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THE POLITICAL USES AND ABUSES OF 'GENDER' IN TRANSLATION

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Abstract

The paper attends to the relationship between translation, language, and politics, focusing on the appropriation of the key Anglo-American feminist term 'gender' into Bulgarian and its political uses and abuses in the recent context of the global crusade against the so called 'gender ideology'. It traces the troubled history of the term which was transplanted in the post-communist world in the 1990s via translation but has not been well translated and understood in Bulgarian society. Through an array of specific examples from diverse registers such as academic publications, institutional policy papers, and EU documents in translation, the paper aims to show how inconsistency and inaccuracy in translation practices have had political consequences during and after the campaign against the ratification of the Istanbul convention on the prevention and combating of violence against women, when the term was highly contested and emptied out of meaning. It is argued that conservative forces have instrumentalized the linguistic confusion surrounding ambiguous and poor translations of the term 'gender' to trigger deeper fears and prejudices related to women's equality, transgender rights, and the EU liberal agenda. Working at the intersection of feminist politics of location and politics of translation, the paper poses questions about the limits of translatability and applicability of major transnational feminist terms. It also offers some options for getting out of the gender impasse in Bulgarian translation.

Keywords: gender, translation, Bulgaria, Istanbul convention, anti-gender movements

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The Anglo-American term 'gender' as a category of social difference entered Bulgaria and the whole of Eastern Europe[1] after the collapse of communism in the 1990s as part of the overall process of democracy building, gaining additional momentum after the accession of the country to the European Union in 2007. Around 2018, the global anti-gender crusade hit the shores of Bulgaria like a tsunami, shattering established meanings, questioning major liberal ideas and philosophies, putting on hold official gender politics, and leaving behind flotsam and jetsam. As Shaban Darakchi explains, unlike Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, the Bulgarian anti-gender hysteria 'emerged rapidly, within months and without previous anti-abortion and anti-women's rights campaigns' - primarily as a 'tool for political and social mobilization,' rejecting the understanding of gender in the social sciences as 'unnatural' (2019, p. 26). As a result, thirty years after its adoption in the Bulgarian language, the Anglo-American feminist term 'gender' has reached an impasse: it has been contested, emptied out of its original meaning, reductively degraded from an inspiring and inclusive term to a divisive political banner and a slur even, raising important questions: What fears and prejudices are hidden behind the fears of 'gender' today? Is 'gender' still a useful category for social analysis and what are the limits of its applicability and translation on Bulgarian ground?

In what follows, I discuss the complex relationship between translation, language, and politics through the multidimensional perspective of the concept of 'gender'. First, I look at the troubled history of the term, which was transplanted in the post-communist world in the 1990s via translation but has not been well translated and understood in Bulgarian society, leading to misunderstanding and confusion in public discourses. Second, through an array of specific examples from diverse registers such as academic publications, institutional policy papers, and EU documents in translation, the paper aims to explore the political consequences of inconsistent and divergent translation strategies in Bulgaria. More precisely, it focuses on the local campaigns against the *Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence* (known as the *Istanbul Convention*) to demonstrate how conservative political forces have instrumentalized the linguistic confusion surrounding the term 'gender' to trigger deeper prejudices and fears related to women's equality,

[1] Eastern Europe is used as an umbrella term for the group of countries which shared similar political and economic organization under the communist regime (1945-89) despite the numerous historical and cultural differences that exist among them.

transgender rights, and the EU liberal agenda. Working at the intersection of feminist politics of location and politics of translation, the paper offers some options for getting out of the gender impasse in translation in the current context of global assault on gender and the drastically shifting US gender politics under the second Trump administration.

Theoretical Premises

In order to trace the role of translation as social, political, interpretative, and critical practice, the ensuing analysis relies on theoretical tools from translation studies and feminist theory. Such interdisciplinary approach is a must when discussing the transfer of 'gender' across cultures as it has proved to be an extremely complex and volatile term, constantly evolving and expanding its meanings in English as well as other languages over the last sixty years. The transposition of the Anglo-American gender apparatus, rooted in the idiosyncratic conditions of Western democracies in the 1960s (and later) into the post-communist world involves dynamic processes of translation not only between different language systems but also between cultural contexts, diverging flows of feminist ideas as well as between different political regimes and historical traditions. This brings to the fore the significance of local semiosis in translation or what Adrienne Rich has called 'feminist politics of location' – i.e., acknowledging one's location or multiple locations, and the consequent conditions and possibilities embedded in that specific location. Decentering the feminist collective 'we,' Rich argues for a movement 'away from abstracted perfect theories and towards change in concrete locations' (1986, p. 227). In accordance, since the 1980s feminist translation has been defined in broader terms as a tool for social transformation, intellectual activism, and political practice (Anzaldua 1987, De Lima Costa and Alvarez 2014, Flotow 2018, Castro and Ergun 2017).

The recognition of locatedness and positionality has become central in translation theory as a whole after the so called 'cultural turn' when the political context and motivations behind translator's decisions were subject to a greater scrutiny. The deeper connections between translation and political engagement exist on many levels as translators participate in the international exchange of ideas, make choices, serve specific ideological agendas, create new knowledge and reshape the culture of the receptor language. Along these lines, exploring the connection between activism, social

change, and the role of translation in geopolitical shifts, Maria Tymoczko argues for 'translation with an activist component':

> Translations are inevitably partial; meaning in a text is overdetermined and the information in and meaning of a source text is therefore always more extensive than a translation can convey. Conversely, the receptor language and culture entail obligatory features that limit the possibilities of translation, as well as extending the meanings of the translation in directions other than those inherent in the source text. As a result, translators make choices, selecting aspects or parts of the text to transpose and emphasize. (2000, p. 24)

In Tymoczko's understanding, translators' partiality is not a defect, it rather makes translations political as it enables them to participate in the ongoing political discourse and strategies for political change. Let us see how translators' decisions and local context have played out in the Bulgarian case of transposing 'gender'.

The trials and tribulations of 'gender' in Bulgarian

Right after the collapse of communism in 1989 there began a massive process of translating Western feminist texts in Bulgaria and the whole of Eastern Europe (primarily from English), dealing with issues ranging from reproductive health, body politics, and sexuality to feminist/ gender theories and methodologies. The term 'gender' was embraced quickly in Bulgarian in an attempt to catch up with the latest theoretical developments in the West as well as a convenient substitute of feminism (perceived unacceptable in the post-communist situation) and a new, more inclusive and neutral category of social analysis.

The process of translating 'gender' into Bulgarian was uneven and difficult not only because the notion did not exist in Slavonic languages (with the exception of earlier Serbian translations from the 1980s)[2] but because of the complexity and the elasticity of the original term. In English, there have been at least four different uses of the term 'gender,' which are still valid and used simultaneously: first) as a grammatical category in linguistics; second) as a social construct – developed in the early 1970s when Anglo-American feminists started arguing that a person's gender did not depend on biological sex but was constructed as a result of social and cultural processes, leading to the distinction between 'sex' and 'gender'. The third, and most complicated meaning of

[2] On feminist translations in former Yugoslavia during the 1980s see Adriana Zaharijević (2024).

'gender' came into being in the 1990s with the rise of queer theory: it questions the very separation and/ or opposition between 'sex' and 'gender,' and insists on viewing both categories as interconnected and discursive concepts related to other variables of human difference such as race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, language, nationality etc. This understanding of gender as a performative category revises not only the simplistic opposition between sex/ gender but also the very opposition between the two tendencies in women's politics: for sexual difference or gender equality. And finally, the fourth usage of 'gender' ironically erases all the complex nuances in the sex /gender distinction: it is used in formal language as a polite word for 'sex' in order to avoid discrimination as well as the ambiguity behind the English word for 'sex'.

Over the last 60 years the meanings of 'gender' in English have proliferated to such an extent that the term has started functioning as a meta-discourse itself, dealing with its fluctuations and superimposed meanings as well as the intricate relations between the various layers of the palimpsest concept. This is why Joan W. Scott, re-echoing her earlier critique of the confusion in popular usage of both 'sex' and 'gender' (2010), argues that 'gender' is untranslatable due to its vagueness and the 'conundrum of sexual difference' it always stumbles upon:

> There is no single original concept of gender to which subsequent translations can refer. Instead, there has been an ongoing conversation across linguistic and cultural boundaries in which the term is addressed, disputed, qualified, and adapted; in the process the ambiguities that the term itself has acquired, the tensions it contains, are revealed. (2016, p. 366)

How can these tensions and interconnections in Anglo-American feminist theory be rendered in a foreign context, where the concept did not exist and where Marxist-Leninist dogmatism and binary thinking had dominated the humanities for more than four decades? Is it possible for translators to catch up with decades of evolution in Western feminist philosophy and social sciences without getting lost in translation?

The Bulgarian story of trials and tribulations in translating gender is not unique – many scholars have written on similar translation troubles in various languages (Tratnik, 2011, Valdrová, 2016, Slavova, 2019, Barchunova, 2020, Slavova, 2020). The major problem in the Bulgarian case has been the proliferation of translation equivalents as well as the inconsistent and diverging usage of the term. Apart from the

most obvious solution of transcribing the English word into Bulgarian as '*джендър*' – adopted primarily by women's NGOs,[3] there have been employed at least four other strategies. The initial strategy adopted was the literal translation of the linguistic term 'gender' as '*род*' (rod) onto which the culturally and socially constructed meanings are grafted.[4] The strategy was primarily chosen by philologists and philosophers as they emphasized the connection of gender with language and its construction through the acquisition of language. This academic usage was employed in the very first translations of Anglo-American and French feminist theory such as the anthologies *Vremeto na Zhenite* [Women's Time], *Feministkoto znanie* [Feminist Knowledge], *Eho-fantaziya: Istoriyata I Konstruiraneto na Identichnostta* [Fantasy-Echo: History and the Construction of Identity], the feminist classic *Nasheto Tyalo, Nie Samite* [Our Bodies, Ourselves by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective] as well as the first Bulgarian feminist research publications such as *Teoriya prez Granitsite: Vuvedenie v Izsledvaniyata na Roda* [Theory across Boundaries: Introduction to Gender Studies], *Rod I Red v Bulgarskata Kultura* [Gender and Order in Bulgarian Culture], *Maiki I Dushteri: Posoki I Pokoleniya v Bulgarskiya Feminizum* [Mothers and Daughters: Directions and Generations in Bulgarian Feminism], and others. Most of these collections, containing foundational feminist texts in the fields of philosophy, literary and linguistic studies, sociology, and psychoanalysis consistently introduced *род* as a tool for social and cultural analysis and paved the way for the newly created MA gender studies university programs. The translation equivalent *род* was used primarily in academic circles but for pragmatic reasons it was soon displaced by the more familiar term *пол* [sex] or the descriptive variant *социален пол* [social sex] as well as neologisms such as *социопол* [sociosex] in an attempt to spell out both the contiguity and the difference between the biological and the cultural. The inconsistency and frivolity in translating this major Anglo-American feminist term has had not simply intellectual consequences (misunderstanding texts and ideas) but political too (being instrumentalized by conservative forces later).

[3] Such as 'Български джендър проект,' 'Български център за джендър изследвания,' 'Фондация Джендър образование и изследвания,' Фондация 'ДА (Джендър алтернативи)'.

[4] Even in this case there has been a variant where the word 'род' is enclosed in quotation marks - to differentiate it from both the grammatical category and the homograph 'род' (the Bulgarian equivalent of family order, which, ironically, is one of the basic targets of feminist attacks). The quotation marks are supposed to signal the changed non-literal meaning of the word but at the same time they emphasize the translation problem itself.

The best way to illustrate the connections between translation and politics is by looking at the translation of Judith Butler's ground-breaking book *Gender Trouble*: *Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), published in Bulgarian as *Безпокойствата около родовия пол. Феминизмът и подриването на идентичността* (2003). As seen in the very title, the Bulgarian translator has rendered 'gender' with the neologism 'родов пол,' which in reverse translation means 'gendered sex'. The coinage is extremely misleading as it suggests a specific (new) type of sex – an ambiguity that would be later capitalized on in the attacks on gender as a 'third sex'. Not only is the distinction between 'sex' and 'gender' obliterated here but the very meaning of the latter term is obscured in Bulgarian, undermining the logic of the whole book, as well as Butler's critique of feminism, binarism, and the heterosexual norm. Contrary to standard feminist translation practice, the translator has neither made an effort to make the text accessible to a wider reading audience by adding a preface, explanatory translator's notes, footnotes or any other interventionist tools nor has managed to 'transpose and emphasize' important aspects of the original in Tymoczko's terminology (2000, p. 25). The most confusing part in the Bulgarian translation is Butler's opening chapter, entitled 'Субекти на пола/ родовия-пол/ желанието' [Subjects of Sex/ Gender/ Desire], which deals precisely with the interrelations between the two major categories 'sex' and 'gender'. Butler's argument in Bulgarian is not as tenable as in English because the distinction between the two terms is totally obscured. The coherence and readability of the translated text are additionally weakened by the clumsy renditions of derivative forms such as 'gendered life,' 'the mark of gender,' 'pre-gendered person' etc. What is more, the translator has ignored the first Bulgarian translation of this chapter from the anthology *Vremeto na Zhenite*, which is much more lucid due to the consistent use of the grammatical term 'род').

This is yet another example of missing cooperation among translators and missing links among translated texts. Translating feminist theory is no easy job: it demands specialized knowledge, research, creativity but also paying attention to the ways in which ideas circulate across space and time – what Rich has called 'politics of location' (1986, p. 226). Of course, as in any translation, there is something lost and obscured in the very act of appropriating gender, there are distortions or 'disturbances of translation' in Butler's terms (2024, p. 207) but risky and naïve translations of major

terms can have a more destructive snowball effect – as witnessed fifteen years later during the debates surrounding the ratification of the *Istanbul Convention* in which Butler's work had a central place.

Institutional Usage of Gender

Similar to the inconsistent ways of translating 'gender' in the humanities and public discourses, institutionalized translations in the area of legislation and social policy have also been marked by discord and chaos. The accession of Bulgaria to the EU (2007) demanded national laws to be harmonized with EU norms and standards, regarding equal treatment legislation, gender mainstreaming, minimizing gender pay gaps, gender-parity measures etc, which pushed the category of 'gender' center stage. In the greater part of the Bulgarian translations of EU policy papers and directives the term '*gender*' has been substituted by '*пол*' (sex) – a decision dictated by strategic factors, favouring transparency, readability, and clarity at the expense of accuracy in translation.

A good example in this respect is a glossary, entitled *100 Words for Gender Equality*, produced by the Bulgarian Ministry of Labour and Social Policy in 2007. The thirty-page bilingual glossary presents in a table form the most common gender-related terms in English and Bulgarian, providing brief definitions and comments in both languages. Obviously, the anonymous experts had the noble ambition of setting up a unified standard and helping translators render foggy Eurospeak lexicon, but their prescriptions have created more confusion than clarity. For example, the very entry on '*gender*' prescribes simultaneously three translation equivalents: '*род*,' '*социален пол*,' and '*джендър*' as seen below:

> ENG – **GENDER** - A concept that refers to the social differences between women and men that have been learned and are changeable over time, and have wide variations both within and between cultures.
>
> BG - **РОД, СОЦИАЛЕН ПОЛ, ДЖЕНДЪР -** Понятие, което се отнася до възприетите социални различия между жените и мъжете, които са заучени и се променят във времето, като варират силно в и между различните култури.

At the same time, in the dictionary, most phrases and terms, deriving from or incorporating the word '*gender*,' use the biological category '*пол*' (sex): for instance, 'gender dimension' (социално измерение на *пола*); 'gender impact assessment'

(оценка на въздействие по *пол*); 'gender gap' (социална дистанция между *половете*); 'division of labor by gender' (разделение на труда по *пол*) and so on (2007, pp. 2-12). In other instances, 'gender' is rendered as '*социален пол*' (social sex): 'gender planning' (планиране от гледна точка на *социалния пол*), 'gender roles' (*социални* роли на *половете)* or 'gender contract' (договор за *социалните* роли на *половете*) (2007, pp. 3-17). In still other cases, where the original relies on the very distinction between the categories 'sex' and 'gender,' the whole signification chain collapses in Bulgarian as in the phrases 'differentiation between gender violence and sex violence,' 'sex discrimination and gender discrimination' or the key phrase 'sex/gender system' – the latter rendered in Bulgarian totally inadequately as 'система на *половете* /*социални* роли на *половете*' (2007, pp. 10-15).

The indiscriminate use of multiple translation equivalents demonstrates the painful efforts of anonymous translators to domesticate the foreign term by bending forcefully the target language until it breaks up. This is why EU documents sometimes speak in bifurcated Bulgarian language: for example, in the translation of EU manual on language use *Gender-Neutral Language Guide,* the Bulgarian version opts consistently for '*пол'* - even in phrases such as 'gender-marked words' rendered as 'маркирани по *пол думи'* (2008, p. 5) where signification implies the linguistic meaning of the category. In a similar manner, *Nacionalna Strategiya za Nasurchavane Ravnopostavenostta na Polovete za perioda 2009-2015* [National Strategy for Promoting Gender Equality for the period 2009-2015], modeled on European documents, tones down the European goal of 'gender equality' by substituting it with the narrower in content phrase 'equity between men and women'. Similar strategies can be observed in the translation of other official documents such as *Towards a Community Framework Strategy on Gender Equality* (2001-2005); *The European Pact for Gender Equality* as well as in the wording of the most important law on gender equality in Bulgaria – part of the harmonization process with EU legislation, passed as late as 2016 after ten-year debates – where the key word 'gender' is totally missing (its Bulgarian title is *Zakon za Ravnopostavenost na zhenite I muzhete* [Act on Equity Between Men and Women].

Under the pretext that 'gender' is too foreign and exotic a concept, institutionalized translations have belittled the efforts of the academic community to make 'gender' speak Bulgarian, have mechanically substituted the polysemous Anglo-

American term with *sex*, *socio-sex* or *men and women*, which, in turn, has produced a leveling and taming effect on gender politics in translation. Thus, the complex phenomenon of gender (which partially incorporates the notions of sex and sexuality but overrides the binary opposition male-female by allowing for other forms of social behavior and identity such as gay, lesbian, transsexuals, transgender etc.) has not taken (a) place in Bulgarian society.

(Mis)Translation and Politics: The case of the *Istanbul Convention* (IC)

The proliferation of meanings and variants of 'gender' reached its peak in Bulgaria during the intense debates surrounding the pending ratification of the *Istanbul convention* around 2018. It had been signed by most CEE countries between 2011-2016 but in the context of the global crusade against the so called 'gender ideology' the ratification process was put on hold in Bulgaria (as well as in Hungary, Czech Republic, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, and Slovakia).

The bone of contention again turned out to be the ambiguous meaning of the term 'gender' in Bulgarian translation. In the original EU directive, the key term is used parallel to 'women or women and men' but always separate from 'sex'. In line with the established pragmatic politics in institutionalized translations, the official Bulgarian translation renders most gender-related terms such as 'gender-based violence' or 'gender identity' with 'sex' and/ or 'social sex'. The most heated arguments against the IC have revolved around the very definition of 'gender' in article 3c (translated in the second row as 'sex')[5]:

> ENG Article 3 – Definitions (C) - *gender* shall mean the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men;
>
> BG Член 3 Определения (B) - *Пол* означава социално-изградени роли, поведение, дейности и характеристики, които определено общество смята за подходящи за жените и мъжете;

Ironically, the *Istanbul Convention* is the first international treaty to provide a definition of 'gender' as socially constructed category precisely because it refers to gender inequalities and violence grounded not in biological differences but in social prejudices.

[5] The EU Convention is available at: https://rm.coe.int/168008482e

During the winter of 2018, the ratification still pending, the term 'gender' was seized and degraded in popular usage, turned into a war cry by various anti-gender advocates (among them neo-patriotic and pro-Russian parties, the Orthodox Church, the Bulgarian Socialist Party, and other diverse political forces), claiming that the IC promoted dangerous ideology of normalizing the third sex and promoting same-sex marriages, undermining family values, educational standards, national unity, and what not. Strange slogans were chanted at the rallies against the ratification of the EU directive: 'Bulgaria is against social sex! There is no social sex! There is no third sex! Throw out the IC!' etc (in Slavova, 2019, p. 240). In no time the analytical category became totally desemanticized, accruing pejorative meanings, used even as a slur – a process described by Emilia Slavova as 'toxification of gender':

> *Gender* came to be used in a wide range of contexts with a pejorative meaning. It could refer to a gay person, a trans- or intersex person, a feminist, or a liberal who supported LGBT+ rights (the so-called "sorosoids," followers of the philanthropist George Soros). This was coupled with strong anti-European sentiment and an extreme aversion to words and practices framed as foreign and a threat to Bulgarian national identity and traditional conservative values. (2022, p.189)

Due to the growing social tensions and the rising homophobia and transphobia, the Bulgarian government transferred the decision about the ratification of IC to the Constitutional Court, which after several decisions, declared the *Istanbul Convention* unconstitutional. The decision was grounded in the 'terminological ambiguity of the concepts gender and gender identity as well as their flawed translation: 'the Bulgarian word for 'sex' [*пол*] is used for '*gender*' as well, making it indistinguishable from 'sex'. Only once, in Art. 4.3, 'gender' is translated as 'social sex' [социален пол], triggering speculations about the existence of a 'third sex' [трети пол]' (CC 2021, pp. 4-5).[6] Further, the Constitutional Court stated that the Bulgarian legislation and the Constitution itself do not discriminate between 'sex' and 'gender,' and they have always worked only with the category of 'sex,' seeing social roles as deriving from the biological sex. It is not accidental that some constitutional experts have referred to Butler's translated book *Gender Trouble* to justify their rejection of IC: 'it relies on terms and concepts such as *gender* and *gender identity*, which have no universal meaning and

[6] My translation.

whose content is unclear and ambiguous, which creates unpredictability in terms of legal consequences and legal order' (Tzekov 2018, p. 2).

Ripple Effects of (Mis)Translation

Today, seven years after the refusal of the Bulgarian government to ratify the IC, the anti-gender mobilizations have not disappeared or subsided. We have witnessed recurrent waves of resistance to the so called 'gender ideology,' linked to various fabricated threats: rallies against Sofia gay pride, recurrent anti-European protests, the vandalization of the EU office in Sofia on February 22, 2025; numerous protests against the adoption of the Euro in Bulgaria (expected in 2026); the passing of the 2025 law to 'ban LGBT propaganda in schools' and the public shaming of NGOs, educators, and intellectuals who 'promote gender and homosexuality');[7] the draft law proposed by the far-right Vazrazhdane Party to create a register of so called 'foreign agents' to be prohibited from carrying out activities in the educational system, media and state institutions; the government's intent to make religion a mandatory subject in schools, and other similar political interventions, which limit the civil rights of Bulgarian citizens as well as the freedom of expression.[8] From the very beginning, these discursive and acting coalitions (bringing together The Society and Values Association, pro-Russian parties such as Vazrazhdane, nationalist parties such as Velichie and Metch, as well the Patriarch, the Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, and other populist political actors) have coalesced around 'gender' as a 'symbolic glue' (Brustie 2015, p. 34). Their well-orchestrated gender panic has been driven by attributing all possible sins to the feminist concept: the decline of patriarchy and birthrates, the end of traditional marriages or putting the lives of children at risk, foreign forces undermining national sovereignty, and what not.

The Bulgarian mobilization of conservative forces is not an exception; it is part of the transnational anti-gender movement from Russia to the United States, from the

[7] It is included as amendment to the Law for Pre-School and School Education which outlaws 'propaganda, popularisation and encouragement, directly or indirectly, of ideas and views connected to nontraditional sexual orientation or to gender-identifying different from the biological'. See https://balkaninsight.com/2024/08/07/bulgarias-parliament-unexpectedly-outlaws-lgbt-propaganda-in-schools/

[8] See https://www.bgonair.bg/a/2-bulgaria/354947-rumen-radev-podpisa-ukaza-za-obnarodvane-na-promenite-v-lgbti-zakona; https://www.actualno.com/politics/deputatite-pak-gonjat-djendyri-prieha-zakon-ot-putinova-rusija-za-cenzura-na-lgbti-snimki-news_2277233.html; https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/vazrazhdane-chuzhdestranni-agenti/33199051.html; https://apnews.com/article/bulgaria-euro-protest-nationalists-eb9a054f062b21bad04a802caf467407

Global South to the Global North (Kováts 2017, Kuhar and Pajnik 2020, Maďarová and Hardoš 2022; Bogaards and Peto 2022). What is more, as Agnieszka Graff and Elżieta Korolczuk argue, Eastern Europe is among 'the key battlegrounds of anti-gender mobilisation' where the demonization of 'gender' is directly linked to the crisis of democracy: 'the right has managed to capture the word 'gender,' to redefine its meaning and demonize it, making gender equality appear like an enemy of the people' (2022, p. 4). In her recent book *Who is Afraid of Gender* (2024) Judith Butler provides additional facts and arguments to explain the rise of the global anti-gender moral panic: 'Anti-gender ideology is driven by a stronger wish, namely, the restoration of patriarchal dream-order where a father is a father; a sexed identity never changes, women, conceived as 'born female at birth,' resume their natural and 'moral' positions within the household; and white people hold uncontested racial supremacy' (p. 14). Butler and her theory of gender performativity have also been misunderstood and manipulated in public discourses in Bulgaria: in the grim 1990s the American scholar was enthusiastically embraced as a symbol of women's right to freedom and difference but in recent years reactionary forces have made her name synonymous with gender scare. The author who has written so many books on philosophy, identity construction, tolerance, and not hurting with words has recently become herself the object of cyberbullying and virulent attacks of hate speech (Slavova 2019, Bankov 2020, Nencheva and Georgiev 2024).[9]

Language has become a major player in the battle against the so called 'gender ideology' as seen in the Bulgarian mediascape and everyday speech, where related words such as 'genderization,' 'genderism,' 'genderette,' 'gendress,' 'genderness,' 'genderish' etc have mushroomed without any clear meaning, simply weaponized as intimidating battle cries. What is more alarming is that the distortion and the overall degradation of the academic term has spilled over from popular discourses back to scholarly publications. For example, in their study of the last two editions of the *Dictionary of New Words in the Bulgarian Language (from the first two decades of the 21st century),* Denitsa Nencheva and Desislav Georgiev have traced a shift in the very definition of 'gender': the 2010 edition introduces the word as a sociological concept, whereas the 2021 edition rewrites its definition as a biological term, explaining that it is

[9] For example, the loud verbal attack at: https://lupa.bg/newa/koya-e-judit-batlar-lesbiykata-maika-na-jendar-ideologiyata-i-kravosmeshenieto_153393news.html

'associated with a different, non-traditional sexual orientation and a different social identity – thus, confirming the reduction of gender to sex' (2024, pp. 11-12). This is yet another example of how official institutions can legitimize specific language policy under the pressure of populist interests and ideologies. Similar, even more extreme practices have been observed in the recent attempts of the second Trump administration to purge the federal government of 'woke' words such as activism, diversity, DEI, equal, gender, inequalities, injustice, LGBTQ, nonbinary, racial inequality, sexuality, social justice, transgender etc. [10]

Can words and the ideas embodied in them be so easily eliminated? When does language turn from a tool of expression and communication into an instrument for manipulation, repression, and control? What can be done to counter such processes and what is the role of translation and translators in this war of words, ideas, and ideologies?

Concluding remarks

The trials and tribulations of the Anglo-American feminist term 'gender' in the last three decades in Bulgaria have demonstrated once again that translation is not a safe zone of intellectual work but a 'perpetual locus of political engagement' (Tymozco 2000, p. 43). There is no doubt that the translation of gender-focused texts into Bulgarian has been instrumental for the dissemination of liberal ideas and the implementation of EU gender equality agenda. Yet, the recent impasse of the term has revealed that it has not been well-translated and understood, it has been taken for granted, opening a huge gap between gender as theory and as embodied practice, between the signification of 'gender' in English and 'джендър' in Bulgarian, as well as between different uses and translation strategies. The anti-liberal assault on 'gender' has capitalized on the linguistic confusion surrounding the Anglo-American term, twisting its meanings, and reducing it to an insulting word. Despite the scattered efforts of individual feminist scholars and organizations in coalition with the LGBT+ community in the country, there is an urgent need for a more organized response in society to counter the anti-gender rhetoric, which has been used as an affective

[10] For the full purge word list see *New York Times*, March 7, 2025 at: https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2025/03/07/us/trump-federal-agencies-websites-words-dei.html

instrument (one that relies on spreadable emotions) against gender equality and democracy itself.

Due to the current dismantling and misuse of the term it needs collective efforts of re-translation, re-thinking, and re-conceptualization as the proper translation concerns not only academic publications and university courses but activism, social politics, media and everyday life. This is why a broad network should be built among translators, feminist activists, scholars, policy makers and institutions to discuss in concert existing conceptual tensions, to find the most suitable Bulgarian translation equivalent, and to pro-actively popularize it. It may be too late to go back to the initial variant 'rod' (successfully adopted in some Slavonic languages) but I believe that the concept of 'gender' could be re-claimed and re-configured – similar to the re-claiming of the key words 'race,' 'queer,' and 'black' in the post-Civil Rights movement context in the USA. Of course, such efforts would demand a serious reflection on the existing conceptual ambiguities and contaminations, disentangling connections with political and religious agendas, exposing manipulative vocabulary as well as a shared strategy on the pragmatic use of the term. Last but not least important, the re-taking of 'gender' would need massive work related to educational campaigns on many levels, training about gender epistemologies, scholars producing new feminist knowledge for the 21st century as the future success depends not only on the manner in which key concepts are translated but also how they are narrated, articulated, comprehended, and circulated.

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