Pre-campaign discourse in the Romanian presidential election of 2024:
An analysis of characterisations

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This paper analyses presidential election pre-campaign communication highlighting the main themes in the descriptions made by candidates about themselves and their opponents, via online news media. The discourse selected for analysis was collected between August and October 2024. The dataset is composed of extracts from public statements and interviews of top candidates focused on image crafting, i.e. self- and other-characterisation, examined through a 3D lens: componential analysis of speech acts, lexical semantics and Critical Discourse Analysis CDA – agency and representation (van Leeuwen 2008). Starting from a landmark profile of the 'desirable candidate', the study outlines the subjective representations of what the candidates consider important themes of self-definition in the preparatory phase of the pre-campaign, in an aim to highlight a general image of 'the public from the mind of the candidate'.

Keywords: *pre-campaign discourse, sociocognitive approach, political discourse analysis, media coverage analysis*

1. Introduction

Vividly impacted by the intensity of recent world events, such as the Ukrainian and Palestinian wars, natural disasters, controversial political disclosure, inflation and generalised economic distress, in Romania the year 2024 was labelled by the press as a "super-election year"[2], marked by a permanent political campaign for local, Europarliamentary, presidential, and parliamentary elections (in a chronological order) throughout the year. The media dedicated substantial space to the coverage of political events, turning political discourse into one of the focus points of the audience. Particularly in election campaigns, media coverage is a strong factor in

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[2] https://romania.europalibera.org/a/super-anul-electoral-2024-alegeri-in-65-de-state/
33029122.html

forming public opinion, also influencing dynamics and perceptions, through its reports.

Starting from a sort of a landmark, desirable candidate as configured by Romanians in a study published online in September 2024[3], I examined several instances of self-descriptions and descriptions of opponents made by top candidates in the pre-campaign period, aiming to identify themes considered most significant to present to the electorate, i.e. what are, in the conceptions of the candidates, the top features or qualities of a future president of Romania, in the pre-campaign phase of the presidential election, further aiming to trace 'the public from the mind of the candidate'. To serve these objectives, the data analysis applies a pragma-semantic and CDA approach, revealing tendencies, i.e. prominent motives in the self- and other-characterisation of the candidates.

For some time, Romania presents a political class which leads to a consideration of political discourse as retrograde by some Romanian linguists (Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu 2013; Rovența-Frumușani et al. 2017), confirming the observation of an "increasing rhetorical poverty" (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2019) of political and especially presidential discourse worldwide. Recent studies in the field point towards a more and more unsubstantial quality and duller nature of political discourse. In Romania, advertisement experts talk about amateurism in political campaigns resulting in "extremely boring things which no longer attract anyone's attention"[4]. In spite of these shortcomings, an analysis of media representation is eloquent, inviting reflection on the general status quo of society, through an examination of contemporary political discourse "at its most resourceful" (Hare 1991).

2. Pre-campaign discourse

Pre-campaign discourse is a sub-genre of political discourse, presenting several particularities due to its place in the preparation of presidential elections. While keeping the main characteristics of political discourse, pre-campaign discourse prefigures the main directions of election campaigns, progressively shifting towards

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[3] https://www.euronews.ro/articole/studii-ce-fel-de-presedinte-vor-romanii-de-la-candidati-locomotiva-la-candidati-f

[4] "E foarte mult amatorism în campaniile astea! […] din asta rezultă lucruri foarte plicticoase care nu atrag atenția nimănui." There is a lot of amateurism in these campaigns! [...] this results in very boring things that attract nobody's attention. (Șerban Alexandrescu, advertisement expert) https://www.euronews.ro/articole/campania-electorala-epopeea-afiselor-ce-unelte-de-comunicare-folosesc-echipele-de

more intensified communication, gradually providing visibility into potentially problematic or controversial aspects which usually amount to scandals inevitably brought about during official campaigns.

The discourse produced by politicians in the pre-campaign phase of elections basically manifests, with an increasing intensity, the traditional polarization between 'us' and 'them', invariably enacting a pragmatic antagonism between the speaker (holder of the floor, member of the inner circle) and all the others, through positive self-representation and negative other-representation (van Dijk 1998, 25), using various strategies for the representation of actors and actions, e.g. inclusion/exclusion, affiliation/disaffiliation, personalisation/ impersonalisation, etc. (van Leeuwen 2008).

The main objectives of pre-campaign discourse are focused around self-definition of the candidates, image crafting, as well as a subtle criticism of the opponents. In the pre-campaign period, discourse mainly takes the form of the basic genres of political discourse, particularly campaign discourse, i.e. slogans, speeches, campaign advertisements, manifestos, interviews, social media posts, public statements, etc., less so debates, which are rather characteristic during official campaigns.

As political action and discussions typically start being produced much ahead of the official election campaigns, the pre-campaign period is the time when main tendencies are prefigured. Political trends are highlighted, as well as first predictions about the bandwagon phenomenon which usually precedes election days, i.e. the people's voting intentions according to polls and word-of-mouth talks. These are all elements which are going to be crucially relevant in designing official campaigns and campaign discourse.

The current dataset is exclusively composed of extracts from "internet-mediated communication" (Yus 2011), i.e. messages and information communicated by candidates via online media platforms. This has become the most popular medium of political campaign (including pre-campaign) discourse in Romania ever since 2014, when the online officially gained supremacy in political communication with Klaus Iohannis' revolutionary "internet victory"[5] which brought about his first presidential mandate, as a result of having "harnessed the power of social media".

In 2024 in Romania, the public has been served with pre-campaign discourse since the second half of August, with the first launches of candidacies for presidency, but the electoral atmosphere has been perpetuated even before the

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[5] https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/romania/11249449/Romanian-presidential-election-does-Klaus-Iohanniss-victory-prove-social-media-can-win-an-election.html

local elections held in June. The pre-campaign period for the presidential election continued until the 23rd of October, i.e. one month before the first round of the election, and was mainly focused on the collection of signatures and other necessary steps for the validation of candidatures. Alternatively, according to journalistic investigations[6], electoral campaigns have been going on for at least two years for some of the candidates who have been promoting themselves and their parties in unofficial and unauthorised actions way before the official campaign was supposed to begin.

3. Analytical framework

In this section, I will present a preliminary assessment of the data, also providing background and contextual information, to frame the analysis.

The data have been extracted and transcribed from video materials from euronews.ro, digi24.ro and youtube.com broadcasting interviews and statements made by politicians rated as top candidates to the presidency of Romania, ranked as such by different polls. Due to limitations of space on the one hand and lack of political consistency and coherence on the other hand, the profiles and ideologies of the candidates will not be discussed in this paper and the data are considered as linguistic material.

The data analysis is approached starting from an examination of local semantics, i.e. lexical choices, meanings of words, forms of implicit or indirect meanings such as implications, presuppositions (pragmatic or ideological), allusions, vagueness, as well as references, propositions (explicitly asserted, implied or presupposed), continuing with a componential analysis of speech acts and a CDA perspective, i.e. representation of agency.

3.1. Context and background

The Romanian presidential election of 2024 is shaped by a political environment marked by a coalition government which brings together two traditional rivals, the centre-right National Liberal Party (PNL) and centre-left the Social-Democratic Party (PSD) with a vocal opposition of the right-wing Union Save Romania (USR) and Alliance of Right-wing Forces, and extreme right Alliance for the Union of the Romanians (AUR) and extremist nationalist S.O.S. parties.

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6 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bwxZq8yFnGs&t=2s

From the early pre-campaign period, three main categories of candidates could be prefigured, i.e. candidates with a real chance of winning, marginal candidates and mavericks. Against a background of severe underlying tensions and regardless of the theoretical ideologies of their parties and political orientations, presidential candidates position themselves as both promoters of reform and defenders of stability, simultaneously drawing on narratives of change and continuity, employing similar, sometimes identical motives of self-presentation. Beside the regular themes of the public discontent caused by corruption, economic inequality, poor educational and health systems, producing a candidate profile self-described as honest, pugnacious, skilled, etc., this election campaign presented a number of unprecedented features employed in the presentations / characterisations of the candidates (further discussed in section 4.).

Starting from a 'landmark candidate', as discussed by sociologist Barbu Mateescu[7] as an ideal profile of the future president of Romania, traced by Romanians in a study realized by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in September 2024, published by euronews.ro in the early phase of the pre-campaign, I tried to identify the main motives employed by presidential hopefuls in the creation of their image in front of the electorate, looking at characterisations in public statements.

Romanians look for an admirable, sophisticated president, a person to respect and admire, a person to consider superior to oneself, someone skilled in diplomacy and foreign affairs who would be fit to manage situations with a new president of the USA, with an explicit desire for change, based on a fundamental dissatisfaction with the functioning of the state institutions and general state of the country. Meanwhile, the candidates themselves have more or less aligned conceptions of what they should share, display for an optimal outcome. Following the analysis, this paper presents three examples of themes identified in the data, revealing elements of the deep incongruence between the two perspectives, i.e. the public and the politicians.

3.2. Research questions and methods

Starting from the above-mentioned juxtaposition of the landmark/desirable characteristics of a presidential candidate vs. the features considered important to display by the top candidates in the Romanian presidential election of 2024, from a narrow perspective, this paper aims to identify the main themes employed in the

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[7] https://www.euronews.ro/articole/studii-ce-fel-de-presedinte-vor-romanii-de-la-candidati-locomotiva-la-candidati-f

self- and other-characterisation of the candidates. In this sense, it is asking (1) *what are the most relevant properties of a presidential hopeful in the subjective representation of candidates?* and (2) *how did these mental models evolve over the last decade (2014-2024)?* From a broad perspective, the analysis is designed to outline the image of the public from the mind of the candidate, describing the current status quo of the Romanian society, from a socio-cultural perspective.

In this paper, the analysis applies a pragma-semantic and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach, i.e. discourse as recontextualization of social practice, elaborated by van Leeuwen (2008), focusing on how social practices are represented in language looking at social actors (inclusion/exclusion, foregrounding/backgrounding, etc.), social actions (activation/passivation, agentialisation/deagentialisation, etc.) and the use of modality to understand how truth claims are supported in discourse. To outline the broad perspective, I employ elements from the discourse sociocognitive model proposed by van Dijk (2009; 2014), looking at mental models and subjective representations that individuals (i.e., candidates) create to interpret specific events (the presidential election of 2024) or people (the electorate), to understand how discourse reflects social beliefs, ideologies, relations, but also personal experiences and perspectives.

4. Data analysis

The dataset consists of extracts representing positive self- and negative other-characterisations, categorised according to the subjective representation / mental model identified in discourse. The extracts are displayed in a two-column table, presenting the original version in Romanian and the English version (translation mine).

(1) Ordinariness: "The normal person"

One of the most prominent motives employed by candidates in the self-definition process is "the normal person". While previous campaigns predominantly promoted sophistication and erudition, in this edition of the presidential election ordinariness, as a strategy for humanisation, is forwarded by all presidential candidates, regardless of parties' ideologies, political orientations i.e. left-, right-wing, elitist, populist etc. Being "normal" is ranked as an "important quality" and is used with a positive connotation, exclusively associated with the speaker as positive self-representation. For the illustration of this mental model, I display a list of examples, in different collocations, below:

„Sunt un *om normal*, care a avut o *viață normală*”.	"I am a *normal person* who has had a *normal life*".
„Suntem o *familie normală și modestă*”.	"We are a *normal and modest family*".
„O să fiu un român ca toți românii, un *președinte normal*”.	"I will be a Romanian like all Romanians, a *normal president*".
„Știu și sunt sigur că nu sunt un om perfect, dar am o *calitate importantă: sunt un om normal*”.	"I know and I'm sure I'm not a perfect person, but I have one *important quality: I'm a normal person*".
„Eu, unul, sunt un candidat cât se poate de normal”.	"I, for one, am a perfectly normal candidate".
„Nu am ieșiri, sunt *ieșiri normale*”.	"I don't have *outbursts*, they are *normal*".
„Sunt un *om obișnuit*, un om *simplu*, care a fost crescut de oameni *simpli* și muncitori”.	"I am an ordinary, *simple man*, brought up by *simple*, hard-working *people*".
„Sunt un *om simplu*, povestea mea este o *poveste simplă*”.	"I am a *simple man*, my story is a *simple story*".
„Nu suntem perfecți. Eu *nu sunt perfect*”.	"We are not perfect. *I'm not perfect*".
„*Nu sunt perfect*, de fapt *nimeni nu este perfect*. Am multe defecte, dar sunt un om care îmi asum lucrurile”.	"*I'm not perfect*, in fact *nobody is perfect*. I have many flaws but I am a man who takes things on myself".

The motive employed here as a desirable feature for the presidential candidates is ordinariness of the self, as a resonance feature with the many. According to political analysts and press commentators[8], presidential hopefuls consider it appropriate to present themselves as "ordinary persons, a man in the street, an ordinary Romanian, not an elite one"[9]. Ordinariness is predominantly constructed and expressed linguistically by the adjectives "normal", "simple" and "not perfect", as lexical choices, in various collocations. "Normal" denotes "not deviating from average or norm; sound, free from dysfunction" (merriam-webster.com) and is used in collocations with "person", "life", "family", "president", "important quality" with the meaning of "modest", as an opposite of "perfect", but also, in other examples, to characterise the speaker's candidature, with the meaning of "natural". "Normal" is used in performing assertive and commissive speech acts, as claims to the truth of being a "normal person" and commitment to future action

[8] Politologist Cristian Pârvulescu live on Euronews.ro https://www.euronews.ro/articole/de-ce-face-ciolacu-bai-de-multime-vrea-sa-si-creeze-imaginea-unui-roman-obisnuit

[9] "om obișnuit, om de pe stradă, român obișnuit, nu unul de elită" [translation mine]

associated with the desirable quality of a "normal person". In a strategy of positive self-representation, "normal" is used to affiliate the referent (speaker) with common, ordinary people, i.e. the mass of the community, and disaffiliate the referent from any special classes, the elites, i.e. the few, and promotes a populist, anti-elitist ideology. From a CDA perspective, being "[a] normal [person]" is a representation of a social action as semiotic – behavioural (van Leeuwen 2008: 73), recontextualizing it as a desirable feature, a positive marker of familiarity, stability and modesty. The examples selected for analysis show that "normal" is also being used as a rhetorical device to downplay expectations of perfection and emphasize relatability, serving to position the speaker as an approachable, down-to-earth figure, as opposed to a remote or privileged leader pointing towards particularly populist campaigns. The discursive achievement targeted is humanization, i.e. the ethos of a humane candidate.

(2) Legitimation/Delegitimation through "the baccalaureate diploma"

According to political commentators, journalists and even some of the candidates[10], it was the first time in the history of presidential campaigns in Romania, in 2024, that credentials, i.e. high-school certifications and diplomas, with a particular focus on the exact grades obtained by each candidate, were employed by candidates as a motive in characterisation, both as positive self-representation and negative other-representation. Represented as an essential item of educational certification, "the baccalaureate diploma" is a condition for legitimation/ delegitimation through credentials. This motive is a frequent occurrence in the pre-campaign period, as it was brought in as a topic for dispute before any official candidacy launches, aiming to disqualify one particular candidate, implicitly benefiting other candidates. The discussion spread onto other aspects of education and professional background for all candidates, each using the motive of their own "baccalaureate diploma", as well as the associated subjective representations, to produce positive self-representation and negative other-representation. Manifestations of positive self-representation and negative other-representation would be the legitimation of the self through the possession of such a diploma, namely a reasonable grade, as well as the delegitimation of the other through an exposure of an unremarkable educational performance.

a.   The legitimation of the self

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[10] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ursTcvt369U&t=1533s

„*Oricum eu am* o diplomă de Bacalaureat pe care v-o pot arăta. O să scriu două cărţi la pensie, dar o să fie pe bune.”

„*Oricând vă pot pune la dispoziție*...”

„*Normal că* m-am apucat în toate documentele să caut *toate diplomele*, să închidem acest circ care la început l-am crezut că este unul într-o limită normală”.

„*Oameni buni*, eu *Bacalaureatul l-am susținut* acum 38 de ani.”

„Nu am fost un tocilar și un elev de nota 10, dar *am luat toate examenele la care m-am încris*”.

"*Anyway, I have* a high school diploma I can show you. I'll write two books when I retire, but it'll be for real."

"*Anytime I can provide* you with..."

"*Naturally* I went through all of the documents to look for *all of the diplomas*, to close this circus which, at first, I thought was one within normal limits."

"*Folks, I took the Baccalaureate* 38 years ago."

"I wasn't a nerd and I wasn't a straight A student, but *I took all the exams I signed up for*".

As an element of legitimation through authorisation (van Leeuwen 2008), understood as an entitlement to stand as a candidate, and thus positive self-representation, "the baccalaureate diploma" is tied to social credibility and legitimacy to engage in political action. In the examples above, as the object of a modal claim to truth and commitment, employed in performing assertive and commissive speech acts, "the baccalaureate diploma" is introduced as a topic through intensifiers ("naturally") and indefinites ("anyway", "anytime"), emphasising undoubtable existence and unconditional availability upon request. The use of "can", used as a marker of ability and willingness, emphasizes that the speaker claims to have control over when and how or if they choose to share their diploma, suggesting an underlying defence mechanism, in this case addressing scepticism and doubt cast by a political opponent. The speaker seems to be defending their qualifications by emphasizing unrestricted (indefinite) availability of the object under scrutiny (the baccalaureate diploma), which is further downplayed in comparison to future, even greater intellectual contributions (writing books), positioning it as something minor or outdated relative to upcoming achievements. The reference to the diploma being acquired "38 years ago" highlights a temporal disconnect, emphasising that, while the diploma still serves as a credential, it is temporally distant, which might imply that its significance has faded over time, especially in contrast with current challenges or controversies. From a CDA perspective, being a possessor of / being willing and able to provide access to "the baccalaureate diploma" is a representation of a social action as material – transactive (van Leeuwen 2008, 73), recontextualizing it as a positive marker of

credibility, accomplishment and entitlement, yet insufficient in more complex situations. The discursive achievement targeted is social validation, i.e. legitimacy.

b. The delegitimation of the other

„N-are nicio calificare, *n-are diplome*, n-are nimic".	"No qualifications, no diplomas, no nothing".
„Marcel Ciolacu, *tu când ne arăți* diploma de bac?"	"Marcel Ciolacu, *when will you show us* your baccalaureate diploma?"
„*Nu mai merge* cu hai să-ți dau o copie după diploma pe care am găsit-o din 80 și ceva de bac. *Nu merge așa*".	"*It doesn't work anymore* with let's give you a copy of the diploma I found from the 80-something. *It doesn't work like that*."
„Nu am nicio problemă în a arăta acest lucru publicului. Diploma mea de bacalaureat este reală și, *spre deosebire de alții*, eu nu am nicio problemă să vorbesc despre asta."	"I have no problem showing this to the public. My baccalaureate degree is real and, *unlike others*, I have no problem talking about it."
„*Față de alții*, nu am nicio reținere în a o arăta".	"*Compared to others*, I have no qualms about showing it."
„*Diploma mea de bacalaureat este reală și, spre deosebire de alții*, eu nu am nicio problemă să vorbesc despre asta".	*"My baccalaureate diploma is real and, unlike others*, I have no problem talking about it.

In association with the opponent/-s and their lack of achievements, namely lack of entitlement to stand as a candidate to presidency, "the baccalaureate diploma" becomes an element of negative other-representation, as a marker of social unreliability and general unremarkable nature, enabling delegitimation to engage in political action, even more so occupy the highest position in the state. In the examples listed in b., "the baccalaureate diploma" is an object in performing assertive and explorative speech acts (Weigand 2010) meant to claim the truth of an unacceptable situation, i.e. the absence of the (or, at least, the so far unpublished) high school diploma. The document is treated as a token of qualification (namely the lack thereof), and overall (de)legitimation. In an antithetic association, the diploma is represented as a questionable achievement and problematic topic for the opponent, while constituting a reason for pride for the speaker. From a CDA perspective, when attributed to the opponent, "the baccalaureate diploma" is the object of an action represented through abstraction – generalisation / distillation (van Leeuwen 2008, 73), through the association with the indefinite "alții" (others), recontextualizing it as an unclear, unreal,

unidentifiable object, a negative marker of incapability and dishonesty, stability and modesty. The targeted achievement is public invalidation, i.e. delegitimation, disqualification in front of the audience.

(3) Gender representation: "The Lady", "The big hat", "The giant leap"

Gender representation is a recent entry in political campaign discourse in Romania, with only one election to have presented a female finalist candidate to presidency, in 2019 (i.e. Viorica Dăncilă, defeated by Klaus Iohannis, running for a second mandate). From a (then) bitter and offensive socio-political relation between finalists and a blunt, disappointing refusal of the male candidate to participate in a debate with the female candidate (Botaș 2020), the pre-campaign phase of the presidential election of 2024 presents the Romanian public with an apparently overly polite gender discourse, covering for the gendered ideologies, referred to as "institutionalized sexism" by politologists[11].

„Avem o plajă de candidați, începând cu mine, continuând cu candidatul de la PSD, doamna de la USR, Nicolae Ciucă..."	"We have a range of candidates, starting with me, continuing with the PSD candidate, the lady from USR, Nicolae Ciucă".
„Este o doamnă, trebuie să o protejăm".	"She's a lady, we must protect her".
„Deoarece este o doamnă".	"Because she is a lady".
„Inițial am privit-o cu simpatie, mi s-a părut ceva interesant."	"Initially I looked at it with sympathy, it seemed interesting."
„Lasconi e o doamnă respectată. Nu am să vorbesc niciodată urât despre o doamnă, nu că mi-ar da vreun motiv doamna Lasconi. E o funcție cu pălărie mare".	"Lasconi is a respected lady. I would never speak ill of a lady, not that Mrs. Lasconi would give me any reason. It is a function with a big hat."
„E un salt prea mare de la primăria Câmpulung la Cotroceni. E un salt prea mare pentru oricine".	"It's too big a leap from Câmpulung town hall to Cotroceni. It's too big a leap for anyone".
„Știți foarte bine că respect ce înseamnă partea aceasta de contracandidați, când este vorba de o doamnă contracandidat cu atât mai mult. Fac un apel la doamna să înțeleagă un pic aritmetica și politică și reală".	"You know very well that I respect all of this part of other candidates, all the more when it is a lady opponent. I appeal to the lady to understand a little arithmetic, both political and real".

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[11] https://recorder.ro/violenta-impotriva-femeilor-din-politica-a-devenit-doctrina-nationala-esti-redusa-la-functia-ta-de-a-face-copii-si-de-a-produce-placere/

The use of "lady" as a reference to the only female candidate in the presidential election of Romania[12] is marked by lexical associations which potentially produce negative other-representation, through a subtle reduction of the candidate's political identity and intellectual capabilities. "The lady from USR", "something interesting", "a respected lady", "a lady opponent" as "a lady" who runs for presidency, is nevertheless chasing a position "with a big hat", engaging in "too big a leap", and needs to "understand a little arithmetic". The juxtaposition is employed to highlight the incongruency between respectability and capability. The discursive strategy employed is vagueness and mitigation, distancing the referent from any political qualifications, through a generic use of "lady", also downplaying her suitability for presidency. From a CDA perspective, "the lady" is represented as a social agent through personalisation/categorisation (van Leeuwen 2008, 52), indicating superficial respect and traditional gendered behaviour, covering implicit biases. The discursive achievement targeted is distance between the opponent and the audience.

5. Conclusions

To discuss the tendencies identified in this phase of the study, I will revisit the three main characteristics of the 'landmark candidate' (discussed in 3.1.) in a parallel with the themes identified in the analysed dataset consisting of pre-campaign discourse. While the landmark candidate was presented as sophisticated, admirable, skilled in foreign affairs and explicitly oriented towards positive change, the politicians rated as top candidates considered it important to convince the audience of their ordinariness, legitimation through a baccalaureate degree, and polite gender representation.

As revealed by the analysis, candidates intentionally craft images of themselves as "normal," "simple," or "imperfect" individuals to resonate with the broader public and differentiate themselves from elites, positioning themselves as aligned with the interests of average Romanians. Linguistically, ordinariness is constructed using specific lexical choices meant to achieve the ethos of a humane candidate. The use of education credentials, particularly the baccalaureate diploma, serves as a new form of legitimation/delegitimation. Candidates engage in positive self-representation by emphasizing their academic qualifications, implying

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[12] At the moment of speech i.e. August 2024, one of the two female candidates, of which one was subsequently disqualified through a decision of the Constitutional Court for extremist behaviour.

competence and entitlement to lead, conversely used to undermine opponents' legitimacy or capabilities. This shift towards credential-based discourse highlights a novel layer of competition focused on proving credibility and educational attainment as critical qualifications for public office. Additionally, the analysis of gendered references, such as "lady" for the sole female candidate, reveals subtle strategies of delegitimation that minimize her political competence, through the use of vagueness and distancing language.

From the broad perspective, findings suggest that the mental models, i.e. subjective representations used in constructing candidate identities in an aim of shaping voter perceptions, address an ordinary population, with average studies and traditional gendered behaviour. From the narrow perspective, associations with familiarity and proximity represent agency in positive self- and negative other-descriptions, legitimizing certain candidates while diminishing others, in an uninterrupted effort to disqualify the opponent/-s and affiliate with the public.

In a permanent exploration of strategies crafted to influence voters' perception, candidates employ the discussed themes to shape their image ("normal", "legitimate", "polite"), reflecting subjective conceptions of broader societal norms about class, education and gender.

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