

**MAINSTREAMING PORNO-CHIC:  
MEDIA PORTRAYALS OF SEXUALITY, YOUNG WOMEN'S PERCEPTIONS OF IT,  
AND SEX TRAFFICKING IN BULGARIA**

Executive summary

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### ***Introduction and background***

During the years of the Cold War, propaganda by both sides of the divide was waged on every front—from movies and posters of booming industry projects and space explorations to social critiques expressed in music, literature, and other visual arts—the political world abounded in examples of ideologically charged images and symbols. Among those, images of communist women, dressed in white lab coats, wearing construction hats, and flying planes, while lacking any sense of sexuality were easily among the most visually recognizable and ubiquitous symbols of communism in the West.

Today, Eastern European women are anything but the asexual heroines of the communist past. In their attempt to violently break away from an oppressive past, the women of Eastern Europe have adopted a new, liberated identity, which has created its own ironic symbolism—they are fashion models, singers, tennis players, beaming with sexuality, offering their bodies for the gaze of the spectator. And while this trend of exaggerated sexuality is certainly not new—in fact, media scholars have coined the term “porno chic” to refer to the advertisers’ beliefs that they have to produce even more arresting and stimulating images in order to get consumers’ attention in a crowded, sign-saturated mediascape—it is a particularly fast and glaringly “normalized” trend in the visual space of Eastern Europe with potentially, dangerous consequences.

The danger in this trend is when “porno chic” not only becomes the norm of media presentations, but also becomes the ubiquitous social norm accepted among young Eastern European women, whose greatest challenge is finding a new economic and political positioning in the social system of the post-communist transition. Today, it is more than evident that gender identities in the countries under post-communist transition are in a state of flux. In the atmosphere of confusion and political disarray which characterized the collapse of the communist system, gender identities got caught in a crisis. This identity crisis, while clearly serving as a new source of empowered sexuality, is also an indication of the consequences of the penetration of global capitalism in the region. With the growing influx of capital in the media and with multinational corporate investment in advertising, women became the prime target as both models and consumers of goods advertised in a hypersexual fashion. In fact, scholars argue that along the sweeping media reform which opened Eastern Europe to the West, providing millions in market shares and advertising revenues, prostitution and the sex trade can perhaps be defined as the other economic “boom” that has brought Eastern Europe into the global economy (Kligman & Limoncelli, 2005).

These parallel economic and cultural developments are certainly not coincidental and have resulted in a major shift in gendered identities of the transitions. One such shift has been the dramatic growth of sex trafficking of Eastern European women and of other women through Eastern Europe. Today it is hard to argue that the causes of sex trafficking in Eastern Europe have nothing to do with the failure of the economic and political structure in the East. But as Kligman and Limoncelli (2005) explained, there are other reasons which tie directly to the sex trade in Eastern Europe—among those, pornographic film producers and magazines publishers as well as international sex tourism agencies all flocked to the former socialist states where there was then little threat of institutional regulation and enforcement. And while the nations of the former Soviet bloc have worked and continue to work towards establishing frameworks to control these trends, including introducing new legal definitions of pornography and regulating sexually explicit materials in the media, the progress made dwarfs in comparison to the challenges posed by the economic benefits of the “sex industries.”

To complicate matters further, Bulgaria’s newly established, hugely profitable and very loosely regulated advertising industry has become a target for criticisms from the European Union Commission, of which Bulgaria is a member since joining the EU in 2007. In this connection, it must be noted that the unbridled exploitive images of sexuality in advertising has been met with criticism by the European parliament, which recently issued a scathing report on negative stereotyping in advertising, targeting particularly Bulgaria’s alcohol producers who have adopted the use of sexuality as a mainstream strategy of selling their product line (Todorova, 2008). Now that Bulgaria is a member of the European Union, along with most other post-communist states, it is expected to adhere to the EU directives, which require all EU member states to reassess their advertising industry regulatory bodies to include clearly stated clauses that will prevent campaigns from using sexual insults or denigrating presentations of men and women, which also associate alcohol consumption with business, social, or sexual success (Todorova, 2008).

### ***Research Objectives and Methodology***

In view of these complex regional dynamics, this research sets two distinct goals: using Bulgaria as a case study<sup>1</sup>, first, to study the portrayals of women and their sexuality in advertising and other media and second, to examine what exact steps have the Bulgarian authorities taken in order to

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<sup>1</sup>Although according to the latest United Nations statistics, Bulgaria has seen a decline in the number of Bulgarian women who are trafficked abroad, it was selected as a case study because it continues to serve as a strategic crossroad in the trafficking of women from other geographical regions, such as the former Soviet states, into Western Europe and the United States.

introduce self-regulation in the advertising industry which will oversee and monitor the presence of sexually suggestive and denigrating portrayals of women (and men) in the media. To accomplish these goals, this research plan approaches the problem from a theoretical perspective which is not used frequently to address the issue of sex trafficking in Eastern Europe since most such studies focus on the role of organized crime groups and the corrupt political structures that support them. Instead, this research follows the framework first set forth by Taylor and Jamieson (1999), who argued that the increase sex trade of women across borders can be seen as a direct consequence of the mainstreaming of market culture, and more specifically, in the increased focus on sexualized content in popular media. It is important to note that while this research does not attempt to establish a direct relationship between the rise of popularity of media which stresses formulaic, hyper-sexual content (most of which is based, loosely or directly, on popular media content imported from the West), it is nonetheless going to extrapolate on the relationship between depictions of female sexuality as popularized in advertising and other media outlets, and its potential effect to “normalize” denigrating and exploitive treatment of women, further setting the need to introduce and adhere to solid self-regulation principles in the advertising industry.

My proposed methodology is two pronged. The first prong is a systematic examination and documentation of the presence of sexualized images of women in popular media, and specifically, in advertising. The second prong involves a policy analysis of existing legal and regulatory frameworks currently in place to oversee the advertising business and sexually exploitive (and pornographic) imagery of women, supported by in-depth interviews with members of media regulatory bodies and professional organizations as well as non-profit organizations focusing on the status of women in Bulgaria, whose line of work directly connects to the sexual exploitation and trafficking of women. The first prong of my research has resulted in both quantitative and qualitative analysis of media content, by closely studying advertising at large (both print and TV) as well as the advertising industry in general. To complete the policy analysis, I plan to travel to the capital of Bulgaria, Sofia, where I will visit the Council for Electronic Media, the Bulgarian Public Council for Self-Regulation in Advertising (a newly established body in charge of promoting self-regulation in advertising) as well as the Bulgarian Association of Producers, Importers and Traders of Spirit Drinks which has been directly involved in a number of disputes over several sexually provocative advertising campaigns. The trends of using sex as a selling strategy for virtually any product clearly reflect the lack of regulatory environment which oversees the appropriateness of pairing sexuality with products, particularly so for

alcohol. In fact, it must be noted that the Bulgarian Parliament only banned direct advertising of liquor in 2005, passing changes to the Health Act, which allowed for liquor to be advertising only as a label, and not for its actual use. Curiously, according to the new provisions, the use of alcohol in ads was not to be associated in any way with sports achievements, while at the same time, no provision were included concerning associations of alcohol with sexually explicit materials, particularly those that might exploit or feature pornographic depictions of women. As part of the interview process, I plan to visit the Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation, The Women's Alliance for Development and the Bulgarian Gender Equality Coalition, who are actively pursuing social and cultural policy changes to support the progress of women in Bulgaria. While these NGOs do not directly work with media, I think it is important to study how women's social organizations view the trend of "hypersexualization" which has nestled itself in all forms of media content and particularly so, in advertising. In the process of the interviews, I am going to ask both members of the media regulatory bodies and the women's NGOs about specific advertising campaigns that have engaged in blatant sexual provocation in order to study their responses and opinions of the social effects of exploiting hyper-sexuality to sell products. Finally, I will also ask them whether they see that using "sex" as the norm in advertising in some way might be interpreted by media audience members—young women in particular—as a legitimate and easily accessible way to generate income and therefore, serve as a "gateway" to creating an environment rife for, and accommodating of, sex-trafficking and other sex-industries.

#### ***Preparatory Work Completed and Preliminary Policy Conclusions***

As part of the first goal of this research proposal, I have studied extensively the hypersexualization of women in advertising and have arrived at the conclusion that while exploitive in nature, the transformation of the portrayals of Bulgarian women into over-sexed, hyper-feminine bodies can be interpreted as producing a feeling of empowerment, a feeling of having set out on the road of a different kind of life, a life devout of hardships and struggles of the likes our mothers and grandmothers endured. Simultaneously, however, it also promotes and mainstreams the sexualization of the female body as the "norm," as both expected, and in fact, desired mode of identifying a woman's worth. Some of the most glaring examples of these trends I have been able to document and analyze in two forthcoming book chapters I have authored, dealing with the hyper-sexualization of young Bulgarian women. In addition, a content analysis of TV commercials recently published in *Sex Roles: Journal of Research*, indicated alarmingly noticeable trends towards the presentation of female models in TV advertising in more sexually provocative roles and portrayals, compared to those of male

models. And it must also be further noted that manifestation of how normalized and often, “glamorized” the sexualization of women in the mainstream media has become is made evident on a daily basis—for example, the most popular news hits on the Bulgarian news site [www.news.bg](http://www.news.bg) for Monday, March 9, 2009, are news on Bulgarian Playmates’ love lives and the a story headlined, “Sexy Bulgarian Girl is the New Italian Porn Star.” As part of my second research goal, I have also begun to study the existing reports and recommendations of the European Union involving regulating media advertising, and specifically, the portrayals of women and sexuality to sell products. As this trend is particularly blatant in advertising, one Bulgarian women’s right activist noted in her remarks on the new proposed provisions regulating pornographic trends in advertising, “ads of this type can only create an environment ripe for trafficking and sexual exploitation” (Tisheva, 2007, ¶ 15).

Some of the preliminary conclusions which I have been able to draw based upon the research findings I have compiled so far point to the urgent need to develop a stronger platform to tackle the root sources of sex trafficking not only as an international crime, but also as a cultural artifact which in many ways, became commonplace simultaneously with the collapse of the communist regime and the influx of western media influences.

### ***Relevance of Research to Youth Issues in the Region***

Scholars have also argued that the transformations of female identity as signaled in the visuals of consumer advertising can be seen as a form of subversive liberation, and indeed as Berry (2004), contended, “magazines do portray new images of women who are both confident of their position and economically independent, which empowers, or at least has provided the potential for, women to make autonomous choices over lifestyle” (p. 134). This sense of empowerment, however, at minimum rests on shaky grounds—among other things, it is based on some rather stereotypical and patriarchal definitions of femininity, which often reinforces rather than transforms the relations of inequality and repressive gender identity in Eastern Europe. Moreover, as my research so far has demonstrated, these sexually provocative depictions of women feed into a cookie-cutter routine of exploitive imagery which regularly portrays women’s bodies as commodified objects. This is a particularly dangerous trend in post-communist Bulgaria, and perhaps in the rest of the post-communist societies of the Eastern bloc, because Eastern European women are now exposed to a steady diet of exploitive, sexually provocative depictions of women which in turn feeds a poisonous trend in women’s and girl’s perceptions of their bodies and their sense of self-worth in the absence of alternative role models. More importantly, it also promotes and mainstreams the sexualization of the female body as the “norm,” as

both expected, and in fact, desired mode of identifying a woman's worth. Furthermore, it remains yet to be seen how these trends are going to affect the lives of young women in Bulgaria, where gender identities are fundamentally transformed and reconfigured to offer women in the post-communist transition a new identity, breaking away from the asexual past of Soviet-imposed and ideological restrictive ways of imagining femininity, but also reassessing the potential consequence of the present, where hypersexuality prevails and "porno chic" defines the standard of acceptable, desirable and easily achievable sense of self-worth and success.

### ***Relevance for the U.S. Policy Community***

This research can carry direct relevance to the US policy community, as it attempts to illuminate the micro-social processes which explore the cultural signification and cultivation of the dominant views of sexuality and gender relations, as well the socially-mediated phenomenon that normalizes the use of the female body as a commodified object, and in its worst manifestation, as a hard currency in the business of selling sex. This research can assist the policymaking community not only in crafting new, effective strategies to combat sex trafficking in the region, but can offer valuable insight in understanding the less conventional mechanism in which sexuality becomes articulated as an acceptable mode of generating revenue and guaranteeing financial success. As Taylor and Jamieson (1999) point out, "so far from being the ideal-typical, shady, violent and disreputable Mafia-like figures at the hard of traditional organize crime analysis, the key players in the new international trade in sex and pornography may be entirely typical creative entrepreneurs at the very cutting edge of the cultural industry in liberised, market societies" (p. 274). To support this hypothesis, is it interesting to note the recent case of the well-known Bulgarian rapper Ivan Glavchev—Vanko 1, who was sentenced to twelve years in prison for sex trafficking and forced prostitution. The chart-topping rapper stood accused of inducing more than a dozen young women--one of them a minor--into prostitution, while his father, Ivan Glavchev, and cousin, Dimitar Rachelov, were charged with transporting girls across international boundaries for the purpose of forced prostitution. Glavchev, however, served only three years of his sentence and was recently released as a result of new legislation introduced to amend the current punishment for incitement of prostitution. The new legislation led to a major reduction of his sentence as it mitigated punishment for sexual exploitation of adults in favor of increasing the punishment for sexual exploitation of minors. Results of this study can be instrumental in promoting active cooperation between the U.S., Eastern European governmental and non-governmental organizations in supporting policy debates as well as offering assistance in implementing self-

regulatory structures that can monitor media portrayals of young women's sexuality and prevent their abuse and exploitation as well in supporting cultural policy debates and in crafting and implementing educational campaigns that promote alternative media portrayals of young women's sexuality—genuinely empowering and inspirational for the youth of the region.

### ***Suggestions for Future Research***

The illusive connection between the prevalence of sexualized portrayals of women in the media and sex trafficking is hard to come across at first glance, while studying Bulgarian, and I would argue, Eastern European media. However, what is not hard to come across is the common place and often, excessive exploitation of these sexualized portrayals, frequently as an automatic “advertising” panacea to all marketing and publicity needs. What needs to be studied further than the sheer volume and mainstreaming of “porno-chic” is its potential impact on young women's minds and their sense of identity and self-worth. This could be done through a series of focus groups, in-depth interviews and surveys of young female, and male, members of Eastern European youth (the project can become a collaborative, cross-national initiative), whose views and responses can in turn be used to develop educational initiatives and media campaigns illuminating the inherent risks in promoting “porno chic” as mainstream and desirable path of success of the youth of Eastern Europe.

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