Sports metaphors and women’s empowerment in the 2014 European election campaign in Romania

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This paper examines sports metaphors as symbolic resources for electoral discourse, focusing on both their conventional nature and their strategic value in delivering the political message. It takes the form of a case study analyzing the multimodal realizations of the ‘EuroChampion’ sports metaphor in five posters used by the Romanian Liberal Party in the 2014 campaign for the European Parliament. We argue that the ‘EuroChampion’ metaphor and the richness of sports imagery are strategically used to enhance deeper doctrinal party positioning, such as promoting meritocracy and competitiveness, while, at the same time, empowering women candidates in the election.

Keywords: sports metaphor, metaphor and politics, electoral race, women’s empowerment

1. Introduction

In today’s highly emotionally-driven society, it is not surprising that, alongside drama and war, sport has become one of its dominant metaphors (Manning, 1991). Drawing on the use of sports imagery in politics, this paper aims to show how sports metaphors are employed in one aspect of politics, namely elections. We accordingly focus on multimodal realizations of sports metaphors used in five election posters by a Romanian political party.

Metaphors are a valuable rhetorical and ideological resource for politics and politicians, especially when used in elections. The use of metaphor for persuasive and rhetorical purposes in politics has been extensively addressed by metaphor scholars over the last few years (such as Chilton, 2004; Musolff, 2004; Ritchie,
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2011; Semino, 2008). Charteris-Black (2004), for example, examines how metaphors are used successfully by political leaders to project powerful representations of themselves and of the countries they lead. Metaphors are often used to bridge the distance between reason and emotion in political discourse (Charteris-Black, 2005). When sports metaphors are used to refer to political ideas, there may be an even greater potential for emotional engagement, since sports usually involve a strong connection and a shared enthusiasm between the players, the technical staff and the supporters. In this paper, we analyze sports metaphors used in election posters by a Romanian party during the 2014 campaign for the European Parliament. We focus on the multimodal realizations (verbal and visual) of these metaphors and their potential to support the ideological positioning of the party and to generate positive associations with women candidates.

Previous studies have shown that sports metaphors, alongside war metaphors, dominate much political discourse worldwide, enhancing the confrontational nature of political competition (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Howe, 1988; Gibbs, 1994; Semino, 2008) via their emotional and symbolic power (Dunning, 1999). In this paper, we seek to examine if there is in fact more to the use of sports imagery in politics than a simple appeal to an accessible and highly emotional source domain that resonates with the audience. To this end, we analyze the ‘EuroChampion’ metaphor used repeatedly in the electoral discourse of the Romanian National Liberal Party (PNL) during the 2014 elections to the European Parliament (EP). The study focuses firstly on the multimodal realizations of this metaphor in five election campaign posters, and secondly on the way in which the ‘EuroChampion’ metaphor connects with the established elections as sports conceptual analogy. Although there is a growing body of research on the use of metaphors in politics, and particularly in elections, considerably fewer studies focus explicitly on multimodal metaphors in election posters, or their use as drivers of the political message. Furthermore, works on metaphors in political discourse from Western European countries (such as Charteris-Black, 2005; Musolff, 2004; Semino, 2008) occupy significantly more space in the literature than studies of metaphors used in Eastern countries.

In this paper, we explore the conceptual match between particular sports metaphors and the liberal doctrine of the party using them in their posters, focusing on how the selection of sports metaphors fits the electoral message and the party’s ideological positioning on the political spectrum. We argue that, in addition to the conveying expressive richness of sports imagery, sports metaphors show a great potential for being used strategically as a symbolic discursive resource.

Furthermore, drawing on the literature on the hegemony of masculinity that tends to be embedded in much sports imagery and on previous studies of sports metaphors used in politics (see: Bairner, 2000; Connell, 1989; Dunning, 1986;
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Dworkin & Wachs, 2000; Jansen & Sabo, 1994; Malszecki & Cavar, 2001; Messner, 1992; Messner, Dunbar, & Hunt, 2000), we discuss how sports metaphors can be used to empower women candidates in elections. Given the prominent role of women in PNL’s 2014 electoral campaign, when they were given access to the main electable positions on the party list, we examine the role of sports metaphors in empowering women in politics and in building women’s political identities. We believe that our analysis might contribute valuable insights to this less discussed topic – the metaphorical framings of women’s roles in politics. We accordingly seek to show how sports metaphors could be used to generate positive, non-aggressive associations with women candidates.

2. Sports and elections: Stimulating competition and assessing candidates’ performance

2.1 Sports imagery and politics

Politics is one of the main social fields that have turned to sports imagery in an attempt to capitalize on the potential of the latter to reach out and engage people. This is one reason why the language of politics, and of elections in particular, is closely connected to sports, especially through metaphorical associations. As early as the mid ’90s, it has been argued that sports-related metaphors have come to dominate the language of politics (Segrave, 1994). But what lies behind the large scale ‘sportification’ of politics? Why are sports metaphors so frequently used in political discourse?

Allusions to sports are used in politics in order to build a solid common ground, a basic binding agent of meaning-making. On the one hand, it is the familiarity with the field that makes it easier to be accepted and understood, as sports ultimately end up “bringing people closer to the public affairs, by enabling them to discuss politics in terms that are rather familiar and accessible to them” (Semino & Masci, 1996, p. 250). On the other hand, sports provide simplification (Segrave, 1994), turning politics into a competitive framework where the positions of the actors and the outcome of their activity are very clear: they are competing to win. This function of sporting activities is even more important when elections are at stake. Finally, an aspect that we find equally central to political use is the wide applicability of sports, which is consistent with the political quest for wide-scale electoral support. Thus, the fact that sports “attract mass audiences and excite strong passions across the barriers of social class and regional origin” (Semino & Masci, 1996, p. 247) becomes a useful tool for politics in terms of addressability and outreach.
In today’s society, sports have become a “powerful vehicle for mediating meanings and feelings” (Kennedy & Hills, 2009, p. 1). We argue that one of the main sources that provide sports with such social value is related to identity and identification issues, which are important for the functioning of sports (Dunning, 1999, p. 5). Similarly to politics, sports are governed by a representation mechanism, as athletes and teams compete for their fans or for the community they are part of (i.e. club level, regional level, or national level). It is this ‘we-ness’ feeling and the identification with the performances of the athletes that keep our interest alive and trigger our engagement with sporting activities. Indeed, it seems fair to suggest that almost everybody develops a sports-related identity at some point in their lives and attaches deep meaning to sporting events (Shapiro, 1989).

Finally, politics has found in sports not only a valuable “seduction imagery” (Soulage, 1998, p. 134) that captivates the public, but also a powerful mobilizing force. The emotional engagement and involvement that people feel and the quest for exciting significance (Maguire et al., 2002) make people want to be part of the performance. This organic engagement and the power of sports “to project onto politics the connotations of enthusiasm, competitiveness, and personal involvement” (Semino & Masci, 1996, p. 251) spur political actors to use sports metaphors to bolster up the intended effects of their discourse.

2.2 Sports metaphors in times of elections

During elections, political discourse abounds in metaphors, conventionally or creatively mobilized to draw voters’ attention and engagement. As noted earlier, sports and war have often been found to be important metaphorical source domains in framing political events, particularly elections (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Howe, 1988; Gibbs, 1994; Semino, 2008). Media coverage of elections is filled with sports and war metaphors, and, arguably, many such metaphors tend to be conventionalized, e.g. running for office, a neck-and-neck race, fighting a battle. Candidates themselves also use sports metaphors in their electoral speeches to describe themselves, to refer to their campaign or to that of their opponents. Sometimes, they employ novel metaphors associated with sports, e.g. Obama’s extended basketball metaphors used in the 2008 Democratic primaries (see below).

The race conceptual metaphor is arguably the most pervasive metaphor used in election discourse (Matlock, 2013; Burnes, 2011; Scheithauer, 2007). Some popular linguistic realizations of these metaphors are: “Bernie Sanders formally announced that he was running for President” (Lepore The New Yorker, July 9, 2015), “White House candidates hurtling almost neck-and-neck towards the finish” (Deignan, 2005, p. 30; note the shared conceptual structure with motion of the race metaphor). Following this confrontation logic and given the shared
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winning/losing balance of power, elections are also frequently presented as a battle (Burnes, 2011; Scheithauer, 2007), moving the focus from competitiveness to a more combative approach, as in “Increasingly, it looks as if Sanders is fighting a battle that he can’t win” (Cassidy, The New Yorker, April 21, 2016) or in “If any of those men have the misfortune of running against Hillary in 2016 or 2020, she will defeat them so soundly” (Borowitz, The New Yorker, December 12, 2012).

When it comes to sports metaphors used in politics, a lot of American political discourse is unsurprisingly full of football and baseball metaphors (Howe, 1988; Lakoff, 1995). Strong personal and cultural associations with football (soccer) have been strategically exploited through metaphors by many European politicians, too. For instance, the former Italian prime-minister’s discourse is built around the football metaphor; Berlusconi framed his decision to enter politics thus: “So I felt that the match was becoming dangerous, that it was all being played in the penalty areas and that the midfield was sadly empty” (Semino & Masci, 1996, p. 248).

Looking at the role of sports metaphors in specific aspects of American cultural discourse, Segrave (2000) remarks that these metaphors have been particularly popular in the political discourse of U.S. presidents: F.D. Roosevelt’s appeal to baseball language in “I have no expectation of making a hit every time I come to bat”, or Clinton’s recourse to football vocabulary in “This is like being ahead in the fourth quarter of a football game. Now is not the time to walk off the field and forfeit the victory” (Segrave, 2000, pp. 51–52) are just two illustrative examples. Nixon mastered the use of football metaphors in politics, to the point of overlapping the two domains; he even chose quarterback as a code name for him as president (Jansen & Sabo, 1994). The 2008 Democratic primaries also witnessed an abundance of sports metaphors used to talk about politics and elections. The then Democratic nominee Barack Obama extensively used basketball metaphors to illustrate the sinuous trajectory of a time consuming and nerve shattering campaign, (the U.S. presidential race): “It’s like we’re in a basketball game, and I’m gonna fumble the ball, and someone’s gonna steal the ball, and I’m gonna miss a free throw, but we’re gonna win the game” (Quote cited in MacFarquhar, ‘The Conciliator,’ The New Yorker, May 7, 2007).

One of the reasons why sports metaphors are so appealing in electoral discourse may lie in the fact that both elections and sports share a competitive basis. As with politics in general, sports metaphors are used to construct elections as a clear goal-driven activity (i.e. winning), involving at least two opposing sides, identifiable and recognizable by the public. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, unlike in sports, the public is an active decision-making entity empowered by the democratic process of elections. Thus, elections tend to draw on what we may call purposive sports (e.g., football, tennis, basketball, or rugby), as opposed to aesthetic ones
(e.g., gymnastics, ice-skating, or synchronized swimming) (Bell, 2009, p. 48), as the former are highly goal-oriented activities following a zero-sum logic. Similarly, elections involve a dynamic interaction process, in which opposing parties try to achieve the same goal, while preventing one another from doing so.

Electoral dynamics places the political confrontation within the structural coordinates of the ‘cooperative means-competitive ends’ sports, which is more about game sports than individual sports, thus implicitly acknowledging the importance of teamwork in achieving victory. Sports metaphors allow candidates to discursively display attachment to voters by emphasizing teamwork and group effort (Semino, 2008). In elections, the race metaphor may be used to emphasize the performance of both individual (e.g., candidates in presidential elections) and collective players (e.g., parties in parliamentary elections). In our case, namely the 2014 elections to the European Parliament, we discuss the race metaphor primarily in relation to competition between political parties, since we focus on the electoral posters of the National Liberal Party. Similarly to sports teams, parties competing in the European elections assemble ‘teams of candidates’ in their attempt to win the race.

Work on the use of sports metaphors in politics and in elections, in particular, has shown that the complex and prolific domain of sports is preferred by politicians who enter electoral races for a variety of reasons. As mentioned before, sports are a very familiar experience for many ordinary citizens (Howe, 1988; Semino & Masci, 1996; Semino, 2008) and many politicians use sports metaphors to connect to ordinary people (Charteris-Black, 2005). The most highly emphasized sports features in electoral discourse have been found to be the physical and mental attributes of the participants (Semino, 2008). This is closely related to the type of sport used to build the metaphorical correspondences. Admittedly, politicians show greater inclination for the use of contact sports (football, boxing, baseball, etc.) as source domains, in their attempt to equate physical (and, sometimes, mental) power with political power. During elections, candidates throw themselves into the race (as did Theodore Roosevelt back in 1912 when he announced his candidacy by saying “My hat is in the ring”, http://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org), or they aim for a comeback (“You could never have a Hart-Mondale race anymore, where Hart won the early primaries and Mondale came back to defeat him.” said John McCain in 2007, McGrath The New Yorker, September 3, 2007). Furthermore, many contact sports metaphors are also used by the media to communicate about elections and about candidates’ performance during electoral campaigns. Thus, reporting on the general elections in 2015 in the UK, the British press predicted that politics is a “bare-knuckle fight again” (Daley, The Telegraph, October 4, 2014). Media coverage of the 2016 U.S. election in the UK has argued that the “gloves come off at last as Bernie Sanders attacks Hillary” (Usborne, The Independent, February 1, 2016).
Sports metaphors such as these tend also to involve a gender bias, since contact sports are usually played by men. The extensive use of these metaphors thus favors the construction and mediation of a masculine hegemony (represented by aggressive behaviour, extreme competitiveness, and/or the drive to dominate) in politics and, consequently, in elections (Howe, 1988; Jansen & Sabo, 1994).

The ‘machismo’ (Segrave, 2000) that generally characterizes electoral politics has roots in the overuse of sports metaphors which stress physical strength and/or the endurance abilities of the participants in a race. This gender bias, when amplified by the competitive nature of elections, may result in a rather masculinized approach to campaigning and to politics. To what extent could sports metaphors go beyond this stereotype of enhancing a rather aggressive manliness in elections and instead reframe the electoral race using less-aggressive logic? We explore possible alternative frames when analyzing the five Romanian campaign posters.

3. ‘EuroChampions’ at work: Corpus and methodology

The corpus for this study consisted of five campaign posters used during the May 2014 European Parliament elections by the National Liberal Party (PNL). They were taken from the official Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/pnl.ro/) of the National Liberal Party, where they had been posted as promotional materials during the campaign. From the six posters posted on the party’s Facebook page, we selected only the five ones that depicted the actual candidates in the EP elections, excluding the one that portrayed two high profile Romanian politicians (i.e. Crin Antonescu, the PNL party leader at the time and Klaus Iohannis, the PNL candidate in the 2014 Presidential elections in Romania) who did not run for a position in the 2014 EP elections. We argue that the latter poster used the EP election context as a good opportunity to show the party’s endorsement for Klaus Iohannis, the PNL candidate in the 2014 Presidential elections, and set the scene for the much more important presidential race to take place later in that year. Therefore, since our focus is on the EP elections, we decided not to include this poster in our corpus. Furthermore, PNL was the only party that had election posters dedicated to some of its candidates, namely two women politicians who were already members of the EP and, in 2014, were running for another term.

We are particularly interested in the linguistic and visual realizations of the elections are sports conceptual metaphor used in these posters, as well as in

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1. The posters were retrieved from the PNL’s official Facebook page and reproduced in this paper with the written permission of the party’s spokesperson and head of communication department.
the strategic use of the metaphor in the party’s electoral discourse. The main research questions that guided our analysis were:

1. How is the central metaphor ‘EuroChampions’ [EuroCampionii, in Romanian] conveyed through the linguistic and visual modes in the posters?
2. What are the implications of the use of this metaphor for the promotion of women candidates (4 out of the 6 mandates of the Party were given to women)?
3. To what extent does the use of the ‘EuroChampion’ metaphor allude to the ideological values promoted by the party?

To answer them we have taken a deductive approach; we assume the existence of the conventional conceptual metaphor (extensively documented in the literature) politics/elections are sports and we look for multimodal realizations of it in the PNL’s 2014 EP election campaign posters. Thus, we examine how the metaphor is conveyed both verbally and visually in the posters and how these modes of expression enrich, cognitively and emotionally, the message communicated.

We build our analysis of the ‘EuroChampion’ metaphor on the MIPVU procedure (Steen et al, 2010) for identification of metaphorically-related words (MRW). The MIPVU procedure emphasizes “the importance of analyzing linguistic data on a word-by-word basis” (Steen et al., 2010, p. 25) in order to establish their metaphoricity. Therefore, lexical units should be treated as a whole, without breaking up multimorphemic words, such as EuroCampionii ‘EuroChampion(s)’, in which the prefix ‘Euro’ is attached to ‘champion’. The root morpheme ‘champion’, which constitutes a meaningful word in itself, without the prefix, appears in the dictionary, whereas the compound ‘EuroChampion’ does not. However, despite the MIPVU guidelines, we have decided to go inside the item ‘EuroChampion’ when applying the procedure and establish the metaphoricity of the word ‘Champion’. We consider that the prefix ‘Euro’ was added to the word to indicate the type of elections (i.e. European elections) that the posters refer to. The prefix does not necessarily modify the meaning of the word ‘Champion’, it only shows that it is about a particular kind of champion that the posters present. Furthermore, the graphic display of the ‘EuroChampion’, in which the first letter of ‘Champion’ is capitalized” seems to suggest that this word, and not the prefix, carries the meaning intended, i.e. the candidates in the posters are champions, a particular type of champions – EuroChampions.

In the posters, the lexical item ‘champion’ is used with a contextual sense that is different, but related to its basic sense. The basic sense is “person that wins the first place in a sports competition” ("Dictionary of the Romanian Language", dlexonline.ro), while the second sense (marked as figurative in the dictionary) is “person that fights for an idea, for a cause, defender of an idea, of a cause”. One
limitation to applying MIPVU to Romanian is the lack of a corpus-based dictionary of the Romanian language. However, for the purpose of our study, the use of the online version of DEX (the “Dictionary of the Romanian Language”) is sufficient, since we analyze posters that have little linguistic content. In short, we consider ‘EuroChampion’ as a MRW.

As for the analysis of the visual representations of elections are sports, we rely on studies of visual rhetoric in advertising (Forceville, 1996, 2008; Phillips & McQuarrie, 2004). When analyzing the visual expression of the metaphor, we observe that the source domain is represented through sports symbols (e.g., the cup, the badges, the timer) and integrated with the target. These symbols are familiar markers used to visually trigger either the source or the target of the metaphor, or to visually express some of the mappings between these concepts (see the VISMET corpus annotation scheme available on the website of the Metaphor Lab Amsterdam). In addition to the familiar visual markers, our analysis also included other features of the visual realization of the elections are sports metaphor, such as candidates as athletes and their depiction as a team on the posters. Once we have identified its verbal and visual expressions, we suggest interpretations of the ‘EuroChampions’ metaphor for each of the five posters analyzed, in order to determine the meaning of the metaphorical correspondences in the images and, ultimately, to grasp the intended message of the campaign.

4. Findings: Identification and analysis of the metaphors in the posters

We start the analysis with the electoral posters that display the whole team of candidates, since the EP election used a party-list system. Then, we continue with a thorough analysis of the posters depicting individual candidates, leaders of the liberal team (those who were placed on the first two eligible positions on the party list).

There is one visual element that we would like to briefly discuss before proceeding to the analysis of the linguistic and visual realization of the elections are sports metaphor in the posters selected. The logo of the party – a yellow arrow, pointing upwards, in a blue quadrant – is present in almost all posters, except poster 2. One can argue that the logo in itself is a powerful metaphorical image; the position of the arrow could be interpreted as a visual realization of the established orientational metaphor GOOD IS UP. The rising arrow indicates motion, progress, and in this case it suggests the forward progress of the party, but also the forward progress by the party (the progress projected onto voters and the country, in general). Considered as part of the posters, the logo supports the visual realization of sports metaphors. Performance in sports is forward-oriented, athletes
seek a vertical trajectory in their career; they aim to reach goals that are ‘up’. Both sports and politics rest on the notion of upwardness in assessing the performance of athletes/teams and candidates/parties, respectively, because high performance is up. In the analyzed posters, the logo is consistent with the interpretation that high performance is essential both in sports and politics. However, taken separately, the logo still points to a connection between ‘up’ and politics, but it does not necessarily suggest a link between ‘up’ and politics and sports. We consider that it is the particularity of these campaign posters (the fact that they are built on the elections as sports mapping) that prompts a richer interpretation of the logo. This is one reason for which we believe that the logo (which appears on all visual materials of the party, during or outside elections) is not a visual element that is intrinsically related to the 2014 EP election campaign, whereas the posters discussed here are; in fact, the posters were designed for this particular campaign.

Campaign poster 1

In the first poster, the ‘EuroChampions’ metaphor is visually suggested by the team-like presentation of the candidates. It is worth mentioning that women were central to PNL’s campaigning for the 2014 EP elections. As we show later, the first two women on the PNL’s electoral list of candidates also benefit from their own posters, in which their merits and qualities as ‘EuroChampions’ are presented. On the one hand, the positioning of the political actors reflects a certain group-discipline (i.e. symmetrical arrangement) and interaction (i.e. high proximity and even direct contact between candidates). On the other hand, the same clothing style and chromatic choice enhances the embedded team representation.

Furthermore, the textual message inserted in the poster, ‘Support the EuroChampions’, is consistent with the sports imagery and the general call for
support addressed to the public. As is the case with sports teams, elections are a competition in which political teams strive for the support of massive audiences.

Finally, the poster includes a familiar symbol of sports imagery – the winning cup – used to visually allude to the ‘EuroChampions’ metaphor, and, thus, to contribute to the interpretation of elections in terms of sports. This visual element enhances the linguistic realization of the ‘EuroChampions’ metaphor by enriching it with the symbolic image of the winner’s golden cup, which is implicitly associated with top performance and victory. Compositionally, the content and the graphical representation of the poster are consistent with the metaphorical association between candidates and victorious athletes, and also between elections and sport competitions. Chromatically, the consistency between the gold-yellow color of the text font and of the cup adds to the interpretation of the message through sports/champion-related imagery.

Campaign poster 2

The second poster that we investigated focuses on team as a collective political actor and places the ‘EuroChampions’ metaphor in a change-oriented metaphorical framework: ‘power to change’ and ‘adjustment’ (‘Let’s adjust Romania’s time to Europe’s clock’). The motion verbs used, i.e. to ‘change’ [a schimba, active, infinitive mode] and to ‘adjust’ [să dăm, active, subjunctive mode], express candidates’ views on the current state of affairs and their desire to improve it by aligning the country with a linear, forward movement, as suggested by the clock. ‘Change’ as a motion metaphor (Matlock, 2013) has been largely used in political discourse not only to convey the challenging of the status-quo by political actors who employ it, but also to suggest the prospect of improvement due to changing direction. Unsurprisingly, motion metaphors have been the key messages in important electoral campaigns such as Clinton’s 1992 US presidential campaign built

Figure 2. PNL campaign poster 2
around the slogan “Change vs. more of the same” (Matlock, 2012) or Obama’s 2008 (“Change”) and 2012 campaigns (“Forward”).

The foregrounded metaphor here, in both the textual and visual modes, is the time-moving metaphor time is moving forward through space (see Boroditsky, 2000; Gentner, Imai & Boroditsky, 2002) that is realized linguistically by ‘clock’ and ‘Europe’s time’. However, the visual representation of time as a clock activates associations with another sports-related element: the timer. An important component of sports paraphernalia, the timer has here a normative, referential significance, i.e. evaluation of the athletes after strict rules of performance. At the same time, the timer is indicative of a sense of urgency, i.e. the time pressure of the competitive framework.

**Campaign poster 3**

Despite being the least metaphorically rich poster in our corpus, the third poster of the campaign is also built around teamwork and team effort as essential components of the sports conceptual and symbolic repertoire. The visual representation of elections as sports focuses here on the extended political team: in addition to the candidates in the EP elections, the whole party as a team is depicted in the image. The team members behind the ‘EuroChampions’ are brought to the fore and, along with them, the implicit teamwork effort.

![Figure 3. PNL campaign poster 3](image)

In this poster, the focus is on the teamwork, making the ‘EuroChampions’ metaphor more about teams and team performance than about individuals and individual performance. Teamwork is a shared value for both politics and sports. The metaphor of teamwork “is explicitly cooperative” (Cudd, 2007, p. 64), in that
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ambivalent nature of the ‘cooperative means-competitive ends’ design, which makes it both attractive and morally valued by society.

The yellow scarves could be linked to the ones that are usually worn by the supporters of sports clubs, to symbolize belonging to a community. Although they are not specific to a particular sport, in general, the use of sports-club branded scarves is mainly associated with team sports such as football, basketball, rugby or handball. Moreover, fans usually wear them during competitions in order to express their sports-related identity and their support for their favorite team. Here, the politicians wearing yellow scarves could be mapped onto athletes, based on the visual representation of politicians’ standing position, similar to that of athletes solemnly listening to the national anthem during sports events. Nevertheless, in this poster there are no additional explicit elements to visually convey the ‘EuroChampion’ metaphor (e.g., the absence of the golden cup).

The next two posters move the focus from the collective actor, the ‘EuroChampions’ team, to individual actors, namely the two leading candidates of the party, Norica Nicolai and Adina Vălean. There is not only a highly compositional similarity between the two posters (e.g., the spatial arrangement of the image elements, text, and picture), but also a similarity in terms of the linguistic (e.g., the ‘EuroChampion’ linguistic metaphor, the ‘fight’ linguistic metaphor) and visual (e.g., the golden cup, the winner’s badges) means by which elections are sports is conveyed.

Campaign poster 4

Figure 4. PNL campaign poster 4


2. Cooperation within the team (cooperative means) and competition between teams (competitive ends) for achieving the goal, that is winning against the other competitors.
'EuroChampion of Romanians’ dignity’ is literally nonsensical; only the metaphorical reading of this phrase is meaningful, provided that we understand politics and elections in terms of sports. As a political champion, Nicolai defends her fellow countrymen’s dignity in Europe. There is an explicit principle of representation, built on the metonymic relationship between politicians and the countries they represent. Being the ‘EuroChampion’ of Romanians’ dignity allows the candidate to identify herself with Romania and, consequently, transfer her political gains to Romanians in general. In a comparable manner, the winning athletes symbolically transfer their victories to the countries they represent.

Next, the text of the poster reads ‘Norica fights for…’, which is a war insertion in the sports metaphorical framing. This is not surprising, given that sports and war both include a conceptual confrontational dimension. As far as the lexical item fight is concerned, the dictionary only registers the war-related sense, when we look up the verb. As a noun, the sport-related sense is also present, but, according to MIPVU, the analysis of MRW has to be made within the same word class.

The reference to ‘war’ and ‘warrior’, in addition to the ‘fighting’ metaphor, suggests a higher level of determination and devotion attributed to the ‘EuroChampion’ as political performer. The text in the badges refers to the things (the causes) that the candidate fights for in the European Parliament: regional security for Romania, equal rights for Romanians in the EU, better paid maternity leave and elimination of violence against women.

The sports competition imagery activated by the ‘EuroChampion’ metaphor also acts as a catalyst for the war source domain. The ‘fight for’ metaphor makes the political fight seem less personal and aggressive when interpreted in the sports-related framing. At the same time, this metaphor reveals a strong feeling of determination and an action-oriented political positioning of the candidate. It is not a ‘fight against’ someone, but a ‘fight for’ certain causes, the focus being switched from the confrontation between political opponents to a more abstract (and thus, less aggressive) fight to achieve socio-political goals, which more people could benefit from. Therefore, the ‘EuroChampion’ metaphor redefines the underlying ‘politician/candidate as warrior’ metaphor in a way that makes the electoral race be more about promoting high political performance and less about outshining other candidates.

Visually, this poster adds to the metaphorical representation of the sports domain. In addition to the golden winning cup, there are also four badges with ribbons (familiar visual symbols for sportive competitions) that are usually given to winners. The victory badges allude to the idea of meritocracy that is suggested by the ‘EuroChampion’ metaphor: the candidate is awarded these badges in recognition of her meritorious previous activity in the EP and of the high political performance. She is determined to continue the ‘fight’, and this is why she competes for another five-year mandate as member of the EP. While the golden cup is
the generic visual anchor of the ‘EuroChampion’ metaphor, the text in the badges explains the achievements that led the candidate to victory. To sum up, one may infer that the implicit intention behind the use of these familiar visual markers is that citizens associate Norica Nicolai with the image of a (political) winner who successfully represents them at European level and that they should vote for her to ensure that she continues to perform.

*Campaign poster 5*

![Campaign poster 5](image_url)

The fifth and last poster analyzed puts another woman candidate in the spotlight, Adina Vălean. She is the ‘EuroChampion of low roaming tariffs in the EU’ [*EuroCampioana tarifelor scăzute la roaming in UE*]. This is a very specific, tangible area of competence (by comparison with the ‘EuroChampion of Romanians’ dignity’, in poster 4), which makes the candidate’s political performance easier to assess. The lead text is followed by a body that reads: ‘Adina has reduced the roaming tariffs with 80% for calls, with 77% for SMS and with 91% for data transfer, thus saving up to over 1 billion Euro to Romanians’ bills’. This explanation of the extended metaphor ‘EuroChampion of low roaming tariffs’ is a form of legitimating the candidate’s promise by means of showing her track record, alluding to the statistics that show previous achievements of the athletes, and using this record as an indication of what is to be expected politically from the candidate. Furthermore, the reference to her past performance highlights her potential and determination to continue fighting for Europeans’ and Romanians’ interests. The text of the poster reads “Adina fights for…”, and the goals of Adina’s ‘fights’ are free roaming, use of GPS data to track emergency number calls, and ensuring Romania’s access to the Schengen Area. They are visually represented by victory badges with ribbons in the colors of the party (blue and yellow). Adina’s metonymical association with the country she represents is made visible by portraying her in the middle of a crowd waving Romanian flags, while enjoying the recognition of her accomplishments.
5. Discussion

The ‘EuroChampion(s)’ metaphor works as a powerful anchor metaphor on which the 2014 EP election campaign of the Romanian Liberal Party (PNL) was built. On the one hand, this encompassing metaphor provides consistency and an interpretation that is the key for all the electoral messages of the party. On the other hand, the metaphor contains the message of the party: promoting the competitiveness and performance of the ‘champion’ candidates.

There are two main ideas that the party seeks to convey to its voters through the sports metaphor that dominates the campaign: the meritocratic culture promoted by the party in choosing its candidates to the EP elections and the empowerment of women in politics. In what follows, we address each of these key election messages captured by the linguistic and visual manifestations of the ‘EuroChampion’ metaphor.

Beyond the general attractiveness of sports metaphors to political discourse, due to their wide addressability, decoding readiness and embedded emotional triggers, we argue that the choice of the ‘EuroChampion’ metaphor by the PNL is also consistent with the liberal political doctrine. Competitiveness is a constitutive element of the neoliberal ideology, which favors the meritocratic logic of rankings, hierarchies and public acknowledgement of success. Seen as the “ultimate meritocracy” (Bell, 2009, p. 54), sports speak not only about competition, but also about performance. The ‘champion’ metaphor is thus connected with both the competitive framework and the visible indicators of success. Furthermore, the consistency of the ‘EuroChampion’ metaphor with neoliberal and capitalist principles “revolves around the rule-governed nature and competitively challenging nature” (Cudd, 2007, p. 55) of sport activities.

The ‘EuroChampion’ metaphor is about standards of excellence mobilized either as an electoral promise (i.e. future-oriented), or as a status confirmation (past-oriented), as with Adina Vălean’s (political) track record depicted in poster 5. Within this general framework of successful competitive representation of the electorate at the European level, the party highlights the performance-oriented meritocratic approach that guides its actions and underscores the expertise and the competitiveness of its candidates as legitimate ‘EuroChampions’.

The effectiveness of the ‘EuroChampion’ metaphor and of the complex sport imagery that it triggers lies in the mobilizing power and the promise of success embedded in the metaphor. To some extent, we could argue that the metaphor dyad ‘champion – fights for’ aims to legitimate the call for electoral support as regards both goal-orientation (the winning status of the champion) and process-orientation (fighting for clear objectives). Moreover, there are at least three consistent references to the idea of collective gain and performance: one related to the explicit
teamwork metaphor of the ‘EuroChampions’ (PNL’s team of EuroChampions in poster 3), a second one embedded in the very status of sports champion (as metonymically representative of the country, in posters 4 and 5) and a third related to Romanians as direct beneficiaries of a champion’s performance (i.e. Romanians’ dignity in poster 4). They all speak about that ‘we-ness’ feeling and the identification with top-performance political actors in the EU political arena as the ultimate level of successful representation on the international political stage.

Interestingly, the posters analyzed (especially posters 4 and 5) explicitly contain linguistic and visual representations of women candidates as ‘EuroChampions’. Metaphorical correspondences between sports and women politicians’ electoral performance pose some challenges that are easier to overcome when the candidate is a man. Sports (and war) metaphors have been largely documented in the literature as important rhetorical and communication resources to construct and consolidate hegemonic masculinity (Gregory, 2010; Jansen & Sabo, 1994; Worsching, 1999). As mentioned earlier in the paper, the use of sports metaphors in elections usually favors associations with more aggressive, even violent sports, such as football, basketball or boxing. Not surprisingly, women are less represented in these sports compared with men. Furthermore, sports metaphors are extensively used in politics and in business to convey competitiveness, domination and the obsessive drive to win that characterize hegemonic masculinity (Gregory, 2010). Metaphorical references to aggressive sports also epitomize the superiority of athletes/candidates involved in the competition.

However, the analysis of sports metaphors used in the PNL’s campaign shows that sports need not be a privileged domain for men candidates; it can also be coherently and consistently used to empower women candidates, especially in times when women’s participation in political competitions is increasing and encouraged.

The champion metaphor, along with the visual repertoire of victory symbols, such as the golden cup or the badges, does not trigger associations with a specific sport discipline, but rather with a more generic framework of sporting success. This, in turn, helps the sports-related imagery overcome gender-biased representations. Thus, sports metaphors are not limited in elections to constructing representations of “manly men” (Jansen & Sabo, 1994, p. 11); sports-related associations can also promote women politicians as different from “womanly women” (Jansen & Sabo, 1994, p. 11) – mothers, loving wives, daughters – or than women that (need to) “act like men” (Jansen & Sabo, 1994, p. 12) in order to secure victory.

Posters 4 and 5 explicitly use visual symbols to metaphorically frame women’s candidacies through sports. Both candidates are women who do not necessarily engage in an aggressive and deadly competitive race to win voters’ minds and hearts. On the contrary, by using the ‘EuroChampion’ metaphor they are portrayed
as winners and meritorious participants in the representative democracy of the EU. Unlike many other electoral campaign products, these posters build on the positive dimension of sport competition, which is conceptually mapped to elections. PNL’s women candidates are already victorious, and they use the metaphor to make people value more their political accomplishments once they are presented in a more familiar way, as sports victories. Furthermore, the ‘EuroChampion’ metaphor allows for a valorization of women’s participation in electoral politics and for a presentation of their success, even if their achievements are usually related to ‘feminized’ issues, such as paid family leave or fighting against domestic violence.

Finally, we should mention that the metaphor of the ‘EuroChampion’ is based on the overlap of two concepts: CHAMPION and EUROPE, which are brought together by the competitive framework of the EP elections. This overlap, however, remains a contextual sport-politics hybrid nexus (see the juxtaposition highlighted by the delimitation between the two units of the compound through the use of capital letters ‘Euro’ and ‘Champion’). The juxtaposition of the two confirms the highly contextualizing power of sports imagery in social fields where different forms of competition are present, such as politics and elections, in particular.

6. Conclusions

This study aimed to shed light on the rich metaphorical framings obtained by using sports imagery in the electoral discourse. Nevertheless, in addition to the general arguments regarding the accessibility and highly emotional identification triggers related to the sport source domain, we argue that sports metaphors can be strategically used to enhance more complex political messages such as doctrinal party positioning or the empowerment of women candidates in the elections.

The ‘EuroChampion(s)’ anchor metaphor used by the Romanian National Liberal Party in the EP electoral campaign is built within the competitiveness framework, which is highly consistent with the meritocratic liberal principle. The sport source domain triggers a whole mobilization mechanism, since at the European level (i.e. the European Parliament), the ‘EuroChampions’ are the ones who represent the entire nation. Therefore, this identification principle, along with the embedded national prestige of being represented by top performers (i.e. ‘EuroChampions’), is used to raise support and generate emotional engagement on the part of the voters.

In the ‘EuroChampion(s)’ metaphor, we have identified an interesting mechanism of using the sports domain in a creative way in order to meritocratically legitimize and empower women candidates. Moreover, the metaphor conjures the warrior imagery (‘fights for’), without the violence usually entailed by war, thus
making the competitive electoral confrontation less aggressive and more about the meritocratic attributes of candidates.

The visual realization of the ‘EuroChampion(s)’ metaphor (i.e. the gold cup or the winning badges) provides consistency for the sports-related interpretation frame generated by the electoral posters and highlights the association between top performance and the winning side in a competitive race. Nevertheless, further studies on the reception of sports metaphors in electoral discourse might provide an in-depth understanding of the effects they have in terms of both attitudinal and behavioral reactions of the voters.

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