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National pride: Negotiating heritage, gender, and belonging in times of illiberal ethnonationalism in Bulgaria

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Abstract

This article explores the relations between cultural heritage, gender, and national belonging. Using heritage as a perspective to these dynamics in Bulgaria, I examine the interactions between the national-populist actors that challenge the core of liberal democracy, and the LGBT+ movement which counters xenophobic and exclusionary politics. In particular, the study focuses on the tenth edition of Sofia Pride march held in 2017 that instrumentalised elements of traditional masked mumming and fused them with international queer symbolics for its visual identity and communicational campaign. National folklore was thus reclaimed to performatively contest ethnonationalist and heteronormative discourses and assert a more inclusive understanding of heritage and belonging. This strategic reinterpretation of masquerade revealed some persistent societal divides which materialised through the hostile reactions of radical-right parties and other conservative circles. Following this opposition, the paper sheds light on the local entanglements with the global illiberal wave and anti-gender mobilisations, while additionally provides a more attuned contextualisation of the Bulgarian terrain. It further emphasises the empirical and epistemological implications of gendered heritage for both the establishment of and the resistance to boundaries.

Keywords: intangible heritage, masquerade, ethnonationalism, anti-gender campaigns, LGBT+ activism, Bulgaria

1 Introduction

This paper addresses the entanglements between gender, national belonging, and heritage in relation to the growth of radical-right ethnonationalism and surrounding contestation in contemporary Bulgaria. By juxtaposing various overlapping and conflicting uses of cultural heritage, the article proposes a contextualisation of global anti-gender campaigns and traces local queer resistance. This nexus is rather overlooked, yet analysing it helps go beyond the backlash narrative (Paternotte, 2020) and avoid other essentialisations. As a starting point, I situate continuous heritage negotiations within the tension between the wave of

illiberal populisms and nationalisms, and the counterforces of civic activism opposing anti-diversity discourses and promoting inclusiveness (Siim, Krasteva & Saarinen, 2018; Rygiel & Baban, 2019).

A growing amount of literature highlights the ongoing global conservative mobilisations against women's and LGBT+ rights.[1] The emergence of powerful anti-gender campaigns on different scales and their persistence worldwide indicate new transnational developments (Köttig, Bitzan & Pető, 2017; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). They use radical-right ideologies of exclusion and polarising strategies, and simultaneously provide these ideologies with further political and discursive opportunities (Norocel & Szabó, 2019). In many cases such movements reaffirm long-lasting nationalistic sentiments based on heteronormativity (Renkin, 2009). Furthermore, they by turns coalesce and collide with populist movements and politics from across the political spectrum (Moffitt, 2016), which are often accompanied by the rise of democratic illiberalism (Krastev, 2007). While celebrating 'the people' as a quasi-natural and homogeneous entity, national majorities identify and exclude those who do not belong to their 'pure' nation (Rosanvallon, 2008, pp. 265–266).

These trends are also visible in Bulgaria where mobilisation against gender equality consolidated relatively late. Like other countries in Eastern Europe, however, Bulgarian society has witnessed illiberal tendencies well before the appearance of the 'gender panic' in 2018. Along with the attacks on democratic institutions, the post-socialist space exhibits another common feature: the rise of new nationalisms which represent complicated relations to the legacy of state socialism and earlier periods, and consequently affect the framing of gender. These processes often induce impulses of retraditionalisation, which recycle 'traditional' gender roles marked by heteronormative and religious models (Morell & Gradskova, 2018, pp. 5, 11; cf. on Bulgaria Nenova, 2021). Again, the nation is crucial since it is the patriarchal family that would assure its continuation. Furthermore, dominant discourses of national identity exclude non-normative sexualities and the construction of this specific antagonism provokes greater resonance among the population (Mole, 2016). In this regard, the mainstreaming of the fluid 'traditional values' has deep socio-political implications that exceed the romanticised references to patriotism and morality (Gradskova, 2020).

In addition, critical heritage theory suggests two more analytical paths which illuminate the Bulgarian case. Populisms instrumentalise cultural heritage for the fabrication of national distinctiveness and the maintenance of strict political, territorial, and cultural boundaries. Radical-right rhetoric grounded in the 'appropriate' past, identity, memory, and values thus shapes society and stokes anxieties about the disappearance of the nation (Kaya, 2019). This perspective can be revelatory, since anti-gender protests in Bulgaria exploit folkloric elements and mobilise their symbolic power to speak in the name of 'the people' and to demarcate its enemies on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation (Petkov, 2018). That also suggests that the construction of heritage is not gender neutral. Heritage, writes Laurajane Smith (2008, p. 161), is 'gendered in the way that heritage is defined, understood and talked about and, in turn, in the way it reproduces and legitimises gender identities and the social values that underpin them.' From its peripheral position, gendered heritage inter-

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[1] The abbreviation LGBT+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, and other related communities. I refer to this acronym since Bulgarian activists use it or some of its versions (namely LGBTI which includes the intersex persons) in their official communication.

sects with wider struggles and engages with 'issues at the very core of politics, society and economics' (Wilson, 2018, p. 9). Therefore, it can elucidate how boundaries are not only imposed but also questioned and negotiated. Approaching heritage as a complex cultural process related to the politics of representation and recognition constitute it as an arena of political action where powerful messages can be articulated and contested (Smith, 2008, pp. 163, 172). Of pertinence here is the performative potential of gender (Butler, 2011) and heritage which can challenge the dominant discourse of (non-)belonging.

These premises are particularly relevant to Bulgarian mumming, which appropriations this article explores. Mummer groups, generically called 'kukeri' (Figure 1), perform annually around New Year or Lent with door-to-door masked processions in numerous, mostly rural, areas throughout the country. Often seen as remnants from ancient rituals or connected to the agrarian cycle, nowadays they are vibrant festivities that contain important social meanings, including questions of sexuality and gender. Masquerade is perceived as an archaic male initiation rite and still only a male enterprise, whereby women's growing participation sometimes faces disapproval. Beyond the patriarchal implications of such interpretations, more complex gender relations, multiple forms of masculinities and femininities, and queering of heterosexist binaries are embedded in mumming. The latter includes also cross-dressing, transvestite figures, and homoerotic performances (Creed, 2011, pp. 70–104), which express and create alternative versions of gendered heritage despite or through the national heritage canon.

This paper resonates with these assumptions to explore the dynamics of democratic illiberalism by addressing both the establishment of nativist and xenophobic ideologies, and emerging activist initiatives that counter the exclusionary concept of a homogeneous national identity. The study focuses on the tenth Sofia Pride march as an emblematic case that illuminates a plethora of adverse messages and values, situated both in the local socio-political context and in its interconnection with global anti-gender mobilisations and transnational LGBT+ advocacy. This edition of the march, held in the Bulgarian capital in 2017, has been chosen because of its promotional campaign, which was based on a traditional masquerade deemed an essential element of the 'national folklore.' The reinterpretation of heritage met the hostility of conservative circles that immediately condemned it as a 'provocation,' and the case became a highly mediatised display of conflicting positions. This example is thus approached through the dialectical function of masking as a 'technology of identity' and as means of interrogating it (Tseëlon, 2001, pp. 11–12) in order to reveal existing boundaries and the complexity, which accompanies the competing heritage reappropriations in times of intensifying anti-gender tendencies.

By examining these collisions as interactions between opposing movements (Ayoub & Chetaille, 2017) alongside their repertoires and historical references, I argue that heritage nowadays plays an increasingly important role in the Bulgarian society where it is re-negotiated as public discourse and personal experience, and that provides us with a useful lens to engage with the amplifying gender divide. In the interplay between global influences and local phenomena, gendered heritage is strategically manipulated by rival groups despite the significant visibility and power imbalances between them: while illiberal actors co-opt masquerade as ethnic property, which further serves to police 'naturalised' gender norms, LGBT+ activists stage its intrinsic queerness and transform it into a symbolic vehicle of their agency and visibility. What is hypothesised is that this constellation poses inquiries into the criteria for belonging to the Bulgarian nation by negotiating the heritage canon and its

'legitimate' content, meanings, and bearers. Consequently, I am interested in the alternative versions of heritage consciousness and the effects on living traditional practices produced by such interactions. Creative rearticulations and political instrumentalisations of masked customs that reveal performatively a spectrum of wider social issues are thus accentuated to offer additional insights on the vernacularisation of anti-gender campaigns and the formation of counterforces to illiberal discourses and policies.

Figure 1: Kukeri from the region of Yambol, Southeastern Bulgaria.
Photograph by the author, February 2017.

My discussion draws upon a variety of qualitative data gathered between 2018 and 2021. It begins with the aforementioned edition of Sofia Pride, which I have not witnessed myself, after which I focused on Bulgarian LGBT+ organisations' other heritage-related projects and public reactions to the same. The background of these activities is also related to the moral panic against gender which started meanwhile regarding the Council of Europe 'Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence' (also known as the 'Istanbul Convention'). To approach this field, I use video documentation, press releases, media reports, publications and discussions in social media and websites, participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and informal exchanges with LGBT+ activists. This study is further informed by close ethnographic attention to mumming and general heritage dynamics in the country. For the exegesis of the illiberal developments, I rely on existing literature by political and social scientists scrutinising the local situation.

The paper begins with a brief outline of expanding illiberal ethnonationalist activism in Bulgaria that also influences masquerade's heritagisation. The main empirical analysis consists of two parts. First, I present the strategic incorporation of heritage elements into the

aesthetics and publicity of Sofia Pride. Second, I examine the conservative backlash against the parade, while also acknowledging preceding illiberal transformations and posterior anti-gender mobilisations. Building on this case, the concluding section extends the discussion by contextualising the negotiations of mumming and some of the effects of these interactions.

2 Ethnonationalism and anti-gender campaigns

The national-populist shift in the Bulgarian post-socialist political scene is marked by the formation of the extreme-right party Ataka ('Attack') in 2005 and its immediate electoral successes (Smilov, 2008, p. 30; Genov, 2010; cf. on its leftist implications Ragaru, 2006). In parallel to the accession to the European Union in 2007, the new Eurosceptic party advanced a radical platform of intertwined ethnic and economic nationalism. What is important here is the application of discursive and rhetorical strategies that define the nation in monoculturalist ethnic terms, by cultivating and spreading phobias, as Sygkelos (2018) remarks. Among the principal 'menaces' articulated by Ataka, he underlines the 'national treachery and disaster' and the 'threatened national identity,' on the one hand, and the xenophobia against the substantial indigenous Turkish and Romani minorities, on the other. Despite entering the Bulgarian and the European Parliament, Ataka remained relatively marginal. Nevertheless, nativist sentiments have larger popularity than electoral support, and similar, yet more moderate, nationalist positions are normalised by 'soft' populist parties that have a decisive role in the last two decades (Smilov, 2008; Zankina, 2016, pp. 188–191). This is what Krasteva and Todorov (2020, p. 202) call mainstreaming and hegemonisation of radical right parties, whose discourse and political agenda are adopted by key political actors. Moreover, radical nationalist coalitions became part of two successive governments and were granted ministerial posts.[2]

These developments are not entirely novel for the post-1989 transition. Neo-nationalist parties emerged in early 1990s as a re-establishment of pro-fascist organisations or as a backlash to the restoration of minorities' rights, both of which had been suppressed by the socialist state (Genov, 2010, pp. 37). These extreme formations' impact was rather insignificant because of the considerably consensual direction towards liberal democracy and Euro-Atlantic structures. Yet the left–right dichotomy fuelled by the main political actors dominated the public sphere and opened—along some disappointment following the transition to a market economy—a space for populist and radical movements. According to Elitza Stanoeva (2017), this major 'divide preserved, through memory wars on the legacy of communism, the pretence of political divergences, while the two poles of the spectrum converged in their support of economic neoliberalism and social illiberalism.' The 'consolidation of a patriotic consensus based on ethnic nationalism' is what frames the public discourse, which further enhances exclusionary policies and practices (ibid.; Behrensen & Stanoeva, 2019).

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[2] The coalition Patriotic Front emerged in 2014, unifying two nationalist parties: IMRO (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation – Bulgarian National Movement) and NFSB (National Front for Salvation of Bulgaria). Then, it was part of the government coalition led by centre-right GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria). In 2016 Ataka, IMRO, and NFSB created the alliance United Patriots, which became part of the third cabinet of GERB one year later.

Political scientists affirm that this national-populist transformation has still not crystallised into an illiberal democratic project (Krasteva & Todorov, 2020, p. 192). The lack of an authoritarian consolidation, the formal existence of pluralist and democratic structures, the general pro-European orientation, and the rhetoric of stability make persistent domestic issues less problematic within the EU, especially in comparison to other member states (Rone & Junes, 2021, p. 231). Some analyses depict the situation in Bulgaria as stabilitocracy (ibid.), others as post-democracy (Krasteva & Todorov, 2020), but there is an agreement that important democratic achievements are being attacked.

Given the consistent illiberal trend, Stanoeva (2017) questions if 'transition to democracy and free market actually entail a commitment to liberalism in the sense of civic values and not just in economic terms.' This inquiry is particularly relevant to LGBT+ rights as the normalisation of homosexuality in Bulgaria was a nominal process of legislative changes, which has not necessarily considered the social opinion and which additionally allows for 'repathologisation of sexual difference' (Panayotov, 2013, p. 165). It is within the framework of this increasing illiberalism, social fragmentation, and general distrust in institutions that we should locate the anti-gender campaigns in Bulgaria. When the latter emerged, they benefited from the opportunities provided by the debates on three legal documents: the Istanbul Convention (in 2018), the 'National Strategy for the Child 2019–2030' and the 'Social Services Act' (in 2018–2019). The 'idea of the sanctity of the family and its traditional values' underpins the three interconnected cases that can be jointly interpreted as an ongoing gendered process of de-democratisation (Gueorguieva & Petrova, 2021). These mobilisations of various political, religious, and civil actors appeared rapidly and—along with their transnational networking—at a national level 'uncovered and catalysed patriarchal, sexist and homophobic attitudes and notions which might have remained passive/invisible for a long time' (Darakchi, 2019, p. 1212). Due to the strong public protest and the powerful alliance of parties from the whole political spectrum, both ruling and in opposition, and not without media support, the government did not ratify the Istanbul Convention, while the National Strategy for the Child was blocked. Moreover, in this hostile context the Constitutional Court treated the Istanbul Convention as a conspiracy aiming to introduce a 'gender ideology' and declared it to be incompatible to the Constitution (Smilova, 2020). Lastly, this discourse subverted the concept of 'gender' into a deviant 'third sex' and attributed the term itself with a pejorative connotation used (without translation) for a derogatory Othering of LGBT+ people, activists, liberal elites, etc. (ibid., p. 188; Darakchi, 2019).

These frictions based on 'politics of fear' reveal the deeper societal division between 'us' and 'them.' This divide stigmatises the 'foreign' elements (e.g., minorities, immigrants, human rights activists) and contributes to the legitimisation of an alternative illiberal project, by redefining the 'Bulgarian people.' The nation is understood as something natural and quasi-biological, the sovereignty, purity, and existence of which are threatened by an alleged coalition between local and international lobbies promoting external 'gayropean' values (Behrensen & Stanoeva, 2019). Typically, ethnic and religious minorities, especially Roma and Turks, are the enemies produced by the discourse of the ethnic and Orthodox Christian nation, which the 'patriotic' consensus over identity politics normalises. Correspondingly, LGBT+ persons are also defined as quasi-people; they are 'the ultimate terror pushing the limits of social acceptance to the extreme' (Panayotov, 2013, p. 165).

The foundations of this nationalistic rhetoric require a look into its relationship to the legacy of state socialism, even though the latter implies different premises. When the

Bulgarian Communist Party came to power in 1944, it first adopted a Soviet-internationalist stance and thus antecedent 'bourgeois chauvinism' was denounced, while ethnic and religious minorities' cultural rights were recognised. Shortly thereafter, however, those rights were not only restricted but categorically repressed during the post-Stalinist period. Ethnonationalist sentiments had been mobilised since the 1960s as a new symbolic glue supplanting the Marxist-Leninist discourse; and in the following decades they transformed into assimilation politics. It would be enough to mention the erasure of vernacular Muslim culture or the campaigns of forced Bulgarisation of Muslims' Turco-Arabic names, leading to massive displacements to Turkey. An essential feature of these developments is the co-optation of cultural heritage used for the consolidation of the socialist (monoethnic) nation, articulated through a large-scale programme that culminated with the 1300th Anniversary of the Bulgarian State (in 1981). This attempt by the regime to justify the present through the past Ivan Elenkov (2007, p. 39) terms 'historicisation of culture,' 'a formula that would mobilise and mythify discourse on national history by reformulating and representing communist symbols and mythology as a national cult that was open and included everything valuable and worthy from the thousands-year-long Bulgarian cultural tradition.' Not dissimilarly, folklore was reconceptualised ideologically: administered and purified, it became a powerful instrument for both international representations and domestic 'patriotic education.' This context encompasses also the popularisation of mumming which authorised its post-1989 transformation into a valuable resource and a vehicle of diverse messages.

3 Heritage for all?

Nowadays kukeri festivities are narrated as having a supernatural power to chase evil spirits away and invoke prosperity. Local practices are characterised by a variety of costumes, masks, bells, and choreography, but on a symbolic level they have been altogether resacralised as an embodiment of an imagined Bulgarian-ness grounded in an ethnonationalist framework. The post-socialist revitalisation of this romanticised mumming, according to Gerald Creed (2011, p. 205), is not simply a sign of neotraditionalism, but demonstrates that it has become a 'mechanism for asserting the resilience of rural residents and the value of village life,' a response to the 'insecurity and disappointment' of devastating post-1989 socio-economic repercussions. Certainly, the performative potential of masquerade provides its practitioners with an expressive tool to address contemporary issues, which is exemplified by kukeri's participation in multiple civil demonstrations. Given the demographic decline and heritage communities' fragility, however, the festivalisation and recent commodification foster mumming's popularity and simultaneously 'erode or weaken its distinctive cultural content' (ibid., p. 214). In 2015 one of the local masquerades was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which advanced the process of resacralisation in national terms. This prestigious label encourages Bulgarians' emotional attachment to mumming in a globalised world, but it also enables boundary-making by rearticulating heritage as a national property, whereby certain groups can be excluded from the category of 'authentic' owners (see Taylor, 2009). Two emblematic cases exemplify the tendency to juxtapose kukeri with what is perceived as 'foreign.' Mummers were used in 2017 by the nationalist coalition United Patriots to block the border with Turkey and stop Turks with Bulgarian citizenship coming to vote legitimately in the general elections.

Furthermore, nationalist organisations have recently organised events involving kukeri against the celebration of Halloween, attacked as a non-Bulgarian custom. Therefore, while local communities cultivate and sustain complex meanings of their living tradition, the canonisation of the latter as heritage also defines its appropriate forms and functions.

3.1 Reclaiming heritage for equality

Drawing upon kukeri's iconicity, Sofia Pride 2017 proposed performatively a new reading of heritage. The tenth anniversary march embraced kukeri stylistics and mobilised under the motto 'Let's Chase Prejudices Away.' By mobilising and modifying mumming rhetoric and symbolism, the organisers evoked the 'magic' power of masks as a means of achieving visibility and motivating a wider public debate on tolerance and prejudices. This intention seems particularly vital considering the lack of institutional support for the parade and the hostile annual counter-demonstrations that parallel it. Since its first edition in 2008 Sofia Pride has not been supported by national authorities but only by foreign ambassadors, though the number of participants has grown markedly (ca. 3000 in 2017). Hence, the queering of national heritage becomes a more radical act through which LGBT+ communities engage broader social circles.

The recuperation of mumming as a powerful symbol, initially suggested by two communications and advertising agencies working pro bono for the event and later adopted by the organising committee, was not accidental.[3] On the one hand, it has been argued that masquerade occupies a prominent place in national symbolism. On the other, the last decade has been marked by an extensive retraditionalisation that reintroduced various elements of pre-modern rural culture in multiple domains of Bulgarian public and private life—from 'traditional' weddings to politicians in 'national' costumes. The representational charge of kukeri is also explicit: masks were staged in the Bulgarian performance at the Eurovision Song Contest 2013, whereas mummer groups participated in the opening ceremony of Plovdiv European Capital of Culture 2019. Therefore, Sofia Pride entered this trend of popular heritage-remaking that further intersected with topical issues such as equality and national belonging.

To do so, the organisers bought online—as many mummers also do—three artisanal masks, one of which had a sequin embroidery of the Earth and other planets, and redecorated them in LGBT+ recognised aesthetics (Figure 2). The communication campaign was centred around the rainbow-coloured masks which, along with the slogan, appeared on the event's banners, posters, and media coverage. During a photo-session for the visual materials, the person under the mask was female, as were also the designers who remade the masks. Another contrast to the official discourse was articulated prior to the march through the popular street photography page in Facebook, 'People of Sofia.' A photograph of a seminude man wearing black jeans and a colourful mask while standing in the middle of a main street in the capital was published together with a short interview describing him as 'the one who will lead Sofia Pride.' Rather than a hiding tool, the mask was reinvented as a critique

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[3] I discuss publicly accessible materials with emphasis on official messages, which do not necessarily consider the perceptions among broader LGBT+ communities and the internal debates within the organising committee.

towards 'those who put on the mask of prejudice every day,' and simultaneously 'a call [...] for many more people to dare to be open about their non-heterosexuality and their gender identity.'[4] This is namely the first target of the performative reconfiguration of heritage and it problematises intolerant and xenophobic attitudes. To quote the mummer,

> The idea behind the transformation into a kuker, but colourful, in Pride colours, carries the message that our efforts to achieve equality must be aimed at removing internal barriers in people—prejudices. It is time for the evil spirit of homophobia and transphobia to leave Bulgarian society.

Figure 2: One of the masks used by Sofia Pride.
Photograph by Mihail Novakov, 2017. Source: Archive of Sofia Pride. Reproduced with permission

Thus, the reinvention of mumming both highlights existing boundaries and creates opportunities for visibility. It further targets the cardinal questions of equality and belonging, as the excerpt above also indicates. This position materialises through heritage: while honouring kukeri's importance and symbolic capital, Sofia Pride revisits the exclusionary concept of the nation and its culture. It contests the dominant discourse by reclaiming national heritage and redefining its boundaries, not only because of its metaphorical convenience, but also because of its mainstreaming. 'We, too, value these traditions. Why do some people think that we don't value them?!,' one member of the organising committee reflected a year after the march. The masks were used also during the event itself: one of them was worn successively by several participants while another one was installed on the stage. The organisers even tried to invite some mummer ensembles to join the parade but had no success in this initiative. Their strategy, however, performatively asserted an alternative inclu-

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4 https://facebook.com/PeopleOfSofiq/photos/a.179822025512718/757889184372663

sionary narrative: 'Tradition and diversity are not contradictory: colourful kukeri will be a symbol of tackling prejudices towards LGBTI people, demonstrating them being part of the same whole' (Statement, 2017).

This interpretation moving beyond the restricted ownership of an established symbol was confronted with numerous contrasting reactions. For instance, the photo in 'People of Sofia' gathered more than 500 comments, many of which exposing the tension between gender and tradition. I will return to the opposing responses, but here I would like to quote two opinions from this discussion that defend the appropriateness of kukeri as a queer symbol, terrain of activism, resource, and media for the expression of messages that the dominant discourse silences.[5] These reflections broaden the scope of heritage and its community: they reclaim normalcy while reminding that LGBT+ people are also heirs and bearers of national traditions, that they have always been an integral part of the national body:

> [...] being LGBT+ is normal. Let me explain it with examples: there were gay kukeri, gay pastors, gay revolutionaries, gay everything. Pride aims specifically that, to show the world that being gay is normal, and moreover that gay people are everywhere and have been everywhere.

Such positions perceive the attachment of mumming to LGBT+ causes not as an appropriation but as a recuperation of their own heritage. They rationalise the strategy of Sofia Pride as a repossession of heritage that had been seized by a nationalist discourse and deployed for propagating the divide between 'us' and 'them.' In a disidentificatory gesture (Muñoz, 1999), they refuse such reading of heritage and, through the agency of the present, rewrite it as something resilient and not fixed, from which the possibility to explore its multivocality and invest it with new meanings can arise:

> The kukeri mask is a great symbol for the Pride. Our beautiful ethnocultural symbols have been left to degrade in the paws of 'nationalists' for too long. The naked body makes the symbol our own in a wonderful way. It snatches the weapon from their hand and turns it against them. They make us seem as if we are outside the national culture, we prove to the world that we are part of it much more than they are, because we can manipulate, develop and give it a new face.

> They like the facade, the clean copies, the banal outer mask of the surrounding world, whose simplicity is almost a pale parodic copy of the real multisignificant essence, which is underneath, an essence that we can [?] under the mask of banality and take, something that the 'nationalists' are too impotent to do, because they are only a copy of an imagination which is not theirs, incapable of reworking a symbol for the purposes of its message.

> It is precisely their inability to see the truth that forces them to be mean and regressive.

> Not us, but they are the evil spirit that needs to be driven out of the new cycle of time.

Social cleavages remain visible, but the insistence on patrimonial complexity adds another aspect to this reflection. Heritage and LGBT+ activism enrich one another by mobilising masquerade's resourcefulness, which 'unsettles and disrupts the fantasy of coherent, unitary, stable, mutually exclusive divisions. It replaces clarity with ambiguity, certainty

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[5] The comments, originally in Bulgarian, belong to a public discussion under a photograph published by a public Facebook page (https://facebook.com/PeopleOfSofiq/photos/a.179822025512718/757889184372663).

with reflexivity, and phantasmic constructions of containment and closure with constructions that in reality are more messy, diverse, impure and imperfect' (Tseëlon, 2001, p. 3). This seems particularly meaningful given the traditional cross-dressing and the central figure of the transvestite bride in almost all kukeri groups, as well as abundant homoerotic implications of their performances, which are commonly disguised as tradition. Thus, Sofia Pride brought critical questions to the surface, contested the gender-neutrality of mumming and offered—not deliberately, nor comprehensively—a more explicit contextualisation of heritage within contemporary debates about gender and sexuality.

3.2 Anti-gender repertoires

Although some media reports and users' comments on the usage of mumming by Sofia Pride were rather neutral or positive, a considerable number of adverse reactions attacked LGBT+ communities and their campaign. Recurrent homophobic rhetoric was reinforced by arguments invoking heritage's sanctity. In what follows I will focus on such widely disseminated critiques, which reveal the interaction dynamics and some persistent anti-gender repertoires.

Radical-right parties were first to protest and, through their city councillors, reiterated the request to ban Sofia Pride as an 'assault against traditional Bulgarian values, morals, good manners and provocation against the family' (Topnovini.bg, 2016). In 2017, this delegitimisation was framed as an act of heritage protection and opposition to the participants in the march who had 'an identity that is no longer Bulgarian.' Ataka, then a member of the government coalition, criticised the queer interpretation of mumming against which it elaborated an essentialist and patriarchal definition:

> This year, the organisers have chosen the kukeri mask as their symbol. Thus, one of the oldest Bulgarian traditions will be disgraced in their procession. [...] This year the organisers tried to provoke to the maximum, by declaring the kuker their symbol. The kukeri, one of the oldest Bulgarian customs, related to the young man's preparation for matrimonial life, for marriage, will be used this year as a symbol of gays, lesbians, transgenders, and bisexuals. Thus, this year's procession will appropriate a purely Bulgarian custom—a symbol of the relationship between a man and a woman and will use it to unscrupulously impose its difference. (Alfa TV, 2017)

Another nationalist party and member of the ruling coalition, IMRO, also emphasised the alleged contradiction between national heritage and LGBT+ people. In line with the biological discourse, it had earlier condemned the Pride as an embodiment of 'the transmutation of blood into water, of human into hominid, whereby there is no longer a difference and a boundary between human and non-human, normal and abnormal, natural and unnatural' (Genova, 2011). Ignoring the variety of kukeri practices and the fact that—as in many countries in Eastern Europe (Renkin, 2009; Davydova, 2012)—the parade, despite growing festive features, represents a mainly political demonstration, the radical-right party attacked the event further (Contrera, 2017):

> Using a kukeri mask is a new kind of provocation. In this way they activate the line of disgracing of Bulgarian traditions and values, because even without having seen it yet, imagining it, it will be a frankly brutal demonstration. Imagine a kukeri mask worn by naked men and women wiggling their bodies on some sort of platform. This, in itself, humiliates the tradition.

These parties have always been a vocal agent of politicised homophobia and their reactions are not surprising. It is also important to mention that their rhetoric shares common grounds with existing opposition against Roma's participation in mumming groups, discredited as 'Gypsyfication' of the custom. The anti-Pride front was, however, further supported by two prominent private folkloric ensembles, which wrote open letters and sharpened the heritage argument. The *Goce Delčev* Ensemble, connected to IMRO, explicitly postulated the antagonism, and denounced the use of kukeri masks and the very parade as a 'perversion' and 'insult':

> We categorically declare that we are against the use of kukeri masks and any other Bulgarian folklore symbols during 'Sofia Pride.' The very identification of such a procession, which in its essence contradicts the traditional values and morals characteristic of Bulgaria, is unacceptable and crosses the boundaries of any tolerance. (Kanal 3, 2017)

The National Folkloric Ensemble *Bălgare* continued this discussion by qualifying the event as 'one more moral provocation, this time associated with Bulgarian cultural heritage' (ibid.). They positioned LGBT+ people out of the national body and indexed another constitutive element of anti-gender mobilisations—the neo-colonial portrayal of 'Europe' and its supposedly demoralising influence at a local level (see Korolczuk & Graff, 2018):

> We face with great indignation the fact that the LGBT community, supported by their friends in our country, decides to encroach and use in their stylistics the symbols of the Bulgarian folkloric tradition, proven over the centuries and preserved through our folkloric heritage, namely—kukeri attire and our national costumes.

> We categorically object to the use of these emblems of the primordial Bulgarian foundations in a context interpreting in an unhealthy direction their ritual and aesthetic messages, which had sustained our existence as a nation. We have a tolerant attitude towards people with non-heterosexual orientation, but we are extremely concerned about the intention of using the Bulgarian folkloric heritage in the service of a morality which is non-traditional for our national psychology, and also contrary to fundamental Christian values. (Kanal 3, 2017)

The letters were disseminated by the aforementioned political parties, which also claimed to have received similar messages by two kukeri groups. The wide circulation of these commentaries introducing a gender-specific notion of heritage illustrates the existence of a coordinated reaction and unequal power relations. As in other countries, 'radical nationalist movements have parliamentary representation, access to government, media and grassroots support' (Davydova, 2012, p. 33), unlike the LGBT+ community. Indeed, the alliance against Sofia Pride included also the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, members of the Bulgarian Socialist Party, nationalistic clubs, and numerous media. Furthermore, in proximity to the march the ultranationalist organisation 'National Resistance' held a counter-demonstration under the slogan 'Let's clean out Sofia's garbage,' the placards for which were reused in the anti-gender campaigns a few months later.

The folkloric ensembles' intervention is particularly important because it capitalises on their reputation as 'guardians of Bulgarian traditions,' tending to act as authorised spokespersons of national heritage and 'the people.' In relation to *Bălgare*'s productions, Donna Buchanan (2015, pp. 10–11) has traced a 'moral lining […] that espouses an old-fashioned perception of citizenship which is equal parts geography and subjectivity, and which is contributing to a larger emergent, nostalgic, protectionist, ultra-nationalist, and

even xenophobic discourse.' The ensembles' outrage, then, censures the Pride, which—unlike ethnonationalist instrumentalisations of kukeri—does not fit what Buchanan calls 'a moral iconography of subjectivity—a certain way of thinking about how to be Bulgarian, a certain way of *appropriate* thinking, that suggests what is a permissible and even preferred way of constituting the self, here apropos the relation of ethnicity to citizenship and belonging.' This framing legitimises the attacks against the parade and insists that institutions 'preserve the authority and the traditional purpose of the Bulgarian folk costume within the messages for which it had been created by our ancestors and with which it is today one of our most successful advertisements to the world' (Kanal 3, 2017). It further strengthens the illiberal rhetoric portraying the LGBT+ community as a foreign agent that imposes a new socio-political order.

4 Discussion and conclusion

Before concluding, I would like to further contextualise these heritage negotiations and note that the 'gender panic' affected mumming and its communities. When, in 2018, 'gender' was publicly stigmatised as 'third sex,' a kukeri group enacted this subverted meaning and personified it in a newly invented transvestite burlesque character (Figure 3).[6] Anti-gender rhetoric reshaped masquerade also by additionally discrediting traditional transvestite brides (see Creed, 2011, pp. 70–104) and by denouncing supposedly unauthentic groups' performance as a 'gay parade.' Moreover, while Sofia Pride's interpretation of kukeri was condemned, a mummer participated in a demonstration against the Istanbul Convention. Given the overlapping anti-gender and anti-refugee discourses (Behrensen & Stanoeva, 2019), and the correspondence between anti-LGBT+ and anti-Roma interpretations of mumming, this context contributes to the understanding of anti-gender campaigns' complexity, their local resources, and consequences.

In this regard, Sofia Pride could hardly alter the robust ethnonationalist repertoires, but it troubled and rendered visible their power to perpetuate the patterns of exclusion and omission. Due to the nationalistic co-optation of kukeri, LGBT+ activists engaged a disidentification process that, in Muñoz's (1999, p. 31) terms, both 'exposes the encoded message's universalising and exclusionary machinations [of mumming] and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications.' Such an uneasy heritage-recycling is also revelatory of the current development of the Bulgarian LGBT+ movement and its growing visibility. Despite existing internal discussions, the queering of folklore manifests community's efforts for political action while constructing a potentially powerful platform for self-representation and articulation of resistance. On the other hand, this performative act intertwines with global debates about nationhood and belonging among LGBT+ communities (Kulpa, 2011), which are not without controversies either. While in France the adoption of national symbols faced anti-homonationalist critiques (Puar, 2013, p. 336), in Central and Eastern Europe various initiatives, including Pride parades, fuse queer with national symbolism in different ways (Renkin, 2009; 2015; Davydova, 2012; Moss, 2016;

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[6] In a similar vein, during the carnival in the Croatian town of Imotski an effigy of a same-sex couple and their child was burned (Vladisavljevic, 2020).

Szulc, 2016; Ayoub & Chetaille, 2017; Uibo, 2019). Most of them embrace such strategies to revisit the heteronormative boundaries of nation and citizenship, to counter the accusation of foreignness, without necessarily appropriating homonationalism or exclusionary nationalism.

Figure 3: 'I am džendăr': the kukeri Gender character.
Photograph by the author, January 2018.

Sofia Pride shares these features and yet intrigues with its unequivocal deployment of kukeri as a central theme that frames the whole campaign for visibility and equal rights. This tactic reflects the elasticity and popularity of mumming but also signals the contestation—despite its slow progress—of the national intimate citizenship regime's heteronormativity (see Pisankaneva, 2006; Roseneil & Stoilova, 2011). Simultaneously, it illuminates two other important tendencies for the Bulgarian LGBT+ movement. These are the queering of national heritage and the emerging heritagisation of vernacular LGBT+ history and archive-building through diverse activist and artist projects.[7] For instance, in 2019 the masks from Sofia Pride

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[7] See also Kristian Chalakov's art that queers Balkan folklore (https://instagram.com/kristian.chalakov), or the GLAS Foundation's exhibition on homosexuality during socialism (Homosoc, n.d.).

were included in the exhibition 'Balkan Pride' showing photographs from Pride marches and counter-demonstrations in Southeastern Europe. This event, organised by the Bulgarian LGBT+ Foundation GLAS, also hosted a public discussion on traditional values and identity, and thus responded to conservative attacks. The heteronormative nationalist sanctity of heritage was contested, which raised a quintessential question: 'Hasn't every Bulgarian citizen the right of Bulgarian symbols?'[8] Even more emblematic is Sofia Queer Forum 2020, a contemporary art event, which explored the history of drag performance in Bulgaria. More interestingly, it symbolically rooted drag culture in archaic cross-dressing practices traced on the national territory and thus mobilised Bulgarian folklore. By explicitly mentioning kukeri and other traditional customs, the Forum argued that these 'rituals and their comparative consideration of today reflect not only the plasticity of human sexuality, but also the polyvalence of gender roles in society' (Sofia Queer Forum, 2020).

To conclude, this paper has outlined the national-populist context that allowed for the anti-gender discourses' emergence and proliferation before the consolidation of anti-gender campaigns in Bulgaria and their reinforcement by global illiberal impulses and networks. These entanglements, by instrumentalising cultural traditionalism and heritage symbolism, define 'the people' in narrow tribalist terms and challenge the foundations of liberal democracy. As the Istanbul Convention scandal demonstrates, this is 'not simply more populist politics but rather a retreat of the taken-for-granted values, knowledge and politics of the established liberal democratic order' (Venkov, 2020, p. 217). Furthermore, illiberal politics and xenophobic sentiments spread within liberal democracies themselves and exploit their premises (Krastev, 2007). On the other hand, these developments do not remain unchallenged since counterforces formulate strategies coupling local and international resources. Sofia Pride 2017 happened in this specific context: it continued the advocacy for equality and visibility, responded to escalating illiberal tendencies and asserted adherence to the national community. Questioning the ethnonationalist capture of heritage, LBGT+ activists explored—or rather highlighted—kukeri's polyvalence and draw from it to convey a message of resistance. While enacting traditional masquerade as a 'tool for self-definition and deconstruction' (Tseëlon, 2001, pp. 11–12), they destabilise the overdetermined boundaries of living heritage to articulate a self-representation within the national body. The kukeri's queering and the concept of belonging it expresses, however, are attacked by radical-right and conservative actors, which mix biological and heritage discourses. LGBT+ people and their interpretation of mumming are both denounced as 'unhealthy perversions' aiming to impose a foreign order (see also Renkin, 2009; 2015). Hence, negotiating ambiguous relations to national heritage as a pride reference within the existing power relations becomes crucial. The honouring of kukeri by LGBT+ activism thus requires but also permits a disidentificatory performance that defies and reworks normative meanings. In doing so, this strategy creates further possibilities, by making visible both the LGBT+ communities and some of the established boundaries they face.

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[8] One of the questions raised by Simeon Vasilev (GLAS Foundation) during the discussion 'Modern Values and Balkan Identity' held as part of the programme of 'Plovdiv 2019—European Capital of Culture.'

Acknowledgements

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