



'Is Romania ready for a female president?': Motherhood, nation and gender in the performance of women presidential candidates (2024–2025)[☆]

Ruxandra Trandafoiu

Edge Hill University, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

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ABSTRACT

This article advances feminist scholarship on gendered political communication by examining motherhood as a strategic trope in presidential campaigns contested by women candidates in Romania. While research has explored the gendered double bind in electoral politics, less attention has been paid to how maternal symbolism operates within post-socialist, inter-imperial contexts. Drawing on a semio-pragmatic analysis of candidates' Instagram profiles, the study shows how Romanian women politicians mobilized motherhood to reconcile competing demands for femininity and leadership competence. By endorsing the traditional family and conflating familial and national imaginaries, candidates rearticulated conventional feminine traits—care, tenacity, moral rectitude—as markers of political authority. In a polarised political environment, maternal discourses provided strategic flexibility, allowing women to address both male and female electorates while mitigating ethnonationalist anxieties. The article contributes to feminist analyses of digital campaigning, nationalism, and the recalibration of gender norms in contemporary European politics.

Introduction

This article examines how motherhood is instrumentalised by women presidential candidates to negotiate the tension between building a presidential image rooted in competency and leadership and traditional social and cultural expectations. The data comes from the Instagram accounts of four women candidates in the 2024 and 2025 presidential elections, in a political context that saw a surge in populist, right-wing and neoconservative discourses, infused with historical legacies concerning the traditional role of women in the Romanian society.

The article starts with an overview of the specific gender politics that characterizes Romania's semi-peripheral inter-imperiality, which gives the case study a specific context. It outlines the limited research that exists in relation to the role of motherhood in presidential elections, by supplementing evidence pertaining to Romanian politicians with case studies from 'core' countries and postcolonial nations in Africa, Latin America and New Zealand. The article then discusses findings deriving from a semio-pragmatic approach that analysed the candidates' speech acts in context. Specifically, the analysis looked at how the trope of motherhood was deployed, but also how campaign occasions, themes and self-identifying attributes were used to construct a presidential image that had to conform to both leadership and femininity

stereotypes. This case study shows that successful motherhood was used as proof for the women's ability to attain flourishing careers while also contributing to the nation's future as both mothers and politicians.

Gender politics in the inter-imperial semi-periphery

Romania belongs to a political realm that does not fit into either Third World or postcolonial categories (Boatcă & Parvulescu, 2020). Characterized by absent cartographies and placelessness (Kulavik, 2019, pp. 2–3), Eastern Europe should more accurately be seen as an 'inter-imperial' semi periphery crafted by the intersecting structures of different empires (Boatcă & Parvulescu, 2020; Doyle, 2020) but also defined by its relationship to the 'core'. To use Boatcă's terminology, in Romania's case this is expressed through perpetual identity negotiation vis-à-vis a perceived core (Western Europe) that can be seen at times to be 'heroic', 'the producer of modernity's main achievements' and at times 'decadent', having lost its hegemonic power. The semi-periphery will often become the 'epigonal' Europe, who lacks its own achievements and is a 'mere re-producer of the stages covered by heroic Europe' (Boatcă, 2013, p. 57, emphasis in the original) but will also increasingly resist and contest Western 'decadence'.

The inter-imperial position comes with specific hangovers that do

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E-mail address: trandar@edgehill.ac.uk.

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not duplicate postcolonial ones. Ethnicity, language and religion rather than race (Boatcă & Parvulescu, 2020, pp. 13–14) feed Eastern European ethnonationalisms. An example of this is protochronism, which is used to justify Romanian cultural exceptionalism and repositions the semi-periphery as the centre (Țăranu, 2025). There is also ideological ambivalence, with democracy and authoritarianism, Europeanism and sovereignism, state intervention and liberal markets, coexisting. The inevitable frustration of being the semi-periphery at the intersection of different imperial legacies also comes with structural hindrances that can be exploited politically, not least when it comes to gender politics.

Referring to the role of gender in the dialectics of inter-imperiality, Laura Doyle writes about 'the submerged channels by which women's lives have been part and parcel of dialectics; not only through their positions as reproducers and sexual commodities but also as carriers of lineage and diasporic community whose histories shape the choices of state actors' (Doyle, 2020, p. 45). Despite these key roles, especially the responsibility of carrying the lineage forward, women's socio-political status has never been elevated. Rather, as Doyle indirectly recognises, the crucial role played by women in national and ethnic reproduction is only silently acknowledged. Paradoxically, while motherhood remains at the core of nationalising projects, it is relegated to the periphery of political recognition. It is useful, in this context, to look more closely at how this paradox operates in Romania's case.

Ethnonational obsessions have always permeated Romania's search for identity and aided the post 1918 quest to establish the modern nation-state. They turned ugly with the appropriation of eugenic measures to 'deal' with Roma and Jewish populations in the 1930s and 1940s (Turda, 2024) and climaxed with pogroms and the Iron Guard rebellion of 1941. Throughout, nationalism and legionarism sought the reproduction of androcentric hegemonic power which only recognized women's role as bearers of sons and daughters for the nation. Motherhood was therefore instrumentalised in the subservient service of national reproduction, since motherhood and nationhood are traditionally entwined. Albanese (2006) argues that because of the women's role in both biological and cultural production the labours of motherhood are seen as comparable with the labours of bringing nationhood into existence.

The mother of the nation trope was instrumentalised successfully in, to give some postcolonial examples, Afrikaner (Brink, 1990) and Hindu nationalism (Gupta, 2021). Yet, as Albanese (2006) points out, the modernizing effort that characterized nineteenth century elite nationalism, was limited by the archaization of women's roles, which often led to conservative family planning policies. In Romania's case, family planning took a traumatic turn with President Ceaușescu's Decree No. 770 from 1966, which banned abortion and demanded state imposed increased natality to cement the future of the Romanian nation (Constantinescu, 2017) and the 'indivisibility' of the heavily bordered nation-state. Motherhood became 'a state matter' (Oprea, 2015, p. 289). The emancipation of the female workforce was tempered therefore by coercive pronatalism and poor maternal healthcare, resulting in 'emancipation through work', but not feminism (Miroiu, 2007, p. 200).

Motherhood's problematic socialist symbolism might have lost some of its potency in the early 1990s, but motherhood was soon reconnected to post-socialist renationalization processes when the link between land ownership, ancestry, kinship and identity was reemphasised (Verdery, 1996, p. 87). Romania's protochronic nationalism underscored ancestral roots, expressed by an obsession with land ownership and border reproduction, and reiterated the genetic continuity of the family of the nation. Within the fragmentation and volatility of the political system in Romania, nationalistic appeals acted as a stabilizing device for political support (Roth, 1995; Smith, 2016). The need for stabilization was made more acute by the deskilling and fall into poverty of the traditional labour class during the post-socialist period. Successive governments ignored labour's needs, leading to its marginalization and alienation that pushed many towards the right (Ciobanu, 2009, p. 333). This process accelerated, once debates about Europeanisation emerged in the context

of EU enlargement. The trope of the nation as family (see Lakoff, 2002), which includes the suggestion that citizens are children looked after by the parent government, became part of a 'hegemonic narrative' used to reclaim the traditional triad of values in Romanian culture – family, nation, Orthodox Church – acting to prevent the incursion of Western colonialism with its damaging cocktail of gender equality and liberalism (Băluță & Tufiş, 2023, p. 632).

A process of remasculinization became evident in freshly minted patriarchal discourses (Kulavik, 2019, p. 8), weakening attempts to openly discuss women's rights. Feminism was quickly delegitimised as 'sexo-Marxism' (Băluță & Băluță, 2025, p. 5). Kulavik's analysis (2019) aptly highlights this ideological failure of feminism in Eastern Europe. Since women's liberation struggles inspired by decolonization did not seem to be relevant to this inter-imperial space, Eastern European women turned towards liberalism and individual freedom, while Western feminists remained on the left, supportive of collective rights (Kulavik, 2019, pp. 5–6 and 18). The failure of feminism in Romania is also due to growing antagonism between intelligentsia and labourers during the post-socialist period (see Ciobanu, 2009), which relegated feminism to the elite sphere. The ideological crises deepened at the social level, with the belief that 'loss of control over women threatens the state' (Doyle, 2020, p. 70). When women perform civic duties on an equal footing, it was argued, men lose their status as providers and protectors, thus putting the national project into jeopardy (Zaharijević et al., 2023, p. 582).

Norocel's work on how the post-socialist right-wing press began to depict women in the public domain is illustrative here. As Norocel argues, 'performances of femininity' in the press fed a renewed 'ethno-nationalist' project (Norocel, 2016, p. 247). While invited, femininity performances had to also be 'disciplined' and deemed desirable to become normative (Norocel, 2016, p. 249). Feminine desirability was naturalised and reconnected to women's motherhood, 'understood as an epitome of heterosexual reproductive sexuality that must be manifested within a legally sanctioned monogamous union with a man belonging to the ethnic nation' (Norocel, 2016, p. 249). Motherhood also became part of the neoliberal arsenal, sold as a form of emancipation (Marinescu, 2021, p. 134).

At the political level, the restoration of the 'proper' family (Zaharijević et al., 2023, p. 578) through the neoliberal and neoconservative alliance looking to provide an alternative to the welfare state in the post-socialist period, emerged in the guise of the 2018 'Referendum for Family'. The referendum was supported by a coalition of liberal and social democratic parties, the right-wing Coalition for Family (anti-abortionist association of non-governmental organizations) and the Orthodox Church, who sought unsuccessfully to constitutionally redefine marriage as the exclusive union between a man and a woman. The referendum was enabled by the emergence of ultranationalist and ultraconservative views which eventually coalesced into a new party AUR (Alliance for the Union of Romanians), a descendent of the nationalist Romanian Nation Unity Party, established in 1990, and Greater Romania Party, founded in 1991, both now demised. Their legacy is obvious nonetheless in the political discourse of newer parties like AUR. Băluță and Tufiş (2023), who analysed parliamentary debates in the Romanian Chamber of Deputies between 2012 and 2021, found that mentions of the traditional family were used to prove national continuity and make claims about the protection of national identity, while liberal threats to the traditional family were seen to prompt 'the dissolution of the nation' (Băluță & Tufiş, 2023, p. 627).

Judging from the discursive political performances that defined the 2024 elections in Romania, this process of 'de-democratization' (Băluță & Băluță, 2025, p. 2) is continuing. The emphasis on the heterosexual family and motherhood as the symbol of Romanian resilience through time, joined patriarchal acquiescence, Christian orthodoxism subsumed into neolegionarism (Marincea, 2025), and nationalist eugenics. Meanwhile, the language regime of the national family continues to be used as a form of control and self-control. The emphasis on natality and

demographics is further cultivated by the trauma of mass emigration experienced by Romania since the late 1990s. In addition, the social media phenomenon of the 'trad wife' has been building around Cristela Georgescu, the wife of one of the presidential candidates in 2024. Her image as 'mother of the nation' is a stylised take on motherhood, parenting and education, used as a form of cultural and social capital (according to Alina Dolea quoted in [Despa, 2025](#)). The 'trad wife' nostalgia for a traditional lifestyle, compounded by post-socialist traumas, signals the desire to escape the pressures of capitalism. It is monetised while being used to promote damaging stereotypes ([Despa, 2025](#)).

Consequently, women in public political roles have to achieve the impossible, by somehow braiding conformity with resistance. They have to carefully juggle their political careers with traditional representations of women as public figures, which depict them as courageous for stepping outside their comfort zones as wives and mothers ([Norocel, 2016](#), p. 257). Motherhood acts as a main trope, which prompts one of the main research questions in this article: How is motherhood deployed to successfully negotiate leadership and gender stereotypes?

Women as presidential candidates

Following from the main research question, another question arises: How is the deployment of motherhood operationalised? The following section provides a brief overview of the possible areas where we could look for examples of how the tension between the personal and the professional, is negotiated in political campaigning.

Case-based research on how women negotiate femininity and patriarchy as political candidates is still slender, particularly when it comes to inter-imperial spaces. Moreover, much of the literature focuses on media representations, rather than appreciating the role candidates have in self-representation. Motherhood is often referenced indirectly, with even fewer studies considering how this trope is instrumentalised in the context of nationalist politics. Consequently, this section will highlight insights derived from postcolonial contexts like New Zealand, Latin America and Africa, supplemented by a few relevant case-studies from the 'core'. Most of the studies, regardless of origin, highlight the burden on women candidates to negotiate competing and clashing demands on style and observe that women have agency in curating their own image, but its effect is heavily dependent on cultural and political contexts.

We know from classic political theory that alongside innate traits, charisma can be to a degree designed by choosing to project certain qualities and features ([Weber, 1978](#), p. 1121). Voters expect political candidates to perform a presidential image that combines personality and capability. Candidates then proceed to engage in 'impression management' ([Goffman, 1956](#), p. 132), a process during which gender is performed 'through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time' ([Butler, 1988](#), p. 523). However, evidence shows that when women enact a 'presidential' image, their attempt is often fraught with difficulties because women are required to more strictly adhere to an already written script that describes how women in public spaces and at the top of the power hierarchy should act. Freedom to perform is therefore curtailed because 'the gendered body [...] enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives' ([Butler, 1988](#), p. 526).

Women candidates thus find themselves in a 'double bind' entailing expectations of gender performance and political performance, which are often perceived as incompatible ([McKay, 2020](#)). McKay borrows the term 'double bind' from [Jamieson \(1995\)](#), who provides a historical development of gender expectations (men can be shackled by a double bind too). When the family becomes a 'social ideal' ([Boatcă & Roth, 2016](#), p. 193), and women are primarily associated with 'private life, physical beauty, and nurturing, supporting roles' often reflected 'in coverage focusing more on the personal background, physical appearance, marital status, and children (or lack thereof) of women politicians'

([Van der Pas & Aaldering, 2020](#), p. 118), women are at risk to fall foul of the Role Congruity Theory, whereby 'women leaders inevitably fail on some standard, because they either violate the stereotype of a leader or that of a woman' ([Van der Pas & Aaldering, 2020](#), p. 118).

Consequently, female candidates are forced to adopt diverse strategies that combine feminine and leadership traits in different measures, in the hope of finding the right balance. Often this includes a feminised style of politics that is less aggressive and posturing, more cooperative and loyal ([Childs, 2004](#), p. 13). To solve the double bind conundrum, female candidates are also more likely to adopt the frames of lived experience, authenticity, inclusivity, empowerment and efficiency, with the aim of enhancing likeability ([Fountaine, 2017](#); [Osei Fordjour & Sikanku, 2022](#)). In other words, they enhance their feminine traits while attempting to circumscribe them within the context of professionalism.

Fountaine argues that the electoral success of politicians like Jacinda Ardern and Nikki Kaye in New Zealand shows that promoting 'intimised' stories and locations (homes, cafes) is often an effective strategy for women politicians ([Fountaine, 2017](#), p. 219). Similarly, [Osei Fordjour and Sikanku \(2022, p. 871\)](#) who deconstructed the acceptance speeches of vice-presidential candidates in Ghana and the United States (Jane Naana Opoku Agyemang and Kamala Harris) found that emotional language and personal stories highlighted a connection to (often vulnerable) others, while motherhood was implied through the notion of care (for own children, adopted step children or others). Career achievements were mentioned to provide credibility.

Thomas and Adams found that successful female presidential candidates (Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf in Liberia and Michelle Bachelet in Chile) 'sought to both mitigate the costs associated with their gender and to capitalize on the advantages' ([Thomas & Adams, 2010](#), p. 117). Both women talked at length about their education and political and professional careers. They emphasised their strength and ability to lead and positioned themselves as candidates from outside the corrupt political establishment. 'In short, both Bachelet and Johnson-Sirleaf presented themselves as capable leaders by showing how they had excelled in stereotypically masculine pursuits' ([Thomas & Adams, 2010](#), p. 120). However, they also capitalised on the unique traits and experiences afforded by their gender, such as selflessness, propensity for inclusion and dedication to the needs of others, as well as being less susceptible to corruption. Bachelet specifically targeted women voters by mentioning the skills acquired as a single mother raising a family. Potentially 'weaker' traits were thus turned into assets. Correspondingly, evidence from Chile and Brazil shows that women presidential candidates mobilized women voters by using gendered themes and approaches ([Reyes-Housholder, 2018](#)), which mixed private experiences and public record achievements.

The private sphere is increasingly used as a key resource to enhance political identity ([Corner, 2000](#), p. 394) because the family remains an indicator of moral standard and proves the ability to negotiate the challenges of public and private, to sacrifice and to follow existing norms ([Van Zoonen, 1998](#)). Family tropes have therefore become key in the construction of 'presidential selves' ([Sclafani, 2015](#), p. 370, emphasis in the original). In the case of men, the accent is on duty, for women is on reliability ([Van Zoonen, 1998](#), p. 61). One is about self-sacrifice, the other about self-interest ([Van Zoonen, 1998](#), p. 62). As [Auer et al. \(2022, p. 339\)](#) note, 'dominant cultural (western) understandings of the family as an institution imbricated with legal marriage, children, and compulsory heterosexuality' have become a 'signifier of political competence and credibility'. However, as the authors point out, while for men the family provides evidence of character and enhanced likeability, women's ability to juggle family and career is sometimes questioned, which means that women have to either play the family card to show patriarchal compliance or justify the absence of parental responsibilities in terms of professional efficiency.

The strategy of framing competence and leadership around femininity and motherhood in order to solve the double bind tension, is evident in the case of Romanian presidential candidates too. Yet, as

argued previously, the Romania context is more specifically defined by the socialist legacy of natality controls, which made women's bodies publicly visible, the post-socialist renationalization process that used conservative rather than progressive values, and 'disciplined' performances of femininity (Norocel, 2016) that do not challenge women's role within the traditional family. Campaigns are often tested by how feasible it is to bridge public and private, physical appearance and competence, motherhood and leadership expectations.

In the 2014 Romanian presidential elections, the two female candidates running for the highest office tried differing approaches. The independent Monica Macovei performed 'an almost gender-blind professional ideal of the hardworking individual' (Norocel, 2018, p. 50). While forays into her private sphere were not completely absent, Macovei made sure to emphasise that running a household helped women acquire good management skills. Elena Udrea, then leader of the centre-right Popular Movement Party, made the most of 'her physical attributes' and argued 'that beauty, modernity, and youthfulness are the paramount values' of her party (Norocel, 2018, p. 51). As Norocel argues, the 2014 elections saw the reinterpretation of traditional norms though conservative, neoliberal lenses, that allowed Udrea to use her appearance to project confidence and power and become one with her party, while Macovei chose to link handpicked gender traits with her undeniable professional skills. The analysis exemplifies the risk women candidates face, as they can be further objectified when banking on their physical attributes (Udrea), or judged for their unnatural masculinity (Macovei). The example also evidences that women candidates play a role in their own problematic representation, some assuming and some resisting stereotyping (Băluță, 2015) in their quest to win.

The "normative cult of motherhood" in Eastern Europe which interprets the rejection of maternity as a "national" sabotage' (Pető, 2010, p. 196), is likely to remain an important part of political campaigning for female candidates. The ambiguous position of women in socialist states under the 'triple burden' of 'paid employment, housework, and political activity' (Owczarzak, 2009, p. 8) has left a complex legacy that helped cement male dominance in the political sphere, while encouraging policy debates around the role of women and reproduction to continue. All the while, voters have been looking for archaic models of leadership, best embodied by an authoritarian family head, combined with an idealised welfare state that recalls a mother's nurturing breast.

The above studies highlight the need to look for instances in which motherhood is operationalised in order to mitigate some of the barriers observed, particularly in semi-peripheral political and social contexts that carry complex historical and cultural overlaps. They identify important aspects such as performing multiple and occasionally conflicting roles, engaging with certain themes over others, using context and space strategically and deploying a carefully crafted cocktail of attributes to self-identify in order to build a presidential image.

Methodology

The result of the first round of the presidential elections of 24 November 2024 was annulled because of legal and financial irregularities and suspicion of Russian interference present in the campaign of independent Călin Georgescu (Fella, 2024, p. 28), who at 23% of the vote had become favourite for the runoff. With Georgescu banned to stand again, new elections were organised in May 2025.

In November 2024 Elena-Valerica Lasconi, then leader of the centre-right Save Romania Union (USR) and mayor of Câmpulung, entered the December runoff after obtaining 19% of the vote in the first round. The independent (former PSD – Social Democratic Party member) Ana Birchall and Alexandra-Beatrice Birtalan-Păcuraru, representing the Alternative for National Dignity (ADN), a party formed by former PSD members with strong nationalist and conservative values, were minor candidates. In May 2025, Lasconi re-entered the race as an independent after being deselected by her own party, who threw its support behind the independent candidate and eventual male winner, Nicușor Dan. She

came fifth in the first round and therefore did not enter the runoff. Birchall and Birtalan-Păcuraru did not compete in 2025, but another female candidate, Marcela-Lavinia Șandru, the candidate of the centrist Social-Liberal Humanist Party, took part.

Instagram was chosen to collect evidence about the female candidates' campaign performance and self-presentation. The platform is consistently used in electoral campaigning because of its strategic potential for enhancing the candidates' self-image (Uluçay & Melek, 2021, p. 143) and recognition. It is ideal for women candidates (Brands et al., 2021) because of its high visual content that encourages 'authenticity' (Ekman & Widholm, 2017, p. 29) and suits a combination of personal and professional content (Ekman & Widholm, 2017, p. 16), which may help candidates strike a balance between likeability and competence.

Data collection took place during the official campaign timeline, between 28 October-24 November 2024 and 7 April-4 May 2025. All posts, which included visual content and an accompanying candidate's message, were analysed. Comments by followers were excluded, since the focus of the project was on the candidates' self-branding. A total of 352 posts were collected (Birchall – 60; Birtalan-Păcuraru – 41; Lasconi – 99 in 2024 and 87 in 2025; Șandru – 65).

Instagram campaigns are often evaluated through quantitative content analysis (Brands et al., 2021; Ekman & Widholm, 2017; Uluçay & Melek, 2021). Because of the relatively small corpus provided by the Romanian candidates, and the focus on motherhood and family, a qualitative approach was chosen instead based on semio-pragmatism (Odin, 2022). This entailed analysing statements or speech acts, including visuals, in context. Motherhood as a macro-theme or *topos* (Wagner & Wodak, 2006), was traced by looking at the roles women candidates performed, the themes they chose to engage with and the descriptors they used to self-identify.

The analysis echoes current approaches in social media analysis, which focus on the main frames used by candidates (Cmeci, 2014; Grabe & Bucy, 2009; Steffan, 2020; Uluçay & Melek, 2021), as well as the strategies used to construct them. For example, the Ideal Candidate frame (Grabe & Bucy, 2009) is often achieved by combining 'statesmanship' and 'compassion' (Uluçay & Melek, 2021). Statesmanship is expressed through patriotic symbols and official contexts while compassion through family associations, children, religious symbols, interactions and physical embraces (Steffan, 2020, p. 3104).

While the above studies provide valid approaches to social media campaign analysis, this research asks: How is motherhood deployed to successfully negotiate between personal and professional roles? How are spaces, themes and personal qualities used to construct a presidential image? Consequently, the methodological approach is tailored to provide an answer to these questions by evaluating the campaign occasion (type of event: private/domestic, nationally relevant or specific campaign event), the space in which the event occurred (previous research suggests that women campaign more effectively in closed intimate spaces), visual performance (appearance, gestures), assumed roles (traditional or non-traditional), gender defined campaign themes, gendered attributes chosen by the candidates themselves and the meta-trope of motherhood (Table 1).

How was motherhood deployed to successfully negotiate between personal and professional roles?

All women used their professional credentials and track record as proof of their ability to lead and solve real-life problems. Lasconi relied heavily on her experience as the mayor of a small town and used her knowledge of the media as a former news presenter to her advantage. Birchall, who had the most extensive political pedigree of all, as a former Member of Parliament, Justice Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, spoke at length about her ministerial track record fighting corruption. Like Lasconi, she had parted ways with her party after being implicated by a series of false allegations, which she successfully defended in court. Birtalan Păcuraru's experience as a former TV presenter notably

Table 1
Gendered performance framework: theoretical constructs and empirical indicators.

Theoretical construct	Gender coding	Empirical indicators (candidates)
Spatial performance	Private / domestic	Home (Lasconi)
	Public	Church; Market; Monument/Remembrance; Park; Restaurant; Square/Street; TV Studio
Role performance	Institutional	Office; Official building (Birchall, Lasconi)
	Feminine	Communicator; Daughter/Granddaughter; Mother; Wife
	Masculine	Achiever; Fighter/Warrior; President
Normative qualities	Neutral / populist	One of the people; Outsider (Lasconi, Şandru, Birchall)
	Feminine	Authentic; Empathetic; Honest
Embodied visibility	Masculine	Aggressive; Competent; Professional; Realist; Strong; Track record (Birchall, Lasconi)
	Appearance	Colourful or folk-inspired clothing (Birtalan-Păcuraru, Lasconi); Suits; Holding flowers
Issue framing	Affective contact	Kisses; Embraces; Handshakes
	Care / social (soft)	Child poverty; Dignity; Drugs/Addiction; Education; Health; Peace; Pensions; Reproductive rights (Birchall, Lasconi)
	Authority / governance (hard)	Corruption; Entrepreneurship; International Relations; Justice reform; Tactical voting; Taxation
Maternal symbolism	Religious / familial	Virgin Mary symbolism; Children; Own children; Family; Dogs

Note: The table operationalises gender as performative political practice, linking theoretical dimensions (space, role, quality, embodiment, issue framing, maternal symbolism) to empirically observed campaign performances.

contributed to the format of her public performances. Şandru, another former journalist and MP, had public recognition as the initiator of 'mothers' law', a bill which gave generous paid maternity leave to new mothers. Consequently, all women candidates had had a public profile, media experience and occasional brushes with misogyny (Birchall and Lasconi, in particular) and all were ideologically positioned centre right.

All women exploited motherhood, lineage and the traditional family strategically. Both Lasconi and Şandru used their own mothers for endorsement and talked about the heritage inherited from grandparents. Birchall, Birtalan-Păcuraru and Lasconi were pictured with their respective husbands, which suggested support for family, continuity and reliability.

Lasconi talked about her daughter and used her former status as a single mother as an example of overcoming adversity ('I know what it means to raise a child and how much it matters to receive a helping hand'). Referring to her daughter she claimed: 'I would have liked 3, I only have her'; 'the bond between parents and children is sacred'. The motherhood trope was further constructed through high-fiving children, referencing Virgin Mary and cuddling the family dogs, which re-emphasised the message of love and care.

Birtalan-Păcuraru featured her husband and five children in a campaign video where, dressed in folk clothing, the family dances the traditional *hora* while reciting: 'Happy birthday Romania! I love you Romania'. Birtalan-Păcuraru was the most literal in her conflation of family and nation, with statements such as: 'I am Romania's daughter, and I am also a mother. I love all Romania's children unconditionally'; 'As a mother I have this power, to be the mother of all Romanians, unconditionally.' Flags, traditional folk clothing, pictures of wooden churches and Virgin Mary icons became Birtalan-Păcuraru's campaign staples.

Şandru was pictured with her son and, alongside Lasconi, talked about natality repeatedly. Deploing the demise of the traditional Romanian village, she said: 'No child has been born [in this village] for

35 years. [...] But Romania must not die in silence. It needs life. Children. A future. I am running for office so that the birth rate becomes a national priority. Romania will be born again. With us. With heart. With courage.' Like the other candidates, Şandru used children as a stand-in for the future of the nation.

Alongside being a mother, wife and daughter, Lasconi and Şandru talked about being one of the people, which tied in with their authenticity claims. Lasconi declared: 'It would probably have been easier for me not to get involved, not to run for office, not to seek to fight for Romanians. But that's how I've lived my whole life: among people, alongside them, helping them whenever I could and needed to.' Birchall, Lasconi and Şandru also saw value in being on the attack and repeatedly self-identified as fighters and warriors against corruption, the established political class and general adversity. Birchall noted: 'I am the only really independent candidate, I am not the pawn of an interest group, I only play on Romania's team.' Şandru declared in a similar vein: "Do you want a president controlled by structures? If the answers to the above questions are 'yes', then ... don't vote for me." Lasconi talked about being the first woman President of Romania, 'a president of good faith, without debts to the old corrupt system, who will bring real change! A president for all, not just for some.'

Femininity and personal qualities were also expressed visually. Lasconi wore dresses or skirts in bright colors and patterns. Birchall's suits provided vivid pops of color, with purple a clear favourite. Birtalan-Păcuraru accentuated her youth by wearing flattering jumpsuits. Kisses, embraces and handshakes featured heavily for Birtalan-Păcuraru, Lasconi and Şandru. Hugs were not unique to women candidates, but women seemed more at ease with physical touches, which signify care, so they did not shy away from performing their femininity through clothing and gestures.

How were spaces, themes and personal qualities used to construct a presidential image?

Contrary to previous research which saw women candidates campaign successfully in intimate spaces (Fountain, 2017), the Romanian case shows that outside of the TV studio, campaigning was very much about putting the miles in to reach as many voters as possible. Being out and about also enhanced the candidates' social media spread. Birchall and Lasconi were the only ones to appear in institutional settings, which acted as a reminder of their professional experience as office holders. Streets, markets and churches were popular choices to help candidates showcase their communication skills and relatability. Lasconi was the only one to open up her private space, with followers getting a glimpse of her garden and home office. All women candidates (like their male counterparts) were careful to observe national milestones, from anniversaries and remembrance events to Easter mass. Through public visits and attending official events the candidates aimed to enhance their presidential performance.

Most women candidates tackled both soft and hard topics, although Lasconi and Birchall stood out with specific policies concerning education, child poverty and pensions (so, issues that belong to the feminine realm of care for the vulnerable), but equally tackled 'masculine' subjects such as corruption and justice reform, international relations and entrepreneurship. Şandru campaigned for free school meals, as part of her 'demographic strategy'. Birtalan-Păcuraru's engagement was softer, and less precise, as she purported to be 'the candidate for peace, stability, dignity and for returning wealth to Romanians'. Lasconi and Birchall were the only ones to mention their support for reproductive rights, which is a typically female issue. Lasconi's view on this contrasted with the religious symbolism that branded her visual appearance, which always included a typically large Orthodox cross pendant. In a country in which women are still scarred by the brutal natalist policies of the socialist regime, her view was a nod to female voters. Her spiritual concerns, on the other hand, played to the dominant faith of the electorate. Lasconi's 'presidentialism' was therefore obvious in its populist

attempt to appeal to a large majority of either gender.

The slogans used by women candidates included messages of love, care and unity. They highlighted their concern for real problems, which could be addressed through dialogue and coming together as a nation. Birchall's posters carried the words '*Mai bine*' ('Better') and '*Ne facem bine*' ('We will get better'), alongside the message 'In 2024, we no longer choose the lesser evil, but the Greater Good!'. Birtalan-Păcuraru used the slogan 'Unity is the key to happiness!'. Șandru's catchphrases were: 'Real Romania, Humanist Romania' and 'Real Romania first and foremost'. In one of her early campaign videos Lasconi used the following appeal: 'Let's rise above all the differences between us and remember how strong we can be together [...] Let's fight for a Romania in which every child has a chance at education and every parent can provide a decent living for their family! A better Romania for all, not just for some!' The appeals to act as a united family supported the women's strategy to perform the roles of healers and carers in a divisive political climate. As Lasconi pointed out: 'if a woman can unite a family, a woman president can unite an entire people!' Women candidates therefore performed differently from male candidates, who lacked the message of love or care, although they did include unity.

Among self-identifying characteristics that would be seen as feminine, authenticity was mentioned by Birchall, Birtalan-Păcuraru and Lasconi. Lasconi also described herself as empathetic ('An open, empathetic person, who knows and understands the problems of citizens.') and honest ('Romania needs an honest, strong, and bona fide leader'), and emphasised family as a source of positive traits and values: 'I come from among the people, an average family that taught me the true values: education, hard work, faith and the belief that we can do better'. A female supporter described Birchall as Christian Orthodox, with a 'lovely, powerful and long-lasting family; a true model family'. A male supporter, on the other hand, praised Birchall for being 'a true professional, an experienced politician, a decent human being, realist, constructive, coherent'. The language difference is justified by the attempt to target all voters, irrespective of gender, and appeal to them via different sets of skills.

Masculine perceived traits featured alongside feminine ones. Birchall called herself competent, professional and a realist. Lasconi often talked about her strength and both Birchall and Lasconi used their track record as minister and mayor respectively to underline their professionalism. Birchall mentioned her Harvard Law PhD and her MP track record as examples of an already successful career. Birchall also tackled accusations of aggressive language by saying: 'I am sometimes aggressive, yes. Years of fighting this system have made me no longer patient to listen to manipulators and impostors. [...] I want to talk about what I can do for Romania. Then I am very calm and very constructive.' Similarly, Lasconi attempted to turn masculine traits seen as negative in a woman into qualities: "It is true that perhaps my tone last night seemed too harsh, perhaps for some I was 'too heated'. BUT... Honestly, I cannot smile and accept untruths and empty promises. I am tired of aggressors posing as victims or saviors."

Lasconi was the only woman candidate with a clear feminist message, largely due to being deselected by her party and receiving negative comments from male politicians. Her reaction drew a line between 'the boys' gang' and the standalone but principled female politician: "This evening, a USR gang ['gașcă'] made a Bolshevik-style maneuver. Stalin would be proud of these guys!". However, she tempered any potential feminist accusations by saying: 'Let's be clear: I took a stand not because I'm a feminist, but because I'm for meritocracy and because in 2025 I no longer conceive of women being sent to the pot, nor of their merits not being recognized.'; 'I have a message for all women in Romania: never underestimate yourself!'

The women's campaign strategy aimed to project a presidential image, albeit one with a difference, by introducing the image of a mother who naturally loves all her children. However, it was equally necessary to assume male traits to project competence, leadership and professionalism.

Conclusions

The article helps to advance and expand previous research, which has had a clear focus on media representations, rather than candidate self-representation. It highlights the instrumentalization of motherhood when building women's presidential image in the context of nationalist politics. Lasconi's declaration to voters - 'You all have a mother and a wife, and you all know how hard she fights for your wellbeing and for prosperity.' - is therefore illustrative of the conflation between family and nation, and the rewriting of the trope of motherhood. Through motherhood, leadership appeared improved by love and care.

Romania's case is particular, although not unique in the context of a semi-peripheral nation in a process of renationalizing that features protochronist and neoconservative tendencies. However, Romania offers an important example in the negotiation that women candidates undertake between conformity to gender expectations and resistance through turning feminine attributes into an advantage. Moreover, the article relies on self-presentation and tactics that women candidates chose to perform in order to appeal, which is an important approach that not only acknowledges women's agency, but also shows that women candidates had varied options at their disposal. While all had to include motherhood, there were also other tactics that illustrated a wide spectrum of feminist political engagements. Self-presentation does not necessarily need to be feminist - women have complex gendered interests (see [Celis & Childs, 2012](#)) - and so the approaches taken by the candidates reveal a range of choices that attempted to test the neoconservative context of 2024 Romania. Lasconi came across as a populist eager to be liked by everyone, Birtalan-Păcuraru as the most nationalist, Șandru as fearless when taking others to task and Birchall as the most professional, career oriented, candidate.

While the research was limited to Instagram, it offers specific visual and self-performance opportunities. Future research might consider expanding the research approach to other platforms and using men's self-performance as a point of comparison.

The research asked: how is motherhood deployed to successfully negotiate between personal and professional roles? Motherhood and the traditional family underpinned all campaign strategies by women. Male candidates used parenthood to a much lesser degree. For women motherhood was not only an opportunity to project love and care but make a natural connection between the national family and the private family, with all they signify: unity, support, future. Successful motherhood also emphasised the women's ability to attain successful careers while also contributing to the nation's future.

The research also asked: how are spaces, themes and personal qualities used to construct a presidential image? Findings confirm that feminine traits continue to be operationalised within the frame of professionalism and leadership (see [Childs, 2004](#); [Fountain, 2017](#); [Osei Fordjour & Sikanku, 2022](#)). As in the case of Latin America, women candidates professed to be anti-corruption fighters ([Thomas & Adams, 2010](#)) and personal traits were supplemented by career achievements ([Reyes-Housholder, 2018](#)). There is clear evidence that women's political campaigning continues to be underpinned by traditionalism, masked by egalitarian discourses (see also [Wagner & Wodak, 2006](#)), with the heterosexual 'traditional' family looming large. However, the Romanian example shows that a degree of freedom to act outside established boundaries and test the relationship between public and private, physical appearance and competence, motherhood and leadership expectations, is possible. The double bind is still very much a feature of women's political campaigning, but one day Romania may still elect a female President.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Ruxandra Trandafoiu: Writing – original draft.

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