not argue for a close examination of news production practices, Danova offers a solid contribution to studying the unexplored media discourse defining the new gender identity of women in the post-communist transition.

Another insightful look into the development of the transitional identity of women in post-communist transitional societies comes from Kotzeva (1999). Kotzeva explained that the identity of women in Eastern Europe has been largely determined by the vision of the socialist woman and thus, articulated by the communist ideology of the past. The "android" image of the woman who can do it all in a mechanical, highly efficient pattern while full of revolutionary spirit, Kotzeva argued, "has been refined to counteract the aesthetic language of the bourgeois presentation of women as figures of fashion, consumerism, and 'sex parasitism'" (p. 85). While not commenting directly on the role of the media in enforcing this communist ideal image of womanhood, Kotzeva nonetheless managed to connect the rejection of the decadent Western ideal of model behavior for women while completely replacing it with a communist-style Puritanism and control over woman's sexuality and social behavior.

Roman (2001), on the other hand, has examined the role of professional norms in the biased media coverage of Romanian women in politics. This bias, she argues, results from a male-dominated concept of the journalistic profession and the socialization of reporters into the predominantly misogynist ideology of the newsroom. Examples include newspapers featuring women's profiles mostly in the context of domesticity, not as directing a business or having political power. What is more, strong women are generally demonized, creating a fearful and often, hugely unattractive, image of women in power—one that is not human, or at least, not feminine. Indeed, to be a feminist is considered, even

by strong women of political authority, shameful and offensive, and in many ways, immoral, or as a residue of the communist past (Roman, 2001). Powerful women are also suspected of "being men" beyond metaphorical representations, or androgynous, such as the former Turkish premier, Tansu Ciller, former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, or former US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright (cited in Roman, 2001).

Women and politics in Bulgaria

Prior to the arrival of socialist rule, the emancipation of Bulgarian women received little attention. Although franchise was extended to women in 1937, the existing women's organizations focused primarily on cultural activities and charity (Kostova, 1998). Yet, as part of the socialist doctrine of equality, the Bulgarian Assembly passed a special bill in October of 1944, officially proclaiming equal opportunities for both sexes. As a result of the new law, women were elected to the National Assembly for the first time in 1945 and women's opportunities in educational and professional development were substantially expanded (Kostadinova, 2003). Women recorded a massive entry into some very prestigious professions, previously reserved as a sphere of exclusive male dominance, including the realm of politics. The number of women in the labor force reached 48 percent of all employees by 1982 and that percentage stayed the same for both 1994 and 1996 (Kostadinova, 2003). Similarly, the political involvement of women peaked during the late 1980s when women constituted 34 percent of the members of the local elected government bodies (Kostadinova, 2003).

The first democratic, multi-party elections in 1990 registered a drastic drop in women's parliamentary representation (see Table 2). In fact, in the years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, political representation of women dwindled significantly. Kostadinova (2003) explains the trend as a result of changes in the electoral system that favored popular candidates¹ and the highly competitive nature of politics in the first years. During the 1991 elections, however, the proportion of women MPs increased to 14.1 percent and fluctuated within narrow boundaries until 2001, when it jumped to 26 percent (US Department of State, 2006).

Table 2 *Women Members of the Bulgarian Parliament*

Years of Parliament	Number of MPs	Number of Women MPs	Percent of total
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	51	21.3

Source: *Gender Project for Bulgaria Foundation*, 2004 (cited in Daskalova & Filipova, 2004) and <http://www.parliament.bg>

It is important to note, however, that the 2001 elections were not characteristic of Bulgaria's political dynamics (Ghodsee, 2003). 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 elections, 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 as well as inexperienced fashion models. NDSV's sweeping election victory made it the largest parliamentary group in the 39th National Assembly and brought an impressive number of women MPs—26 percent of members of parliament and 35

percent of NDSV's members were women.

The last parliamentary elections took place on June 25, 2005 and included candidates from more than 22 parties and coalitions (www.parliament.bg). The elections registered the lowest voter turnout since the fall of the Berlin Wall (56 percent of registered voters participated) and brought fewer women MPs to the 40th National Assembly (see Table 2). Similarly, the breakdown of key leadership positions registered only modest advantages for women (see Table 3). The 40th National Assembly has only one woman chairperson of a standing committee (the committee of culture) and out of the eighteen ministers (including the Prime Minister) in the government, only three are female—Emel Etem, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Disaster Management Policy; Emilia Maslarova, Minister of Labor and Social Policy; Meglena Kuneva, Minister of European Affairs. Additionally, three ministries are currently with no female representation (Danova, 2006).

Table 3 *Key Leadership Positions Held by Women in the 39th and 40th Bulgarian National Assembly*

Positions	39 th National Assembly (2001)		40 th National Assembly (2005)	
	Total number	Number of women (% of total)	Total number	Number of women (% of total)
Standing parliamentary committee chairs	21	4 (19)	24	1 (4)
Ministers	16	2 (13)	14	3 (21)
Deputy ministers	44	10 (23)	48	24 (50)

Source: Daskalova & Filipova (2004) and <http://www.parliament.bg>

Methodology

This study employed textual analysis to identify emergent frames. 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. In order to develop a full understanding of how female politicians were portrayed, the authors collected and reviewed selected issues of the top two popular newspapers. 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 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.ⁱⁱ

The classification of Bulgarian newspapers was borrowed from Merrill's *Global Journalism: A survey of international communication*. In his examination of the British press, Merrill (1995) identified two major types of national daily newspapers – populars and qualities. Popular newspapers are among Europe's highest circulation dailies and share a tabloid-sized format as well as an emphasis on sensation, sports, and crime (Merrill, 1995). The quality dailies have smaller circulations and share the broadsheet format and a more serious approach to news (Merrill, 1995). This study examines the coverage of *Trud* and *Standart*—the two highest-circulation populars, which are also the highest-circulation newspapers in the country.

The very first representatives of this type of newspapers were *24 Chassa* (24 Hours) and *Dneven Trud* (Daily Labor), which is often referred to as *Trud*. At the beginning of the period 1991-1996, *24 Chassa* held the leading position among all national dailies (Krause, 1995). In the past seven years, however, the leading position has been held by *Trud* (see Table 4). Together, these two newspapers dominate the Bulgarian media market (Alfandari, 1998; Popova, 2004). In the late summer of 1996 the German press group Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung (WAZ) acquired 70 percent of the 168 Chassa media group, owner of *24 Chassa* and thus became the first large foreign investor in the Bulgarian media market (Popova, 2004). In February the next year, WAZ acquired 70 percent of the leading Bulgarian daily *Trud* and soon after started offering joint advertising deals (Popova, 2004). Because of this joint ownership arrangement, the two newspapers tend to have similarities in layout, their editorial tone and advertising choices (Popova, 2004). In fact, the newspapers have a history of switching editors and reporters. For the purpose of this study, from the top two dailies, therefore, only *Trud* was analyzed.

Table 4 Audience (in percentages) for the Top Bulgarian Daily Newspapers for the Period 2000-2005

Newspaper	June 2000	June 2001	June 2002	June 2003	June 2004	June 2005
<i>Trud</i>	45.4	47.4	40.2	38	37.1	34
<i>24 Chassa</i>	27.3	26.2	26.9	24	23.2	21.3
<i>Standart</i> (with ranking)	3.9 (4 th)	2.9(4 th)	5.2(4 th)	3.6(3 rd)	4.3(3 rd)	4.3(3 rd)

Source: Alpha Research, data available on the company web site <http://www.aresearch.org>

On the other hand, *Standart*, the second newspaper in the group of the populars, was chosen because it appeared as a strong alternative to *Trud* (Kosseva, 1996). *Standart* was created in 1992 with the goal of making it a paragon of "quality" journalism (Keremidchieva, 1998). Its imported paper, expensive color printing and price way below its real cost, were all techniques aimed at beating the monopoly of *Trud* and *24 Chassa*. Even though *Standart* never managed to reach the desired circulation, and had to tone down its luxury appearance in 1996, it established itself as one of the leading newspapers in the Bulgarian market (see Table 4) (Kosseva, 1996). Since its creation in 1991 by the Standart News media group, *Standart* has been consistently among the top five most popular newspapers in Bulgaria (Kosseva, 1996; Fileva, 1998).

The sample of articles analyzed in this study is comprised of all *Trud* and *Standart* issues for the period May 28-July 23, 2005. The sampling period was selected to cover 28 days before and after the 2005 parliamentary elections. Both authors read and analyzed the electronic versions of *Trud* and *Standart*. The analysis covered content from the entire newspaper, including headlines, articles, profiles, editorials, pictures and cartoons, although in the period before the elections each newspaper had a clearly labeled rubric for its election coverage. 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 several emergent categories. In the analysis of text, the methodology was guided by Hall's (1975) conceptualization of the "decentering" and "deconstructing" the text, working back through the narrative's constructed meaning of form, appearance, rhetoric, placement and style, to uncover the underlying social and historical processes, and the preferred audience readings of the production of news (Hall, 1975). In our first step, therefore, we identified the categories used by the media to define women politicians, namely, news stories, photographs, news profiles, interviews, etc. We, then, looked for the visual, verbal, and presentational tone in which the news event was made to appear meaningful. In addition, an analysis of the narrative structures of text was also conducted in order to further decipher the underlying social meanings, imbedded in the news production process and defining the surfacing frames/themes of interpretation. As Lester (1994) contended, "a closer textual analysis. . . focus(es) on discursive strategies within the text that . . . help reveal how ideological dimensions structure reporting of news and in fact narrow the range of discursive and democratic possibilities" (

Results

Coverage in Trud

Physical appearance

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" (Dimitrova, 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 (Dimitrova, June 14, 2005, p. 17).

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 ("Overheard in the Hallway", July 12, 2005, p. 3). 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" (Apostolova, Krusteva, & Avramova, July 21, 2005, p. 16). Although the article did not identify an author, the style was clearly gender-biased—women MPs were described as, "strutting on the red carpet," "super elegant," having "delicate faces" (Apostolova, Krusteva, & Avramova, July 21, 2005, p. 17). As the article summed it up, "if beauty is said to save the world, then this year's parliament is certainly in safe hands" (Apostolova, Krusteva, & Avramova, 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, *Trud* 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 (UDF). Mihaylova, who often stood shoulder to shoulder with Nadezhda Mihaylova, the head of the right-wing UDF 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 derogatory 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 reporters, placing her among the frontrunners for nomination in her political party. *Trud*, following closely her remade image, noted that Mihaylova is finally looking “more human, more down to earth”, “visibly beatified,” thus implying that exhibiting male qualities is a risky move which could potentially damage one’s political career (Apostolova, Krusteva, & Avramova, 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 six 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 and the CB, said, “it’s natural to be courted by the members 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 its style of reporting (Veleva, July 2, 2005, p. 10-11).

Credentials and performance

The analysis revealed that when women's credentials are discussed, *Trud* does make a mention of the educational and professional preparation of the female politicians. Indeed, all women candidates for 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 positions 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’ joking sense of the words”, “the fist in the velvet glove”, “the blonde fury”, and “having aristocratic taste” (Todorova, July 15, 2005, p. 12). Similarly, in an article about the political qualifications of the newly-elected forerunner of the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF), Eleonora Nikolova, the reporter describes her as “window display case” of over 28 years of successful marriage (Veleva, 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.

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 as “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 a break, if time permits (“The Governor Entertains”, 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” (Nikolova, June 1, 2005, p. 10). The analysis concluded “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 possess the character and energy of the current [now former] Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko" (Nikolova, June 1, 2005, p. 10).

The findings suggest that even when female politicians are asked to discuss issues of political importance, their responses are often trivialized and refracted through the prism of gender stereotyping. For example, when the negotiation process of establishing a ruling coalition after the elections was initiated, *Trud* speculated that the former deputy Prime Minister under NDSV's government, Lidia Shuleva, should 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 comically inept in handling a weapon. 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 affairs.ⁱⁱⁱ

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 referred to by first name only, as opposed to 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 Nade" 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" ("Parliament Hopefuls Like a Cow", May 29, 2005, p. 5). In Simeon's case, the first name attribution can be linked to the fact that, prior to his return to Bulgaria, most people knew him as the young king "Simeoncho," which is a diminutive of Simeon.

*Coverage in Standart**Competency*

In its pre-election coverage, *Standart* primarily focused on the leader of UDF, Nadezhda Mihaylova. She was given disproportionate coverage in comparison to the other women candidates for MPs, although in general the election coverage was primarily focused on several popular political figures. When covering Mihaylova's campaign, *Standart* chose to refer to her as the "blue leader," (blue being the color of the Democratic party) or by last name. The headlines represented the only exception, where she was often referred to by first name.

In addition, a particularly noticeable change of tone was also present in the nature of the coverage that female politicians received. Mihaylova's campaign to reach out to her electorate was covered by *Standart* and portrayed her as very accessible and willing to listen to her constituencies. In an article entitled "I want to place the King in a chess mate," Mihaylova is reported as playing a game of chess against the seven-times national champion, who also happens to be a woman (Oncheva, June 4, 2005). The same article also described Mihaylova as giving a lecture on the political platform of the democratic forces to a student audience at New Bulgarian University, where as the article reports, she received the warm welcome and the respectful attention of the students. Interestingly, in the same issue of the newspaper, Mihaylova's story is faced with a stand-alone photo featuring the then Chief of Internal Security, Boyko Borisov (not an MP candidate or elect, but speculated to be running in the election and highly regarded by both political circles and the general electorate) arms wrestling with the Bulgarian arm wrestling champion. Despite the fact that Borisov lost the match, the photo features him in the advantage, while the caption refers to him as "The General", which implies not only his earned military rank but also the position of respect and acknowledgement of power which his title symbolizes.

The rest of the articles about women politicians in the pre-election coverage discussed briefly the leaders in the party lists, whether they were men or women, by placing emphasis on their party affiliation and qualifications. Thus, in the pre-election, the readers of *Standart* can learn that a female woman MP candidate proposed that all parties sign an agreement on tolerant and honest election campaign, or that a woman of Turkish origin is the assistant district manager for Smolian, a region heavily populated by the Turkish minority. The gendered approach, however, surfaces when the newspaper talks about one of the independent candidates, Vesselina Bozhukova. The article identifies her as highly qualified – she has worked as a midwife, accountant, tax inspector – yet "the 52-year-old lady" needs "the support of her husband policeman and two sons" for a campaign that will feature her

“giving away kids’ clothes and sweets to orphans.” In a similar vein, the newspaper talks about Juliana Doncheva as “the pretty model and specialist in communications and politics” (“Bozhukova Enters Elections”, May 31, 2005).

One article in the pre-election coverage deserves special attention because its point was to discuss the shortage of female candidates for Parliament. Entitled “Only 80 Ladies Have a Chance for Parliament,” the article starts by asking whether the parties fulfilled their promises to put 30 percent women on their election lists. The article answers that question by saying that “almost all parties put together their lists with the conviction that it’s a man’s job to lead. Only ¼ of candidate MPs with a chance for a parliament seat are ladies” (“Only 80 Ladies Have a Chance”, May 30, 2005).

Leadership and Qualifications

Immediately following the elections, *Standart* spent most of their domestic coverage discussing the negotiations to resolve the stalemate initiated by the lack of a decisive majority winner to form a government. The negotiation were further made difficult by the strained political relationships not only between the existing political forces, but also by the new comer, *Ataka*, a right-winged nationalist party, which surprisingly won 21 seats in the elections and upset the pre-existing balance of power.

The coverage concentrated on the progress made in securing a cabinet with a consensus between the majority political powers. Given the previous record of NDSV to attract and employ the highest number of female MPs, the only mention of female politicians’ in the reporting of the rounds of political negotiations actually featured two of the tsarist most prominent female MPs—the Minister of Culture and Tourism Nina Chilova and Anelia Mingova, the freshly elected leader of the NDSV MP group. Mingova’s profile appeared on July 11, 2005, entitled “Mingova—the queen of the yellow group,” referring both to her assuming the leadership role for the newly elected tsarist MPs, but also playing a word game with the political name of her parliamentary group (King Simeon II). The article, written by a female journalist, referred frequently to Mingova’s new role in the political life while at the same time, served as a biographical sketch that stresses her impressive resume. Mingova is referred to as “the lawyer” “the figure of consensus”, “a close associate of the king,” a “a very competent attorney,” “expert in her field.” The article also refers to Mingova as known in her field “first and foremost as an expert in her field and only then as a politician” (Budakova, 2005, ¶ 4).

In a similar spirit, *Standart* ran an interview with the Minister of Culture and Tourism Nina Chilova in honor of her birthday. While the interview overall maintained a tone of objectivity, it nevertheless showed the subtlety of the gender bias which is often associated with the language used by Bulgarian

journalists in their coverage of women politicians. An example includes the very first question Chilova was asked: "How do men court her these days: as a minister or as a beautiful young woman?" And while Chilova discreetly declined to respond to this question, she played along with the gendered tone of the interviewers, pointing out that she tends to be intuitive like all women, but also, too rational sometimes, which craftily shows the subtle and sometimes, almost unconscious gender biased approach of treating female politicians in the Bulgarian press as well as the politicians' own gender-biased response, often meant to deflect the chance of appearing less feminine than socially accepted ("Profile of Nina Chilova", July 20, 2005).

Discussion and conclusions

On a global scale, it is fair to say that women occupy far less prominent space than men in both political power and representation. In Eastern Europe, this phenomenon has intensified with the collapse of communism, which was replaced by an unprecedented masculine democratic transition. This, on the other hand, has been accompanied by a widespread use of stereotypical images and representations of women in the press which in turn, leads to the creation of a social climate tolerant towards and in fact, encouraging, of sexism in social life (Frumasani, 2000). 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 and are often aided in this process by the female politicians themselves. 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.

This situation is further deteriorated in the post-communist states in transition, where a viable model for the female politician—her social role and identity—is virtually nonexistent. Instead, women in politics in Eastern Europe had to model themselves after "the woman official," the myth of which was

heavily propagated by the communist party. "These women were devoid of any sense of sexuality, they could not dress fashionably, wear makeup, or look attractive in any way," a model which rests on cultural norms long abolished and forgotten (Pasca-Harsanyi, 1993, p. 46). Furthermore, the transition of the media system itself and its discursive changes inevitably contribute to the nature of the press coverage female politicians receive. The media discourse in the popular press in Eastern Europe is perhaps best characterized by its language of excess—opposing the journalistic discourse inherited from late communism, excessive language offered a "radicalized antithesis of its clichéd professional jargon" (Spasov, 2003, p. 5). This excessive language also meant treating news as entertainment, orienting content more towards maximum profits in minimum time, and more importantly, did not require special training or much journalistic effort (Spasov, 2003).

In Bulgaria, the analysis of *Trud* and *Standart* showed some noticeable qualitative differences, where *Trud* employed language and journalistic devices (photographs, attributions, etc.) clearly refracted through the lenses of gender bias, while *Standart* maintained a more neutral and restrained approach in their coverage of the female political candidates and the elected MPs. However, even *Standart* exhibited gendered-mediation signs albeit in a more subtle and less obtrusive fashion. More importantly, the analysis clearly showed that the press which female politicians receive more often than not trivializes their achievements and minimizes their contribution to political discourse. It must be noted, then, that a fundamental shift in both gender norms and media conventions is needed to bring about the beginning of a new kind of a democratic transition—one in which equality of the sexes is more than utopia. 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 see 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, & Sudar, 2002). The tendency to partake in this gendered mediation and in fact to willingly seek out this type of coverage is not an entirely unfamiliar process in the East. In fact, as Julia Kristeva (1986) once poignantly pointed out, women in Eastern Europe often tend to be among the staunchest supporters of the established social system. "In the East, . . . women promoted to decision making positions suddenly obtain the economic

as well as the narcissistic advantages refused them for thousands of years and become the pillars of the existing governments, guardians of the status quo, the most zealous protectors of the established order" (p. 201). Kristeva tried to explain this social phenomenon as a "paranoid type of counter-investment in an initially denied symbolic order" (p. 201). In order for a palpable 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, thus, creating a new symbolic order which beacons a real and genuine transition to democracy.

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ⁱ Under the reformed electoral system, a party needs to pass the 4 percent threshold to get representation in the Parliament. Yet women were on the lists of a significant number of parties that failed to meet this threshold in the 1990 elections (Kostova, 1998).

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

ⁱⁱⁱ 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."