

## **How Radical, How Much For Women? Examining the Gender Question in Radical Right Parties in Bulgaria**

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### **Abstract**

Research on women and the radical right has expanded in recent years as various radical right parties and movements, such as the Front National or the Tea Party, have been staging women politically and forwarding alternative claims on women's issues. The present paper aims to explore that issue in Bulgaria, which has witnessed its own rise in radical right politics in the last decade. The questions guiding this exploratory research are: What is the representation of women in radical right parties? Are radical right parties making a distinct claim on women's issues? How does the picture in Bulgaria compare to other countries where there have been distinct conservative claims made by women from radical right parties? To assess the descriptive representation of women by radical right parties, the paper examines electoral data from national and European parliament elections, parliament representation (including committees), and party leadership representation (including women's party organizations). To assess the substantive representation of women and whether or not radical right parties make distinctive claims on women's issues, the paper examines party platforms, as well as statements in parliamentary committee discussions and in the media on women's issues made by radical right parties.

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In the last century, we have witnessed a number of great (political) transformations which have affected our political reality at large, as well as our micro worlds – those of individual countries, distinct cultures, varied political parties and ideologies, and so on. The women’s liberation movement is one of these great transformations in our political history which has placed an at-the-time new issue – that of gender rights – on the table and together with the ensuing second and third-wave feminisms, has significantly affected both the development and the discourse on gender equality that continue to the present day. As a result, we have witnessed an exponentially growing interest in gender studies, and in particular in women’s representation (Jones 2009; Krook 2005, 2010; Phillips 1995), with scholarship shifting focus from descriptive to substantive representation (Childs and Krook 2008; Wangnerud 2009), and attention moving from the traditional study of parties of the left, which have long been seen as supplying one, more women to parliaments, and two, women who pursue the feminist agenda and have thus been identified by default as the natural representatives of women’s issues, to conservative parties, studying what both women and men (Celis and Childs 2012; 2014; Piscopo 2014) do in the interest of women.

By nature of its origin, the gender equality discourse has largely drawn upon the experiences of Western, established democracies, which has on the one hand, provided a solid base of data and cases that have aided our understanding of what, how and when affects women’s representation, on the other, as a result of its focus on a very similar set of countries, it has left a significant blind spot in our understanding of women’s representation. Coupled with another great transformation of the last century, which majorly changed our political reality as we knew it – the fall of the Berlin Wall and the democratization of Eastern Europe – we can no longer limit our knowledge of gender equality, or the causes and consequences of women’s representation, to the realms of Western cultures alone. As cases where the traditionally expected relationship between women representation and political affiliation has come to into question (Harteveld et al. 2015; Rashkova and Zankina 2014; 2015), the political realities in these newly constructed democracies, have the potential to alter our understanding of *who*, *where*, and *how* represents women.

In fact, the heterogeneity of women and their representation is subject not only to systemic differences in institutional, cultural and historical set-ups, but also in how women’s issues are perceived by distinct actors within the same system. Focusing on the differences between the feminist and conservative idea of what constitutes the representation of women, Celis and Childs (2015) emphasize the sometimes subtle and often overseen distinction between women’s issues and women’s interests, and highlight the need for a systematic way in which we can evaluate what constitutes representation in the interest of women.

Notwithstanding the fact that we still need more clarity, and agreement, on how to classify something as representation benefiting women, recent research (Childs and Webb 2012, Celis and Childs 2014) has managed to go so far as to clearly establish that women’s issues and interests are, and have been, part of the political agenda of conservative political parties as well. Within the growing number of studies examining women’s representation in parties of the right, and the rather simultaneous expansion of a new party family (Rydgren 2005) – that of the populist radical right – in order to achieve a full picture of women representation across the political spectrum, we ought to ask the same questions as the ones coined by Celis et al. (2008) and further developed by Loveduski and Guadagnini (2010) – namely, how is representation done, who does it, in relation to which women, what policies, where, when and why, to whom is it accountable and how effective is it – also for the political parties of the radical right. Despite their significant electoral success in recent years and an expanding body of research focusing on explaining this new phenomenon (Bale et al. 2010; Mudde 2000, 2007; Rydgren 2005), we know little about the gender equality within populist radical right parties and even less about *if* and *how* they represent women’s interests. This gap is even larger for non-Western democracies. Seeking to answer

some of the questions developed in Celis et al. (2009) and Lovenduski and Guagagnini (2010), we make a first attempt to alter that by advancing gender and politics research on the radical right parties in post-communist Bulgaria.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section briefly reviews the literature on women and the radical right. Section three explains the rise and development of the populist radical right parties in Bulgaria. Section four focuses on descriptive and substantive representation. Section five summarizes the findings and concludes.

### ***Women and Populist Radical Right Parties***

The radical right is a political phenomenon which has gained enough public attention and remarkable electoral success in the last two-three decades turning itself to a newly established party family (Rydgren 2005; Mudde 2007) which can no longer be overlooked whenever we are talking about party systems, representation, or the like. Despite their national varieties, parties from the populist radical right (PRR) family share three characteristics as outlined by Mudde (2007) – nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. To that we can further add male domination. Nativism and authoritarianism manifest themselves in various types of nationalism that is country and context specific, and in the West is mostly linked to immigration issues pressing on domestic job markets and social provision structures. The male domination is an observation that PRR parties are *Männerparteien*, which are predominantly led by, represented by, and supported by men (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2015).

The increasing electoral success of leading PRR parties such as the Front National (FN) and the expansion and rise (and fall) of others as the Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV) and UK Independence Party (UKIP), have led to an expanding body of research on the populist radical right, not only as a phenomenon in itself, but also on its impact on other parties and the adoption of state policies. In a detailed analysis of Berlusconi's coalition governments, Verbeek and Zaslove (2014) examine whether the participation of the Lega Nord (LN) has had an effect on Italy's foreign policy, while Bale et al. (2010) study how the presence of populist radical right parties has affected the social democrats in West European democracies. And whereas the latter study finds mixed evidence on the types of strategies that social democratic parties adopt in response to the success of radical right parties, Verbeek and Zaslove point to the importance that institutions, particularly, the structure and the fragmentation of the party system, have on the amount of leverage a junior coalition player, such as the LN, can have.

A large portion of the scholarly debate around the PRR focuses however, on trying to examine the third aspect of radical right parties being considered *Männerparteien*, or who they are supported by and why. And although we know that both the membership and the support of radical right parties are largely male, scholars are still struggling to explain the so-called gender gap we find in voting for these parties. A number of scholars (Givens 2004; Spierings and Zaslove 2015) have found that one of the most important reasons why people support populist radical right parties – their views on immigration – are the same for men and women, but cannot explain the gender gap. Moreover, Spierings and Zaslove point out to the fact also argued in Mudde (2007) that the gender gap, or the presence of women in PRR leadership and party bodies, is overemphasized when studied independently of other political parties.

The relationship between women and the populist radical right, and in particular women *within* populist radical right parties, is a phenomenon which has thus far received very little scholarly attention. With the notable exception of Cas Mudde's (2007) chapter on this, questions about the role of women in leadership and representation in PRR parties remain to be studied across the board. The quest becomes even larger when we think of some of the new democracies in South Eastern Europe, for which there are few academic accounts about these countries' experiences with radical right populism, despite its

increasing popularity seen in the formation and electoral success of Ataka in Bulgaria, the Slovenian National Party (SNS) in Slovenia, and the Greater Romania Party (PRM) in Romania, to name a few. Moreover, there are virtually no accounts of these parties' inclusion, representation and role of women. This doubles the challenge, as Minkenberg (2002, 361) cleverly noted that 'studying the radical right in transformation countries in Central and Eastern Europe not only resembles shooting at a moving target but also shooting with clouded vision'. It is precisely this clouded vision, which we intend, at least to some extent, to unravel.

### ***PRR in Bulgaria***

Although nationalism was always present in Bulgarian politics, including in the post-communist period, it is in the last decade that radical right parties have made a significant breakthrough, gaining parliamentary representation and establishing a permanent political presence. Having one of the largest ethnic minorities in the EU percentage-wise, it is only to be expected of Bulgaria to have a nationalist party in parliament. What is surprising is the rather late appearance of the radical right compared to other East European countries.<sup>1</sup>

Following its independence from Ottoman rule, Bulgaria was left with over 20% of ethnic Turks in the country. The newly independent Bulgarian state adopted a number of strategies in its attempt to deal with the Turkish minority, focused first and foremost on decreasing the number of ethnic Turks in the country (Dimitrov 2000). Despite all efforts from population transfers and bilateral agreements to integration in the socialist society and forced assimilation culminating in the infamous renaming process of 1984-1989<sup>2</sup>, the ethnic Turkish minority preserved its numbers and identity, currently constituting 8% of the population. Following the collapse of communism, the ethnic Turkish minority also gained political representation in the face of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) – a party that has been the third largest in parliament since the first democratic elections in 1990 and has taken part in four coalition governments. Such ethnic factor creates favorable conditions for radical right parties to organize and rally against. In addition, Bulgaria had a history of various pro-fascist organizations in the interwar period and during World War Two when the country was allied with the Axis powers. A Roma minority of 4.4% is blamed by many for all the ills in the country, further providing the nationalists with ammunition. Lastly, the Syrian refugee crisis and the current presence of over 13,000 Syrian refugees in the country has spurred fear among many Bulgarians, leading to protests against the building of refugee centers and occasional incidents of racial violence. The crisis has been successfully exploited by radical right parties.

On the other hand, Bulgaria has been praised for its ethnic peace, culture of tolerance and the so-called "Bulgarian ethnic model" (Zhelyazkova 2001). Despite its large ethnic Turkish minority, Bulgaria was spared the ethnic conflict and violence witnessed across former Yugoslavia. Although ethnic tensions were present in the country following the collapse of communist rule, they never reached a critical point. Whatever nationalist parties formed or reorganized after 1989, their support was limited due to the shameful legacy of the renaming process and quickly evaporated with the outbreak of the Bosnian war in 1992. The MRF, in turn, was praised by many politicians for not playing the "ethnic card" and radicalizing the Turkish minority. Yet, support for the radical right did resurface in the 2005 parliamentary elections, following a four-year mandate of a coalition government in which MRF was a junior partner.

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<sup>1</sup> The Slovak National Party has been parliamentary represented since 1990. The Slovene National Party reached parliament in 1992 and the Hungarian Justice and Life Party in 1998. The Greater Romania Party was even part of the governing coalition from 1993-1995 and held parliamentary seats throughout 2004.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed account of the renaming process, see Gruev and Kalionski, 2008.

The 2005 elections saw the emergence of an extremist populist formation, ATAKA (Attack). Founded just months before the elections and revolving around its charismatic leader, Volen Siderov, ATAKA adopted a rhetoric that was clearly nationalist, anti-elite, anti-West and even anti-democracy. In combining neo-nationalist and neo-totalitarian elements, ATAKA appealed to the disenfranchised across the political spectrum, but most importantly to those disillusioned with the transition and the transition elites. ATAKA has been characterized as both Left- and Right- wing (Ghodsee 2008), because of its mix of nationalism with welfare chauvinism and nostalgia for the communist past – a feature that is rather common for the East European radical right (that is not really right, but is certainly radical). Capturing almost 9% of the vote in the 2005 election, ATAKA gained 21 parliamentary seats. ATAKA's success led to the important discovery that radical right rhetoric appeals to apathetic voters (Ghodsee 2008) and hence was here to stay. ATAKA's performance in the 2006 presidential elections proved even more disconcerting, as Volen Siderov gained enough votes to go to a run-off with the incumbent president, Georgi Parvanov, the latter scoring a convincing victory in the run-off. In the first for Bulgaria European Parliament elections in 2007, ATAKA gained 14.2% of the votes sending three candidates to the European Parliament. Its support drastically increased in the 2009 national elections from 300,000 to 400,000 votes, resulting in but a marginal gain (9.36%) due to the higher voter turnout.

Until the 2014 elections, ATAKA was the fourth largest party in parliament. Its rhetoric grew even more xenophobic, openly attacking Bulgaria's relations with its Euro-Atlantic partners and Turkey, in particular, while promoting close relations with Russia. In fact, ATAKA has been one of the most ardent supporters of Russian interests in the country – a paradox that is becoming the norm for European nationalists who are increasingly relying on financial support by Russia (Front National being the most obvious example). This resonates the argument put forth in Verbeek and Zaslove most recent work (2015), illuminating the impact that radical right parties do have on a country's foreign policy. Certainly, ATAKA influenced the strategic foreign policy moves in favor of Russia made by the Oresharski cabinet in 2013-2014. The 2014 European Parliament and national elections proved disastrous for ATAKA, but only due to the appearance of another radical right party, the National Front for Salvation of Bulgaria (NSFB), which managed to steal a significant part of ATAKA's votes. As a result, both nationalist formations failed to send any candidates to the European Parliament. ATAKA's representation in the Bulgarian National Assembly, in turn, was reduced from 23 to 11 seats. Despite ATAKA's downturn, support for radical right parties has remained steady in terms of electoral votes with new radical right parties entering parliament.

The National Front for Salvation of Bulgaria (NSFB) was formed in May 2011 in the Black Sea city of Burgas, months before the combined presidential and local elections. The party was soon joined by a number of smaller nationalist formations. A typical nationalist party, NSFB uses patriotic and exclusionary rhetoric, defending Bulgarian culture, traditions, language, and sovereignty. Compared to ATAKA, NSFB has a more coherent political platform, though equally targeting ethnic minorities. Furthermore, NSFB uses less populist rhetoric compared to ATAKA and is not leader-centered, having more established power sharing structures and three co-chairs heading its executive council. It could be argued that NSFB is a splinter off from ATAKA, since NSFB's leader, Valeri Simeonov, started his political career as municipal councilor from ATAKA. Simeonov was also Siderov's best man and a director and owner of the SKAT TV station which was a main vehicle of ATAKA's propaganda and success. It is after a rift between Siderov and Simeonov that the latter decided to form another nationalist party. Relying primarily on regional support, NSFB received 2.5% in the presidential elections, coming in 5<sup>th</sup> in the first round, but Simeonov came in second in the local elections for Burgas. NSFB's performance in the 2013 parliamentary elections was even more promising, coming less than half percent short of passing the threshold. In the 2014 elections, NSFB united with another nationalist party, the Internal Macedonian

Revolutionary Organization (IMRO)<sup>3</sup>, in a coalition named, the Patriotic Front (PF). The PF gained 7.3% of the votes and 18 seats in parliament. Due to its more constructive and less populist stance, the PF was invited in the governing coalition headed by a center-right party. Although the PF holds no ministerial posts, it was given its share of governing positions, including that of deputy ministers. The PF has proven much more successful than ATAKA in gaining access to power (a success that one could argue also settles a personal score), matching the success of other European nationalists such as the Austrian Freedom Party, the Swiss People's Party or the Danish People's Party among others. This shows that although relatively new, radical right parties in Bulgaria have firm support and have become a lasting factor in Bulgarian politics.

Radical right parties in Bulgaria attract more than just the disenfranchised. ATAKA's voters are typically with high school education, under 30 or over 60, and from larger cities. NSFB, by contrast, relies mostly on pensioners and its voters are from villages and smaller cities, with high school education. NSFB attracts a number of left- as well as right-wing voters, which is less the case for ATAKA, despite the welfare chauvinism of both parties, and both parties attract swing-voters. Both NPSB and ATAKA draw support primarily from male voters, who in the case of ATAKA are twice as many as the women supporting them. Overall support for radical right parties in recent years has been about 400,000 voters, with the percentage ranging between 9-12%, depending on the voter turnout.

The radical right in Bulgaria is illustrative of the differences between radical right parties in the West and those in Eastern Europe. First, East European radical right parties are a much more recent phenomenon. If Western Europe experienced the rise of the radical right in the late 1970s and 1980s, in Eastern Europe this took place in the 1990's or 2000's for two main reasons. One-party communist rule ended in 1989, hence, any other parties, radical or not, could not appear before that. More importantly, communist parties often adopted a form of national communism that intended to channel nationalist feelings and provide regime legitimacy by filling in the ideological vacuum left by the de-legitimized communist ideology (Genov 2010). Nationalist rhetoric and ethnic homogenization policies were prevalent throughout communist rule not only in Bulgaria, but also in Romania and Poland for example. Following the collapse of communist rule, many communist successor parties, including the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), retained the nationalist overtones in their rhetoric, effectively monopolizing nationalist discourse. Thus, what we see in Bulgaria and in some other East European countries in the early years of the transition is nationalism from the Left. The Right, by contrast, stood in opposition to the former communists, taking on a liberal and cosmopolitan stance. It is only with EU negotiations and pre-accession conditionality that the BSP started moving to the center and towards social-democracy, abandoning nationalist discourse and, thus, creating political space for nationalist parties to organize. A second major difference between the radical right East and West are the reasons behind its support. If the Western radical right emerged due to erosion of traditional cleavages and pressures posed by globalization, its Eastern counterpart is a response to the transition and a function of disillusionment with democracy and the prolonged transition and a longing for an idealized communist past. Hence, East European radical right parties are often communist nostalgic. Lastly, a major difference between Eastern and Western radical right is the demonized "other". In Western Europe the "other" are the immigrants,

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<sup>3</sup> The IMRO traces its history to the 19<sup>th</sup> century independence movement and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when IMRO was engaging in various political activities, including terrorist attacks. During the communist regime IMRO was allowed to exist as a cultural organization, but resumed its political activity following the collapse of communist rule. IMRO initially takes part in the democratic opposition, Union of Democratic Forces (UDF), but later leaves the UDF to take part in a number of electoral coalitions, some of which leading to parliamentary representation. IMRO's rhetoric was less explicitly nationalist in the early years of the transition and became more and more so with the appearance of other nationalist parties in the last decade.

i.e. minorities from outside. In Eastern Europe, by contrast, the “other” is from within – the Roma, ethnic Turks in Bulgaria, ethnic Hungarians in Romania, etc. This means that exclusionary rhetoric and policies take on a different character as the minorities that need to be excluded share common citizenship, rights, and even history with the dominant majority. It is as of most recently that immigrants have become an issue in countries like Bulgaria and are being also targeted by radical right parties.

### ***Representation***

The focus and interest of this paper is the place and role of women in radical right parties. We examine both the descriptive and substantive representation of women in the radical right parties of Bulgaria. Why Bulgaria? The relevance of the Bulgarian case can be justified with at least four arguments. First, Bulgaria is a good example of the differences between the PRR family in the East and the West. Second, given that the remainder of the articles in this special issue focus on the more ‘traditionally’ exploited states of Northwestern Europe, a case from Southeastern Europe adds a very much needed variation, which contributes to a broader understanding of the phenomenon across contexts. Third, both the representation of women and our knowledge about it for the Southeast European region is very limited; hence, studying the women in Bulgaria’s radical right is a useful exercise in its own right. Finally, the Bulgarian case shows that while radical right parties may be *niche* parties, they are also very much subject to the strategic effects of electoral factors which govern party competition and the decisions of mainstream parties, witnessed in the formation of additional radical right formations which together have had a noteworthy electoral success, emphasizing once more that the PRR party family should not be studied in isolation, but rather in comparison with all other political parties.

### *Who are the women?*

Radical right parties have staged few women in the Bulgarian parliament, ranging between 3-5 for each parliament, and a total of 11 individual female MPs. The percentage of female MPs from radical right parties has ranged from 10.5% to 27.3% for individual parties and from 14.3% to 21.7% for radical right parties combined. Compared to other parties in parliament, radical right parties together with the ethnic Turkish party, MRF, are those to consistently include the fewest number of women in their parliamentary groups, apart from small ‘flash’ parties. This finding is consistent with previous research arguing that nationalist and ethnic parties include fewer women (reference). By comparison, the current ruling party GERB has had over 32% female MPs in the last two parliaments. With few exceptions, ruling parties in Bulgaria have been the ones to have the most women in parliament, reaching as high as 40%, and it is ruling center-right parties that have had the highest percentage of women ever (see, Rashkova and Zankina, 2013). The number of female MPs from radical right parties has slightly increased in the last two parliaments (from 3 to 5), as has the percentage of female MPs from radical right parties as percent from the total number of women in parliament (Table 1). Currently, the 5 radical right female MPs constitute 10.4% of all women in parliament. Hence, we can argue that in terms of descriptive representation, radical right parties remain predominantly male and women from such parties have a marginal presence in parliament.

More interesting than how many is the question of who those women are. Siderov’s practice of appointing women very much resembles that of Berlusconi, where looks and personal relationships, not skills, matter. ATAKA leads the score in appointing the youngest (and some would argue also the prettiest) female MPs in parliament with Kalina Krumova becoming an MP in 2009 at age 24, and Kalina Balabanova, entering parliament in 2013 at age 23. Certainly the most interesting case is that of Denitsa Gadzheva who entered parliament in 2007 at age 24. The girlfriend of Siderov’s step-son, Gadzheva became Siderov’s mistress causing a scandal that led to the end of Siderov’s 20-year marriage and a

divorce drama that dominated the media - a scandal that only proves the recruitment of women in ATAKA is not based on skill, but on personal (and sexual) relationships. The “gender balance” of ATAKA has been amply discussed in the yellow press, calling ATAKA’s female MP’s “Volen’s Angels”.<sup>4</sup> Gossip aside, ATAKA’s female MPs have not been praised for their political skills and are viewed with a skeptical eye at best. Siderov’s practice of appointing women has not contributed to an improved gender balance or understanding of equality but, on the contrary, has reaffirmed cultural stereotypes.

**Table 1. Women in Parliament by Party 2005-present**

	<b>2005-2009 parliament</b>		<b>2009-2013 parliament</b>		<b>2013-2014 parliament</b>		<b>Current parliament</b>	
Political party	MPs	Women MPs	MPs	Women MPs	MPs	Women MPs	MPs	Women MPs
<b>Patriotic Front</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	19	2 (10.5%)
<b>Ataka</b>	21	3 (14.3)*	21	3 (14.3%)	23	5 (21.7%)	11	3 (27.3%)
<b>BSP/Coalition</b>	82	15 (18.3)	40	7 (17.5%)	84	19 (22.6%)	39	5 (12.8%)
<b>MRF</b>	34	3 (8.8%)	38	3 (7.9%)	36	5 (13.8%)	38	4 (10.5)
<b>DSB</b>	17	4 (23.5%)						
<b>UDF</b>	20	4 (20.0%)	15	2 (13.3%)	-	-	23	1 (4.3%)
<b>Law, Order, Justice</b>	-	-	10	2 (20.0%)	-	-	-	-
<b>GERB</b>	-	-	116	<b>32 (27.6%)</b>	97	<b>32(33.0%)</b>	84	<b>30 (35.7%)</b>
<b>NDSV</b>	53	<b>20 (37.7%)</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>BPU</b>	13	1 (7.7%)	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>ABV</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	11	1 (9.1%)
<b>BBTs</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	15	2 (13.3%)
<b>Parliament total</b>		50		49		61		48
<b>Total women %</b>		20.8		20.4		25.4		20.0
<b>RR women as % of total women</b>		6.0		6.1		8.2		10.4

Source: [www.government.bg](http://www.government.bg)

\*Initially, ATAKA entered parliament with only one female MP. In the middle of the term, another female MP replaced a male MP. At the very end of the term a third female MP replaced a male MP. Thus, by the end of the term ATAKA had three female MPs.

If the representation of women from radical right parties in parliament is marginal, it is non-existent in the European parliament. ATAKA was the only Bulgarian radical right party to send members to the EU

<sup>4</sup> „Ангелите на Волен” [Volen’s Angels], Lifecafe, January 18, 2014. Available on: [http://www.webcafe.bg/id\\_1656937670\\_Angelite\\_na\\_Volen](http://www.webcafe.bg/id_1656937670_Angelite_na_Volen)

parliament and one of the few to send no women at all (Table 2). Among its total 5 MEPs (3 in 2007 and 2 in 2009), there were no women. By contrast, mainstream parties have been consistently represented by women, with percentages ranging from 25-100%. GERB's female MEPs have outnumbered male MEPs in the previous two EU parliaments. NDSV and the Blue Coalition, in turn, chose women to be their only representative in the EU parliament. The BSP has always included women among its MEP's, but not at levels as high as center-right parties. Surprisingly, the ethnic Turkish party, MRF, which has had low representation of women in the National Assembly, has been consistently represented by women in the EU parliament, with percentages ranging from 33-50%. These findings indicate that it is women from center-right parties who are most represented in the EU parliament, whereas there are no women from radical right parties. In the current EU parliament, we also witness an overall decrease in women's representation (from 47% in the previous parliament to 29.4% in the current) and a decrease in the number of women from mainstream parties. Overall, women are well-represented in the EU parliament by Bulgarian parties and at higher levels than in the National Assembly.

**Table 2. Bulgarian women in the European Parliament**

Political Party / number of women(total MEPs), % women	2007-2009	2009-2014	2014-present
ATAKA	0 (3)/0%	0 (2)/0%	-
GERB	3 (5)/60%	3 (5)/60%	2 (6)/33%
BSP	2 (5)/40%	2 (4)/50%	1 (4)/25%
MRF	2 (4)/50%	1 (3)/33%	2 (4)/50%
NDSV	1 (1)/100%	1 (2)/50%	-
Blue Coalition/RB	-	1 (1)/100%	0 (1)/0%
women/BBTs	-	-	0 (2)/0%
Total seats	18	17	17
Total women (number/%)	8/44%	8/47%	5/29.4%

Note: Authors calculations, data from the Central Electoral Commission ([www.cik.bg](http://www.cik.bg)) and media sources.

#### *How much for women?*

Setting out to study the representation and role of women in the radical right in Bulgaria, we must inevitably wonder *what do women in the Bulgaria's radical right parties do*. That is, we are interested to know whether and to what extent they represent women, what kind of parliamentary activity do they participate in and do their legislative and non-legislative actions relate to women's issues? Although the interpretation of what constitutes substantive representation of women (SRW) varies in the literature, Celis (2009) work on the subject emphasizes Pitkin's (1972) three criteria of acts, interests, and responsiveness, as the building blocks of how to conceptualize SRW. In order to understand the level of substantive representation of women in Bulgaria's radical right, we have examined the parliamentary activity of each woman MP, as well as the parties manifestos. To do that we had to come up with a conception of what comprises women's interests. And while the interpretation of what *is* in the interest of women is still a very fuzzy question, we employ a simple classification and consider anything related to women's structural social situation (from giving birth to child rearing), as well as anything reflecting women's social perspective as marginalized (thus the need to overcome any sort of discrimination and inequality related to women, children and adolescents).

Celis argues the first steps in acting for women come from approving legislation that deals with women's issues and from broadening the political agenda with women's issues, by introducing such during parliamentary debates (2009, 97). We therefore examine the parliamentary activity of radical right women in Bulgaria in the last three parliaments. Table 2 summarizes the results. The data shows that the

level of activity of women MPs is rather low. We see that the highest number of parliamentary activity registered is by an MP from ATAKA in the 2009-2013 parliament and that reflects 36 instances of parliamentary activity, only 4 of which (less than 12 *percent*) are related to women’s issues.<sup>5</sup> It has to be noted, however, that of all three parliaments studied, only the 2009-2013 parliament was one which lived its full four-year tenure. Therefore, while the number of activities on women’s issues is the highest during that parliament, the proportion of activity on women’s issues in the current parliament, which was elected in 2014, is largest. For example, MP Sultanka Petrova from the Patriotic Front has spoken 8 times in parliament during the last year in office, 2 of which have been on women’s issues, i.e. her activity is 25 *percent* related to women. A more useful and interesting information, however, is to look at what these women MPs are speaking about. Data on parliamentary debates reveals that a large part of their activity is related to the region from which they are elected – for example, six out of the fifteen instances of parliamentary activity of MP Kalina Balabanova were dealing with issues in the Northeast Region of Bulgaria from which she was elected. After that come issues affiliated with party stances - here we see statements in relation to the nationalist, anti-ethnic and anti-refugee rhetoric of the radical right parties, and issues related to the parliamentary committees of which the MPs are members. Our special interest of course is in what types of debates and questions have women’s interests been introduced. The largest portion (50 *percent*) of activity related to women’s interests in the current parliament discusses various aspects of education (funds for state schools security, education for first graders). Other issues representing women’s concerns that have been introduced during parliamentary debates are child benefits, compulsory vaccines for children, and the compliance with UN’s recommendations on child protection. The trend is similar for the previous parliaments. The short-lived 2013-2014 parliament presents no activity related to women’s interests, but the activity within the 2009-2013 parliament again reveals an emphasis on education-related issues (although here many of the questions brought up are in relation to children with special needs, orphanages, etc.). The questions of reproduction and policies to stimulate female workers to become pregnant and give birth have also been raised.

What picture does this information paint? Given that the space and focus constraints of this paper do not allow us to address women substantive representation fully, we can only draw preliminary conclusions as to the role of women in the radical right parties of Bulgaria. And while, ideally, we would have a larger cross-section (including activity of other women MPs, as well as activity of male MPs across the political spectrum) in order to compare the activity of the radical right women to that of other MPs, we can say two things thus far: one, the number of women acting for women has increased between 2009 and now, and two, the importance of women’s issues measured as the proportion of the total activity by female MPs has gone up significantly (from roughly 10 to 16 *percent*), and this can only be expected to increase further as the current parliament continues its term. Perhaps the most surprising finding remains the fact that radical right women, despite every expectation, have indeed raised questions which can be linked to the interests of women.

**Table 2. Bulgaria Radical Right Women’s Parliamentary Activity**

Politician’s name	Political Party	Committees	Parliamentary Activity (total)	Activity on Women’s Issues
<b>Current Parliament</b>				
Kalina Balabanova	Ataka	Agriculture and Food; Corruption	15	3
Magdalena Tasheva	Ataka	Energy; Overseeing the State Energy Committee	6	0

<sup>5</sup> Parliamentary activity here refers to speaking in parliament – either posing a question or making a statement on a certain issue.

Miglena Aleksandrova	Ataka	Transport; EU matters; Committee for the absorbance of EU funds	7	1
Polina Karastoyanova	Patriotic Front	Culture; Economic Policy and Tourism	0	0
Sultanka Petrova	Patriotic Front	Agriculture and Food; Healthcare	8	2
<b>2013-2014 parliament</b>				
Denitza Gadjeva	Ataka	Environment; Transport & Information Technology	2	0
Kalina Balabanova	Ataka	Agriculture and Food; Corruption	5	0
Magdalena Tasheva	Ataka	Energy; Investment projects	4	0
Margarita Nikolova	Ataka	Budget; Labour & Social Policy; Children, Youth & Sport	0	0
Miglena Aleksandrova	Ataka	Culture & Media; EU matters and control over the EU funds	7	0
<b>2009-2013 parliament</b>				
Denitza Gadjeva	Ataka	Transport & Information Technology; Internal Security & Social Order	19	0
Kalina Krumova	Ataka	EU matters and the absorbance of EU funds; Labour	31	5
Tzveta Georgieva	Ataka	Labour & Social Policy; Health	36	4
<b>Total</b>			<b>140</b>	<b>15</b>

Source: Authors coding, data from [www.parliament.bg](http://www.parliament.bg).

At the same time, the party platforms of the two parliamentary represented radical right formations do not address women's issues explicitly. The platform of the PF addresses the demographic situation in the country, but in relation to the higher birth rates of minorities and stresses the fact that social security should be given as a return for labor. The coalition argues that in order to prevent maternity turning into a well-paid business, they propose child-benefits to be limited only to the first two children and be abolished altogether after the birth of a fourth baby. Education is discussed in terms of school curriculum that nourishes patriotic values and limiting diverse curricula for the minorities. Unemployment and the income of pensioners are of great concern, but women are not singled out as more vulnerable to unemployment and lower income levels after retirement. ATAKA's platform (or rather its 20 points) similarly mentions the demographic crisis and the priority of health, education, and social policy. Its platform is more nationalist and welfare chauvinist and does not make any reference to women or women's issues. This indicates that women's issues are not a priority for either party and are subsumed into questions of nationality.

### *Conclusion*

Returning to our original questions – how radical, how much for women? - we can argue that the representation of women in radical right parties in Bulgaria is limited at best. Women from radical right parties have marginal presence in parliament, constituting a small number and percentage from their

respective parties, and a small number and percentage of women in parliament as a whole. Furthermore, women from radical right parties do not figure among Bulgarian MEP's, despite the fact that most other parties stage more women in the EU parliament compared to the National Assembly. Yet, women from radical right parties have been active on women's issues. While this initial study cannot indicate how their activity compares to that of women from other parties and to that of male MPs from their own parties, as well as in general, we see a slight increase in their activity on women's issues. However, such activity is strictly focused on health, education, and social policies, and particularly on child-rearing issues. Hence, we can argue that those women espouse an essentialist view of gender, where the woman's role as a mother and caretaker is emphasized and other roles in society are de-emphasized, even ignored. This finding resonates with research on women activism in radical right parties by Scrinzi (2014), who finds that women activists in Front National and Lega Nord similarly focus on social and family issues. At the same time, party platforms do not mention women's issues but discuss health, education, and social issues primarily in relation to ethnic minorities who pose a threat to such policies. Thus, we can say that women from radical right parties do make distinct claims on women's issues, but at the same time, such claims and such issues in general are not a priority for the parties they represent. Compared to other countries in Western Europe in particular, where there have been distinct conservative claims on women's issues, the voice of Bulgarian radical right women is much weaker and the claims they make rank lower on the priority list of their respective parties. In addition, we have a reason to think that at least some of the women in radical right parties are appointed for reasons other than their skills, which harms their ability to symbolically and substantively represent women.

In terms of future research, it is worth exploring whether the limited representation of women in radical right parties in Bulgaria is due to party age and democratic maturity and the fact that those parties are a relatively new phenomenon. Extant research shows that women's representation increases with the amount of time since a woman was first elected to parliament (Rashkova 2013). Our findings also indicate a rise in statements on women's issues made by women from radical right parties in parliamentary committees and on the parliamentary floor. Comparing the Bulgarian case to other East European countries where radical right parties have had a longer presence would help us examine this factor. Expanding the sample would also give us a more comprehensive view of the region and the role of women in radical right parties. Furthermore, this would allow us to further examine the peculiarity of East European radical right parties which espouse welfare chauvinism, nostalgia for the communist past, and a number of Left-leaning policies.

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