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Ilieva, Kristina ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6503-5034> (2022) Framing the "Refugee Hunter": Gender and Nationalist Perspectives on Border Vigilance in Bulgaria. *Conflict and Society*, 8 (1). pp. 90-105. doi:10.3167/arcs.2022.080106

Official URL: <https://doi.org/10.3167/arcs.2022.080106>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3167/arcs.2022.080106>

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/13532>

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Framing the “Refugee Hunter”

Gender and Nationalist Perspectives on Border Vigilance in Bulgaria

Kristina Ilieva

■ **ABSTRACT:** In this article, I explore the construction of the “refugee crisis” from the perspective of border vigilantes in Bulgaria. Drawing on ethnography in Harmanli, a border town with a refugee camp, the article explores how the identity and agency of the “refugee hunter” emerged. I argue that the gendered identity of the “refugee hunter” combines a national feminized victim and a vigilant masculinized protector. The masculinized protector patrols the Bulgarian-Turkish border in order to defend the victimized national community from the immigrant Other and the nongoverning state. The article illustrates that the refugee hunter identity has produced a new mode of hegemonic masculinity, where immigrant men and women are constructed as criminals, while men’s border patrols as heroic.

■ **KEYWORDS:** border, Harmanli, nationalism, masculinity, refugee hunter

Interviewer: You had an interesting anniversary on 14 February.

Dinko Valev: Yes, it is the anniversary of when I became famous. On 14 February [2015], I encountered refugees near the border village of Yabalkovo while exercising with my ATV because I was going to race on 3 March [National Liberation Day].

[Video footage of people arrested on the ground plays in the background]

...

Interviewer: How do you deal with being famous? You have become a star since then.

Dinko Valev: Stars only shine. I try not to stop now that I have become a star; *I have not stopped helping people*. I want there to be many others like me. Not just people who bark on the side, de facto, without taking action. *I bark because I take action*. (*No Man’s Land*, “Dinko—A Hero of Our Time,” emphasis added)

After 14 February 2015 Valev’s footage of apprehended migrants lined up and facing the ground reached national and international news. The videotaped arrest includes racist slurs and depicts a group of about 17 people made to lie facing the ground, hands behind their heads, and a baby crying in the background. Valev, who accidentally found the migrants, was described as a “migrant hunter” or “refugee hunter” and simultaneously celebrated as a “hero.” Since his first “accidental” arrest of migrants, he acquired armored vehicles and a military helicopter. For Valev and his fans, refugee “hunting” represents modern-day heroism. The TV show *No Man’s Land* episode entitled “Dinko—A Hero of Our Time” indicates the media fascination



with Valev's identity and its role in Bulgarian popular culture (Krasteva 2017). The quote illustrates how Valev presents a hegemonic position of being something more than a "star" because he "takes action." Yet, the interpersonal violence toward newcomers is a punishable offence according to the constitution as it is illegal to deprive anyone of their liberty (Cioffi 2017). The question is how something so violent, framed in terms of "hunting" human beings otherwise protected by international law, became "help" and "heroism." What social dynamics produce this type of unsanctioned violence, and what role does gender play in the construction of the vigilant hero?

In this article, I demonstrate the relationship between refugee hunting and hegemonic masculinity, and in particular, how the two reproduce each other in the context of Bulgaria. The article focuses on the masculinity exhibited by refugee "hunters" such as Dinko Valev and the status it has in the wider society. Because of the violence toward migrants, the masculinity of refugee "hunters" needs to be distilled as it takes a hegemonic position within the gender hierarchy in Bulgaria. While vigilantism has a history in many countries across Europe and North America, the "migration crisis" brought out a new surge in vigilantism (see Bjørgo and Mareš 2019b), drawing precisely on notions of forced migration as "illegal." Vigilante violence has two main modalities in Bulgaria: ad hoc and organized vigilantism (Stoynova and Dzhekova 2019). A vital characteristic of all vigilantes is the targeted attack on Other categories (Bjørgo and Mareš 2019b: 1–2). Organized vigilantism in Bulgaria includes nonpartisan far-right organizations such as the Protection of Women and the Faith, the Bulgarian National Movement Shipka, and the Vasil Levski Military Union, some of which organize voluntary military and combat trainings but mainly focus on charity work. Characteristic of these organizations is their membership base, united around a website or a Facebook group, which relies less on single figures, as is the case with ad hoc vigilantism.

As refugee hunting is a form of ad hoc vigilantism (Stoynova and Dzhekova 2019), I expand on the notion of ad hoc vigilantism through gender analysis. Drawing on a yearlong ethnographic fieldwork in a border town in Bulgaria, interviews with anti-asylum activists, and online video diaries of Dinko Valev. I analyze the practice of border patrols as a form of ad hoc vigilantism, which

generally lacks significant pre-meditation and is often a reaction to (alleged) criminal activity by representatives of a vilified community. Different activities can be subsumed under this type of vigilantism, which is not associated with stable organizations, being perpetrated by individuals, local informal groups and angry mobs, which form spontaneously. (Stoynova and Dzhekova 2019: 164)

Similar to the border vigilantism that Shapira (2019) documents on the US-Mexico border, refugee "hunters" have a negligible impact on stopping immigration through their acts. Instead, they fulfill a performative role (Diphorn and Grassiani 2019), and their performances are constitutive of new kinds of hegemonic masculinity building on old narratives of heroism blended with new anti-immigration discourses. Suvi Keskinen's concept of "white border guard masculinities" is instrumental to capture this phenomenon. White border guards are characterized by "a fixation on borders, border-control, cultural boundary work and exclusions that are treated as necessities" (2013: 227), and this is clearly evident in the Bulgarian case presented in this article. The aim of the article is to show the masculinity that refugee hunting produces and how this masculinity enables the violent border vigilance.

Studying the gender constructions by refugee "hunters" is worthwhile because they build on popular, nationalist, and militarist gender discourses to justify violence toward asylum seekers. After discussing the ethnographic research on which this article is based, I theorize how refu-

gee hunting intertwines hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005) and nationalism to construct a threatening migrant Other. This construct of the migrant Other as a security threat to the Bulgarian nation in turn functions to justify the militarized masculinity of refugee “hunters.” After exploring the nationalist discourse of masculine protection of the borders and the militarized notion of security, the article traces the relationship between refugee “hunters” and the state.

Researching Border Vigilance

My ethnographic fieldwork at the “front line” of the migration crisis (Papataxiarchis 2016) explored on the one hand how vigilante violence became accepted and normalized and, on the other, the role of gender in the legitimation of such forms of violence. From May 2017 to March 2018, I lived in the town of Harmanli, located on the border between Bulgaria and Turkey and thus since 2007 also on the border of the European Union, after Bulgaria’s accession. The field site was selected because it houses one of the biggest refugee camps in Bulgaria, the Harmanli Registration Reception Center. The town has a strong anti-migration position, and only up to 10 percent of the total population in Harmanli finds admission of asylum seekers and refugees acceptable in the town (Erolova 2019: 565). Living in Harmanli enabled me to understand the wider negative public attitudes toward migration and encounter a refugee “hunter.” I draw on three main sets of data: video diaries, in-depth interviews, and ethnographic notes. I conducted in-depth interviews with a refugee “hunter,” organizers of anti-asylum protests, focus group interviews with locals, and participant observation in settings of marginalized masculinities, such as a refugee-owned barbershop.

My first confrontation with vigilantism in Bulgaria were YouTube videos of refugee hunting in the spring of 2015. The terms refugee hunters and migrant hunters (used interchangeably) had just entered the Bulgarian vocabulary, reaching many through social media platforms. I studied the four “video diaries” that the self-proclaimed refugee “hunter” Dinko Valev created for his social media profiles. I collected most of the data at the moment of its creation. It is easier to collect data when it is publicized, as at a later point some hate-related content may be removed due to sites regulations. At present (28 August 2022) Valev has 1,583 posts on Instagram, about half of which are videos and the other half images and memes. A big part of the videos captures cars or are promotional material for his automobile company. I purposefully selected the video diaries, which are a distinct way of him recording himself. None of the video diaries of him apprehending migrants are on his Instagram; some are still available on YouTube, posted by different accounts of his followers. Valev has more than 60,000 “followers,” which is a form of power, gained after his arrests of asylum seekers. I watched his video diaries and subsequently conducted a discourse analysis guided by Foucauldian ideas of power (Butler 2009) and framing analysis (Goffman 1974).

I aimed to understand how the refugee “hunter” is harnessing his masculine identity and ideology. The publicly accessible videos on social media websites (Instagram and Facebook) are “selfies,” which enable the expression of identities visually for consumption by others (Hand 2017). People like, post, and repost the selfies in an act of endorsement of or solidarity with the constructed identity, thus shaping norms, beliefs, and attitudes (Marshall et al. 2020). All his video diaries are less than ten minutes, making them easy to watch and circulate. Very few of the video diaries document his hunt, while others include his general reflections, including responses to “common questions” about him, such as why he is wealthy. In all video diaries he appears to be speaking directly to the Bulgarian nation or to a particular group (such as those

who envy him). In some videos he is driving what appears as an expensive car, appealing to a business model of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005), and often he is at a party with some pop folk divas; in others he is a father playing with his young children, appealing to a traditional masculinity. They suggest that Valev carefully constructs his masculine identity of a young Bulgarian, heterosexual male, of a good socioeconomic standing. Videos and memes construct his potent identity alongside aspects of the Bulgarian culture, such as envy (of his success) and lack of goodhearted people (such as himself). While the search for migrants is the central theme of his heroic personality, others include instilling justice in everyday life, for example, catching people smoking weed and saving people in road accidents. The memes are mostly vulgar, sexualized, and militarized. Themes that emerge as central are his military tanks, the Bulgarian flag, and semi-naked women.

The video diaries are complemented by an in-depth interview with a refugee “hunter.” My ethnographic interview with the refugee “hunter” Peter (pseudonym) occurred spontaneously. I rang a phone number listed under a flat advertisement, which took me to a flat viewing with Peter. Peter was in his early thirties, and his muscular body was a part of the first impressions he made. He arrived to show me to a rundown house of which he was the landlord. The family occasion they were celebrating that day gave him an uplifting cheer. He was eager to ensure that he would be immediately available if I needed anything while staying in Harmanli (he had already enquired if I was on my own). He commented on how he could fix parts of the property. He continued to inquire about my research while sharing that it was his brother’s birthday. He had asked if I knew Dinko Valev.

Due to how the information found online shaped my own perception and expectations of the refugee “hunters,” I was initially confused by his openness. But the interaction with Peter occurred along well-known gendered dynamics, in which he acted like a benevolent, protective figure toward me. I assume that my positionality as a young “Bulgarian” woman facilitated building quick rapport with Peter, who was eager to “help me” with my research. I had informed him that I had returned from the UK to document the locals’ experiences of immigration. In the context in which return migration to Bulgaria is scarce, my return (albeit only for fieldwork) signified for him a solid national attachment. I recorded an interview with Peter after the flat viewing. He drove around Harmanli “to show me what is going on.” I aimed to build rapport rather than challenge his sometimes offensive perspectives. I drew on the distance from Bulgaria through my identity as a student abroad to inquire about his views on the local border and migration politics.

From his perspective, refugee “hunting” is about men gatherings. “A big group of us are gathering tonight. He will even be there.” I was not sure who “he” was. By that point, Peter had only shared that he has “personal experiences” with refugees in response to my research topic and that he had been trying to resolve the “problem” with them. I am unsure if my decreasing interest in the flat or Peter’s wish to self-identify as a refugee “hunter” led him to share: “Dinko Valev is one of my very close friends . . . Dinko comes, and he stays at my place [he lives in Yambol, a nearby town]. We often get together. We even go *around* together. We go *around in our region*. He will be at the gathering tonight. If you want, come!” (emphasis added).

Theorizing Masculinity, Nationalism and Border Vigilantism

How can we conceptualize the phenomenon of refugee hunting in a democratic European country? There is a consensus in the literature on vigilantism that nationalist discourses in various

contexts sustain its violence (Agbibo 2018; Gardenier 2018; Girling et al. 1998; Meiering et al. 2020; Palmer 2021; Ratcheva 2014). Several studies also document that vigilantes in different settings perceive the respective state in which they operate as “failed” or incapable (Koehler 2019; Saglam 2021), constructing a vacant space for their policing and sociocultural repertoires. Research has pointed to the militarization of border vigilantism, where vigilantism on national borders follows certain rituals such as military “shifts” that vigilantes take to patrol, or the division of the border zones in sections to be guarded (Shapira 2019). In the case of border vigilantism in the US, it attracts ex-military officers, alluding to the relationship between border vigilantism, nationalism, and militarism (Shapira 2019). In Europe, vigilantism has existed mainly toward minorities, and in Bulgaria in particular, the Roma community have been the target of mob violence since the fall of the Iron Curtain. To return to the focus of this special section, on what vigilantism produces, in this article I focus on the masculinities that vigilantism produces and that enable it. In this article, border vigilance includes the patrols on the physical national border by men. I aim to illustrate how the refugee hunting masculinity in Bulgaria entails a hegemonic position in the gender hierarchy. Being construed as a heroic masculinity, I link border vigilantism with nationalism and militarism.

Sarai Aharoni and Élise Féron use the concept of “gendered vigilantism” to document the relationship between gender and vigilantism. Gendered vigilantism is “a set of performances that are both producing and the product of various femininities and masculinities” (2020: 89) in the process of border control, cultural boundary work and exclusions (Keskinen 2013: 227). Through discourses about protecting the women on the streets, constructed as vulnerable, Soldiers of Odin produce a masculine identity of protectors. To sustain their masculine identity, they also produce the construct of the migrant male as a sexual predator, whom they police.

Social media has emerged as a new platform for vigilante violence (Ekman 2018; Vicenová 2020) and for glorification of the vigilante’s masculinities. Using social media research has helped understand the relationships between vigilante groups and their followers. Drawing on camera recordings of Hindustava boys, vigilantes in India, which were circulated via WhatsApp, Rahul Mukherjee (2020) argues that the boys recorded and circulated videos documenting mob violence and lynching in order to be recognized and to gain status in their community. Vigilantes’ online messages often spread disinformation or misinformation (Banaji and Bhat 2019), and in some cases, the process of making video diaries itself, including “the shaky, hand-held, ‘unedited’ videos or the shuffling noise of moving phones,” creates a sense of “authenticity,” thrill, or fear that contributes to their circulation and social resonance (Mukherjee 2020: 82). While some vigilantes may be in small groups and organize spontaneously, the recording of their violence online has made it possible to reach large numbers of people instantaneously.

The notion of hegemonic masculinity is fruitful in understanding the emergence and agency of refugee “hunters.” It explains why some men retain power over others, as is the phenomenon of refugee “hunters” in Bulgaria. Discussing the concept of hegemonic masculinity and its development in political sociology since the 1980s, Raewyn Connell and James Messerschmidt argue that hegemonic masculinity “was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it, but it was certainly normative. It embodied the most honored way of being a man; it required all other men to position themselves about it” (2005: 832). While the refugee “hunters” in Bulgaria are a small group of men, they have gained popularity, partly through video diaries or media interviews, which display their masculinities. The practices of “hunting” and the masculinity associated with it are normalized for more than half the population in Bulgaria. In 2016, an express survey on the topic of “civil arrests” of migrants crossing the Bulgarian border found that more than 50 percent of the interviewed approve them to one degree or another (Raycheva 2017; *Sofia Globe* 2016), illustrating the wide popular support of

the vigilant masculinity. Exploring the wide popular support for refugee "hunters," on 11 April 2016 the Bulgarian National Television conducted an opinion poll on its website that showed that 84 percent of the viewers supported the idea that vigilantes should be recognized and supported by the government, while only 16 percent said they were against this idea (Gotev 2016). While the refugee "hunters" are few and formed as ad hoc vigilantism, through the masculinity they perform, they have brought normative gender constructions for what it means to be a present-day male hero.

The widespread support of vigilantes can be contextualized within the relationship between nationalism and gender (Andersen and Wendt 2015; Enloe 1990; Nagel 1998). Focusing on male nationalists in colonial Algeria, international relations scholar Cynthia Enloe documents how women have been missing from the making of nations, politics, and power in general and have served merely as "symbols of the nation violated, the nation suffering, the nation reproducing itself, the nation at its purest" (1990: 87). She convincingly argues that "Algerian anticolonial nationalists used women as passive symbols to affirm their masculine national identity" (Andersen and Wendt 2015: 1).

Bulgarian nationalism since its inception is constructed around victimhood. Nations are "imagined political communities" (Anderson 2006), and the historian Maria Todorova identified that the emergence of Bulgarian nationalism is based on "an intensive defensiveness, a feeling of humiliation, and a struggle against an inferiority complex" (1995: 75), where the Bulgarian nation is a feminized victim. This victimized notion of Bulgarians as ridiculed, mocked, and overpowered is an internalized feature of early Bulgarian nationalism still visible today (Ratcheva 2014; Todorova 1995). The national revival period from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries aimed to instill Bulgarian national consciousness, imagined as dormant during the governance of the Ottoman Empire. Among the key revivalists was Father Paisii of Hilendar credited with writing the first "Bulgarian" history book in 1762. The monk Paisii gathered about 40 materials to compose a history of "the Bulgarians." Aiming to inspire a national liberation from the Ottoman Empire, he wrote, "read and know so that you would not be mocked and judged by other tribes and peoples" because he endeavored to make people "talk and be proud of your kinship and language" (Hilendarski [1762] 2013:11). Bulgarian national identity constructed by the "fathers of the nation," such as Paisii, is of a victim. Other discourses of the victimized Mother Bulgaria are the "Bulgarian" lands that fell outside the contours of the map during the drawing of the present-day national borders (the period between the 1878 treaties of San Stefano and Berlin and the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913). As Joane Nagel (1998: 249) argues, "the culture and ideology of hegemonic masculinity go hand in hand with the culture and ideology of hegemonic nationalism."

Men have a particular role in nationalist discourses as heroes saving Mother Bulgaria. The masculinity of national heroes or liberation fighters naturalizes and sustains nationalist, masculinist, and militarist discourses (Efthymiou 2019). Male national heroes such as Vasil Levski (1837–1873) are intertwined with the imagination of the nation as a political community (Anderson 2006). National history and myths are based on national liberation movements and "national freedom fighters" who fought the Ottoman Empire. Such male heroes are part of the national consciousness in creating, protecting, and fortifying the national borders against "the enemies." Levski as a monk represents a "spiritual man" embodying nonviolent masculinity who became the "revolutionary" man (Detchev 2006) to unify the country and fight the Ottoman Empire. The imagined "enemy" is also key to the masculine performances in the name of the nation. A symbolic aspect of Levski's masculinity was that Ottoman military men chased him because of his "national liberation" activities. In response to this military threat, the ideal of masculinity embodied the ultimate sacrifice for the nation, granting him the national hero

status. In popular memory, Levski's idealized masculine sacrifice for the nation instilled in his claim: "If I win—I win for all our people; if I lose—I lose only myself."

Militarized Masculinities: The Refugee "Hunter" Model

Border vigilance is embedded in the securitization of immigration (Karamanidou 2015), treating migrants as a security threat. Since Bulgaria's accession to the EU in 2007, its southern national border with Turkey transformed into a border of the EU. Since 2013, the Bulgarian state's methods of preventing asylum seekers from entering included building a 130-kilometer barbed wire on its national border with Turkey, deploying military guards and technology there, and stationing gendarmerie patrols in border towns. Between October and November 2013, the state deployed an additional 1,400 police to the border, when the total number of asylum applications for the year was 7,144 (ECRE 2014).

Strategies of militarism include amending the 2009 Law on Defense and Armed Forces to extend the powers of the army during peace time. On February 2016, the Members of Parliament unanimously backed a new measure that allowed the military to patrol the border on par with border police (Cheresheva 2016b). In effect, the militarization of the national border during peacetime constructs asylum seekers as a warlike enemy. The securitization of migration thus manifests in militarist fortressing of the national border.

The EU border police Frontex contributes to the securitization of asylum and migration in Europe through its "speech acts" (Léonard 2010) and intensified militarist practices to contain the "crisis" (Léonard and Kaunert 2020). Following the EU-Turkey agreement, which placed further pressure to fortress Bulgaria's southern border, the agency had its number of employees expanded, and Frontex personnel stationed in border regions such as Bulgaria (Aas and Gundhus 2015). Frontex and the Bulgarian state's fortressing strategies and adjacent anti-immigrant rhetoric construct a militarized border space of "fighting" illegal immigration.

EU policies in general are aimed "at protection *from* asylum seekers, rather than at protection *of* asylum seekers" (Nancheva 2016: 550). A vast body of research has documented a moral panic from immigration (e.g., Pasamonik 2017; Sedláková 2017) as discourses of immigration and terrorism are intertwined (Cap 2018; Vachudova 2020). Refugee hunting is underpinned by prejudice and stereotypes that equate all refugees with Muslims and all Muslims with terrorists" (Cheshmedzhieva-Stoycheva 2017: 191). The militarized masculinities against immigration rest on a discourse of an existential threat from Muslim men. The militarized masculinities of refugee "hunters" are also predicated on a securitized construct of immigrants as terrorists. Valev predicts:

Even though people may think this is a joke and these refugees are not a threat to Bulgaria, Europe, and the community, the situation is becoming very serious. There will be times, remember this when it will be a horror in Bulgaria. It will be full with these Gypsies, who believe in Allah blah blah, and whatever he tells them, this is what they will execute. (bTV 2016)

The quote illustrates that the security threat is imagined as against the nation and against Europe. The construct of immigration as a national and European threat is elevated into matters of physical and ontological security (Rumelili 2015). In Bulgaria, the securitization of immigration intertwines with a threat from minorities such as the Roma community constructed as criminals and targeted by ad hoc vigilantes since the early 1990s (Stoyanova and Dzhekova 2019).

Vigilante masculinist violence emerges in the context of ongoing militarization on national borders (Shapira 2019). The militarization of the refugee “hunters” is evident in their military vehicles. Valev, for example, owns military tanks. The hunting is aided by all-terrain vehicles, dogs, horses, military-style vehicles, and a helicopter (Brunwasser 2016; Cheresheva 2016a; Cioffi 2017; Tomlinson 2016). Often, they carry weapons, and whether these are air or hunting firearms is unknown (Shikerova 2021). In the context of hunting undocumented persons on the US-Mexico border, Robert Castro argues that the masculinity of the “hunters” is ritualized. As a fraternal organization, “recruits are also ritualizing their masculinity while tracking and capturing undocumented persons” (2008: 8). Valev and other refugee “hunters” have requested the increase of civilian border patrols, the legalization of hunts, and arrests of people on the border.

The refugee “hunter”—a man, dressed in black or military hunting clothing—exhibits machismo via a hypermasculine body and apprehends migrants “with bare hands” (bTV Novinite 2016). In celebration of their “success,” refugee “hunters” upload images and videos of the hunted humans on social media. The “trophy” of the hunt are usually photographed captured on the ground, powerless. The recordings of the glorified hunt and the capturing of human beings have “created a new ‘genre,’ video selfies of violent Othering on Facebook” (Krasteva 2017: 678).

The masculinity of refugee “hunters” is based on predatory instincts. Valev describes the sexual pleasure of hunting people, as he justifies his hunts “because they excite me [*shot me kefi*].” The rituals of refugee hunting masculinity in Bulgaria include video-recording the domination of migrants without their consent. The “hunters” position themselves as dominant and triumphant males in their activities while the “enemies” they dominate are silenced. The “likes” from the online witnesses of the acts of domination add a sexualized aspect to the video recordings.

Defending the National Border

A video diary of Dinko Valev begins: “I am walking today because the weather is very nice, between hot and dry, on the Bulgarian-Turkish border, and what should I see . . .” The footage, recorded on a mobile phone, lasting just over four minutes, was uploaded on 27 March 2017 to a YouTube account.¹ Valev’s reportage claimed to identify that there are “illegal immigrants” crossing the border, contrary to “what others say,” presumably state officials. As he speaks, we see four people standing, made to line up next to each other. He evaluates that these four men are in “apparently good condition,” as if people seeking asylum need to appear unwell. In English, he shouts to them, “Where you [*sic*] from?” After a moment of silence, the man closest to the camera replies, “From Afghanistan.” Valev continues his investigation by asking, “Where you go? Where you go [*sic*]?” The same man replies quietly, “Sofia.” The questioning continues in English. “You have some knife [*sic*], guns?” Next, he snaps at them in Bulgarian and then proceeds in English, “Go on the floor, lay down. Go in [*sic*] floor, hey!” The men, wearing hoods with their backs to the camera, follow the threatening order silently and lie down on the ground one by one, while Valev searches them.

As Valev continues filming his search, he explains the reasons for his investigation to them in Bulgarian. “I am searching because you may carry anything. I need to see if you have any knives, so you do not stab me in the back. Because I got my hand stabbed one time. It is not my job, but where are the people who should be doing it?” He assumes the role of border police, which he deems as absent. Valev finds three metal objects after searching the four men lying face down on the ground. His ironic comment “They were not dangerous, were they?” invites support for the belief that migrants are threatening, as if he has just located criminals possessing illegal fire-

arms. The rhetorical question invites feelings of existential threat and justifies a reaction to border crossings' perceived deviance. Then, he notices that one of the metal objects has been bent around, "it was how they cut the wire." He proclaims, "The government may not like what they see, but the Bulgarian nation needs to know the truth." Reaffirming the notion that he is doing a service to the nation, he imagines the nation as victimized. The truth is concealed from the Bulgarian nation: dangerous men are crossing the border. Thus, he "heroically" saved the oblivious Bulgarian people by exposing "the truth" via his video diary. The masculinity he exhibits subjugates migrant masculinities as a heroic act. The refugee "hunter" masculinity is hegemonic masculinity intertwined with the defense of a victimized notion of the Bulgarian nation.

His audience alternates ambiguously between the Bulgarian nation, for whom he records the video, and the subject of his vigilance, the migrant men. Continuing to speak in Bulgarian, he justifies his acts: "I may be someone who for you is not good, but for many others I am good. Everyone chooses their path. I do not steal or kill, and I am not doing anything wrong." This recording excerpt tries to denounce him from the image of a "thug" who steals. Importantly, it also suggests that the refugee "hunter" identity is his chosen path, highlighting how it intertwines with his life choices. He sees himself as "good" and a hero for "many others," personified in his pushback of the men, "Go back, Turkey, OK! Go back Turkey, [*sic*] OK!" He then starts talking in Bulgarian again, documenting the reasons for his actions to the Bulgarian people:

I will put them in the van and send them back to Turkey. I have not taken them for money, as others do. I have money because I have a job, and I have brains. I know how to make money. I will not call the police because they made me look guilty the last time I called them. I will send them back to Turkey so they never set foot here again.

Refugee hunting has an end goal to send the apprehended people "back." In the postcommunist context of Bulgaria, characterized by poverty and corruption, his explanation of the hunting procedure appears transparent and honest. He also projects masculinity of a successful businessman to be admired. His relationship with the police indicates he is aware of the legal requirement to call the police yet is also powerful enough to denounce them. Then, he speaks in English directly to his victims again, "You must say this, your cousin, you mother, and you [*sic*] father—what happened in Bulgaria. You must say this. Go back to Turkey, no more Bulgaria" protecting of the Bulgarian nation. When I accessed these four minutes and 12 seconds of film, it was "liked" by 312 people, "disliked" by 23 people, and viewed 12,497 times, which is indicative of its wide accessibility and the mobile witnesses of the masculinist violence.

The video diary maps a gender hierarchy, including the refugee "hunter," the state, the Bulgarian nation, and the subjugated migrants. In this video diary, Valev presents himself as doing a service to the Bulgarian people, which the state (represented by border police) is not able to do. The refugee "hunter" masculinity is higher than that of the state and the police. The Bulgarian nation is imagined as a victim, left alone in the unknown, while dangerous men cross its borders. In the gender hierarchy, Valev thus emerges as a savior of the feminized Bulgarian nation, which permits him to break the law. Despite knowing that the police "will make him look guilty," he still took away the rights of people seeking asylum by pushing them back to Turkey. He is proud of his defiance of the authority, constructs the border police as "not being there," and claims they should act similarly to how he does. He builds his actions as just, especially in what is seen as the absence of a productive police presence. His interpretation is that while some may not understand him, many will think that what he does is for the good of the Bulgarian people. Thus, he constructs "the Bulgarian people" as accepting his masculinity and as being his allies. The search practice is intense and violent, subjugating the masculinities of the migrants in the name of the nation. Gender-based interpretive frameworks are essential in

constructing local (feminine) vulnerability and heroic (masculine) reactions encapsulated in the discourse around migration.

The masculinity of refugee “hunters” such as Dinko Valev has a broader social impact in setting masculine ideals. Being an unknown white man working in a garage in Yambol, Valev has received much media attention with interviews and invitations to talk shows and 60,000 “followers” on social media platforms like Facebook (Lozanova et al. 2017: 27). The BBC declared that in Bulgaria, he was a “national celebrity” and a “superhero” (Brunwasser 2016). The emergence of the noun *dinkovtsi*, as a derivative of the Valev’s first name, is an example. As one of the talk shows aired on the third primary channel in Bulgaria, Nova TV, described it, his name has become a noun (Nova 2016). Dinkovtsi are men and boys modeling Valev, which suggests a closeness between Valev’s masculinity to those who identify as dinkovtsi, even if they do not patrol the border. Dinkovtsi refers to men and women who share the masculinist interpretations for the need to “defend” the Bulgarian nation from “illegal refugees.” My interlocutors, working- or middle-class citizens, often used the noun, some self-identifying as dinkovtsi. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005:831) emphasize the Gramscian notion of hegemony “focuses on the dynamics of structural change involving the mobilization and demobilization of whole classes.” The emergence of refugee “hunters” is not simply about cultural control but is linked to the mobilization against immigration and the historical change in the production of the immigrant as a national enemy in the context on postsocialist Bulgaria, through ideas about masculinities.

Refugee “hunters” construct themselves as fighting (an imagined) national enemy by drawing on specific historical figures: liberation fighters. Refugee “hunters” idolize national liberation heroes such as Vasil Levski, of whom Valev has a portrait in his home. In an interview, asked if he feels threatened by migrants, Valev claims that the Taliban have threatened to kill him over the phone and in a video. He frames his response alongside Levski’s “heroic” claim: “If I die, I will die for my motherland. I will not die, for example, because I beat up someone, or someone kills someone, or for selling drugs. I will die for something dignified” (bTV 2016). Valev invokes a feminized notion of the nation and a hypermasculinized notion of male refugee “hunters.” Refugee hunting shapes modern patriotism as militarized violence against people seeking refuge and has penetrated the broader social fabric as the norm instead of as belonging to the established far-right scene in Bulgaria (Stoynova and Dzhékova 2019: 167–169). Refugee hunting has also penetrated the broader social norm of masculine performances as the “hunter” masculinity intersects with heroism and national security. Masculinity, nationalism, and militarism intersect in ways that co-constitute each other and reproduce each other in different political contexts or events (Efthymiou 2019).

State-sponsored Vigilantism?

The involvement of the state authority and support for refugee hunting is indicative of the permeability of refugee hunting masculinity in European society. Refugee hunting is on behalf of Bulgaria and Europe, the latter imagined as “geopolitics of mobility,” a space of free movement without internal borders (Verstraete 2003). This European identity positions the countries on the borders of Europe as protectors against immigration, which in turn is constructed as specific racial and gendered subjects.

Refugee hunting is a violent expression of hypermasculinity unsanctioned by the government. The awareness of citizen arrests, available via video diaries, and the lack of prosecutions of these illegal activities indicate a complicity position of the Bulgarian government. Bulgaria

violates the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) Article Five and its domestic law (Cioffi 2017: 1284). As a member of the EU and the Council of Europe and a signatory to the ECHR, the EU has a responsibility (1300–1302). On the one hand, the EU is responsible for the refugee-hunting phenomenon, for funding the fortressing of its southern border, and on the other, for failing to protect human rights. Rather than interpreting citizen arrests as individual cases, they need to be contextualized in the state response to such arrests. The lack of prosecution of citizen arrests means that the Bulgarian state has allowed refugee “hunters” to escape punishment in what Jeremiah Cioffi describes as a “government-sanctioned xenophobia” (1285).

The backing of the state authority of refugee hunting is evident in then Prime Minister Boyko Borisov’s immediate endorsement of Valev’s actions and those of others who captured people seeking refuge (Cheresheva 2016a). In 2016, Borisov said, “any help for the police, the Border Police, and the state is welcome. I thanked [the vigilantes] . . . [and] sent the Director of the Border Police to meet with them so that they could coordinate their information” (cited in Shikerova 2021). This public announcement reflects the national security power hierarchy in the context of border vigilantism. The former prime minister ascribes higher power to vigilantes than the Director of Border Police, whom he made to meet with vigilantes rather than vice versa. In addition, the “coordination of information” suggests that vigilantes should report to Border Police and, importantly, Border Police should keep them informed. By congratulating the refugee “hunters,” state representatives confirm the lack of capabilities of functioning border police, thus following masculinist views that Bulgaria needs defense that the official military and police forces cannot provide. While Valev enjoyed widespread popularity, as evidenced by the number of his “followers” on social media, some commentators describe him and his friends as “thugs.” After widespread international criticism, Borisov backtracked on the comments and said, “citizens should not exceed their rights.”

Nonetheless, recent informal cooperation between the Bulgarian police and refugee “hunters” such as Dinko Valev has been documented. Writing for Radio Free Europe, Genka Shikerova (2021) compares a police announcement on capturing immigrants with the most recent video diary of Valev. On 17 November 2021, the Ministry of Interior’s news website reported that a “border police squad” had caught 20 illegal immigrants and men in the border region of Elhovo (MVR 2021). On the same day, Valev also posted a video diary that records his arrest of 20 men made to lay facing the ground. Shikerova’s (2021) investigation leads to a confirmation from Border Police that Valev is indeed on the scene with the “border police squad.” Knowing that Valev “caught” the people and recorded it on video, Border Police did not arrest him. Instead, his name became obscured and replaced with “border police squad.” The traditional monopoly of violence, which has been legitimate in the state, also transferred to refugee “hunters” to protect the national border and Bulgarian national identity.

Vigilant citizens engage in public reporting (Yuval-Davis et al. 2019), normalizing and glorifying collective civilian violence. While vigilantism in Bulgaria gained prominence with the brutality of “refugee hunting” repertoires (Krasteva 2020; Stoynova and Dzhhekova 2019), the violence of hunting refugees is spread to citizens in the everyday milieu, especially in border regions and around refugee communities and camps (Gardenier 2018). Ordinary citizens such as the “hunters” subsume a modality of policing in their encounters with migrants, while state officials, police, and detention managers validate it. Citizens who patrol the border create a border-order-other (Van Houtum and Van Naerssen 2002) via state awards recognizing vigilantes’ “work.” Due to the relationship between citizens and state agencies, border vigilantism is a part of a hostile environment (Goodfellow 2020). The relationship between refugee “hunters”

and the state institutions produces forms of social control and collective violence (de la Roche 1996; Yuval-Davis et al. 2019). The state and its institutions support the ideal of masculinity, presented in this article as refugee “hunters” masculinity.

The state support for vigilantes is embedded in a broader culture of pushbacks of people seeking asylum. The European Court of Human Rights has already ruled that the Bulgarian government violates the ECHR because of the pushbacks on the Bulgarian-Turkish border. In 2016 the state, represented by Border Police, pushed back a Turkish journalist without assessing his needs or allowing him to challenge his removal. At the end of 2021, the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, a human rights organization, reported 2,513 pushbacks from Bulgaria, involving 44,988 people (HRW 2022). The widespread state practices of pushbacks on the border are intertwined with border vigilance of citizens. This relationship is crystalized in Valev’s violent call to his captives to “go back.”

Conclusion

The discourses on the EU migration “crisis” shaped grassroots politics of ordinary people who respond to perceptions of “illegal immigrants” posing a threat to their communities (Benček and Strasheim 2016; Forest 2015; Grillo 2005). Knowledge about masculinities is relevant to the prevention of masculine violence, such as in the context of “citizen arrests” toward asylum seekers. Gender constructions are at the heart of vigilantism and, in the case of ad hoc vigilantism, can produce a particular hegemonic masculinity of the “white border guard” (Keskinen 2013). The article demonstrated the role of gender in justifying refugee hunting, policing tactics, and violence against migrants. The vigilante identity in Bulgaria produces (1) a national feminized victim needing defense from (2) the radicalized male refugee Other and (3) a masculinized protector—refugee “hunters.” The refugee “hunter” masculinity is embedded in the wider context of securitization of asylum and immigration in Europe. The strong securitization discourse of immigration, characteristic of fears, existential threat, and militarism is symbiotic with the nationalist masculinity of refugee “hunters.” Building on the male “national freedom fighters,” refugee “hunters” construct new forms of nationalist masculinity positioned against asylum. The wide network of “followers” of these modern national heroes, coupled with their unsanctioned masculinity and supported by state institutions such as Border Police, have contributed to the refugee “hunting” masculinity’s hegemonic position, expressed in the wide popular support for vigilantes and against asylum seekers (Kyuchukov 2016).

■ ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The research for this article has been funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

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NOTES

All translations from Bulgarian are my own unless otherwise indicated.

1. The YouTube account that posted Dinko Valev's video is "Always for Macedonia" (*Se za Makedonija*), which posted videos about Macedonian and Bulgarian nationalist politics. As of 17 October 2020, the channel had 1,230 subscribers, while the video with Valev on the border had 12,497 views. All but 3 of the 25 comments under the video, entitled "Dinko Valev—Bulgarian Hero," are cheering for Valev, congratulating him, calling him a champion, and a few comments saying, "Kill them, Dinko" (*Trepigi Dinko*). The comments that are not cheering refer to the video as "fake" and a "theater" organized by Valev, thus denying the four men's subjugation.

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