



Centring European inter-imperial peripheries: Intersectional dynamics in Romania during the long election year 2024/2025[☆]

Introduction

"This year, the citizens of more than 60 countries, representing nearly half of the global population, will go to the polls, making 2024 the biggest election year the world has ever seen. A democratic mechanism of that magnitude will have a far-reaching impact on billions of citizens. [...] To make this possible, we need to make sure that everyone's voice is heard; this requires the democratic participation of female voters and candidates in elections that are fair and free from intimidation, violence, and threats." (Johnson Sirleaf, 2024, n.p.)

Looking back, we can only agree with the apt observation of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, former Liberian president and the first female president on the African continent, that the year 2024 went down in the records of recent democratic history as a momentous episode during which about half of humanity cast their ballot in elections. To begin with, different types of elections were organised across the world during that year, which made it a "super-elections year" of planetary proportions. They included local and municipal elections in such countries as Brazil and Turkey, legislative elections in South Africa and India, as well as presidential elections in the United States, Finland, and Taiwan. Elections were also organised at the easternmost corners of Europe, or the so-called European peripheries, as Eastern Europe is expediently labelled in mainstream Western-centric analyses (Boatcă, 2015, 2016; Kulawik, 2020). Local elections also took place in Hungary (9 June 2024), while legislative elections were organised in Croatia (17 April 2024), not to mention the elections for the Parliament of the European Union (EU), which took place across all constitutive Member States. Among the countries in these European peripheries, Romania witnessed a particularly intense and long election year. Indeed, the EU parliamentary elections were organised concomitantly with the local elections on 9 June 2024, just like in Hungary. Then, the presidential elections were initially planned in two rounds: 24 November and 8 December 2024. Intertwined with these, the elections for the national bicameral Parliament were held on 1 December 2024. After the first round of presidential elections was annulled by the Constitutional Court, re-runs were organised in two rounds, on 4 and 18 May 2025, respectively. Therefore, as a reminder that these elections were all bound together, we have coined the phrase "the long election year 2024/2025".

As Johnson Sirleaf emphasised, the legitimacy of such democratic mechanisms rests crucially on the active and full participation of citizens

and the foundational role of gender equality. With this in mind, we argue that gender may serve as a heuristic indicator when examining the various reconfigurations of current democratic (and undemocratic) landscapes. On the one hand, the analyses of gendered electoral representation, the parties' organisational infrastructures, and their political agendas provide us with insights into the persistent inequalities and obstacles to women's political representation, be they descriptive, substantive, or symbolic (Pitkin, 1972). Descriptive representation pertains here to the actual number of women elected to various political positions, whilst substantive representation concerns women's political agency (within parliaments, governments, and other state institutions), and the development of social and economic policies reflecting women's interests (Celis & Childs, 2008; Chiva, 2017; Pitkin, 1972). In contrast, symbolic representation refers to both the visual and discursive aspects through which gendered symbols constitute identity, reify legitimacy, and establish and maintain political control (Lombardo & Meier, 2014).

In Romania, women have been forced to navigate a political landscape wherein support is often conjectural and provisional in a context of tacit misogyny dressed up as concern for traditional family values (Băluță, 2013, 2015; Băluță & Tufiş, 2024; Mateescu & Tufiş, 2024; Norocel, 2018). More recently, the appropriation of women's rights discourse by various far-right parties, including the promotion of women to high-profile leadership roles such as in the case of Diana Ivanovici Șoșoacă, constitutes a research field yet to be explored in detail (Ferent et al., 2026). Taken together, these complex dynamics call for critical reflection upon the political instrumentalisation of gender, as well as the analytical categories deployed by scholars to study it. The long election year 2024/2025 provides an excellent opportunity to probe deeper into the role played by gender and other categories of social structuring in the conditioning of political participation (Celis & Childs, 2020; Collins, 2019; Erzeel & Rashkova, 2023).

The long election year 2024/2025 in Romania

The timetable for organising these elections was subordinated to the electoral interests of the ruling coalition, formed by the nominally centre-left Social Democratic Party (*Partidul Social Democrat*, henceforth PSD), the main liberal conservative National Liberal Party (*Partidul Național Liberal*, PNL) and the oscillating centre-right Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (*Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România*, UDMR/*Româniai Magyar Demokrata Szövetség*, RMDSZ). Consequently,

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local elections were organised jointly with those for the EU Parliament on 9 June, whilst the elections for the national bicameral Parliament were scheduled for 1 December, sandwiched between the original two rounds of presidential elections planned for 24 November and 8 December 2024.

As a consequence of this scheduling, the campaign strategies and electoral agendas were shaped in very specific ways (Stan & Zaharia, 2025). In the first instance, the debates focused mainly on the local elections, which were more consequential for political parties than the EU elections, while, in the second instance, the overlap led to an emphasis on the presidential candidates, overshadowing the parliamentary elections and the parties' electoral programmes. Furthermore, in the EU parliamentary elections, the PSD and PNL ran on a joint list, securing almost 50% of the votes. While the most prominent far-right party, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (*Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor*, AUR) came in a distant second with about 15% of the vote, the far-right scion SOS Romania (*S.O.S. România*) received slightly over 5%, thereby passing the electoral threshold. Together, the far-right parties (AUR and SOS Romania) gathered almost 20% of the vote. Concomitantly, women's descriptive representation (as elected members of the EU Parliament) decreased; from slightly over 34% in the 2014 EU elections, it had reduced to 21% in the 2019 elections, and fell to a mere 15% in these elections. In addition, the national parliamentary elections further confirmed the rise of far-right parties, with the AUR becoming the second largest party, with 18% in the national parliament, and two other far-right parties passing the electoral threshold: SOS Romania with 7%, and the Party of Young People (*Partidul Oamenilor Tineri*, POT) with almost 6.5%. Consequently, far-right parties together control about a third of elected legislators in the 2024–2028 mandate. Somewhat surprisingly, in both the EU and national parliamentary elections, the far-right parties had one of the highest percentages of women on their electoral lists among all different parties (ranging from 29% to 45%). Consequently, in the Romanian Parliament, SOS Romania and POT have the highest percentage of women elected as legislators (over 30%), while the AUR had a slightly lower percentage than the PSD. Overall, the women elected on the AUR, SOS Romania, and POT lists account for over 40% of all women elected to parliament. In addition, the only parties with female chairs are SOS Romania and POT. Thus, the concept of descriptive representation requires a theoretical re-evaluation of the relationship between political representation, gender representation, and the promotion of democratic norms and values in a political context permeated by far-right parties.

Meanwhile, the presidential elections triggered a major political scandal and drew the most media attention both nationally and internationally. In the aftermath of the first round, the apparently independent far-right candidate Călin Georgescu – who had been almost absent from prior polling – took everyone by surprise and qualified in the runoffs as the main contender, with almost 23% of the vote. In response, the Constitutional Court annulled the election results on grounds of legal and financial irregularities, as well as suspicions of disinformation and cyber-manipulation efforts in Georgescu's campaign. These could seemingly be traced back to pro-Kremlin Russian entities. In his campaign, Georgescu pursued an explicitly misogynist and anti-feminist agenda, dismissing his main contender Elena Lasconi, candidate of the centre-right Save Romania Union (*Uniunea Salvați România*, USR), since women “cannot be president” because they have “a different role in society”, and labelling feminism as “absolute filth” that is being forcibly imposed on Eastern European societies by a “degenerate West” (CeRe et al., 2025, p. 53). Among the far-right parties, POT aligned openly with Georgescu. His candidacy was ultimately invalidated by the Central Electoral Bureau in March 2025, opening the road for George Simion, the AUR chair, to emerge as the main far-right contender. Surprisingly, Simion won the first round of the re-runs, with almost 41% of the votes, while Nicușor Dan, the seemingly independent moderate centre-right candidate, trailed behind with 21%. After a highly polarising campaign, Dan won the runoffs with over 53% of the votes, and was

sworn in as President of Romania. Since his investiture, Dan has tried to navigate, rather ineffectively, between “reflexive Atlanticism” and “European strategic autonomy” (Pup, 2026). “Reflexive Atlanticism” entailed an attempt to mimic the MAGA agenda internally and within the EU, to secure the goodwill of the second administration of US President Donald Trump, and to disarm the far-right sovereigntist mobilisation under the leadership of the AUR in national politics. “European strategic autonomy” involved the gradual pursuit of strategic autonomy to decouple Romania from the US. Dan appears to be more interested in pursuing the former than the latter; in his first presidential speech, commemorating Europe Day, Dan argued mistakenly that “unfortunately, Europe is a subject that divides our society” (Romania has one of the highest support rates for EU institutions among the Member States), and embraced a populist standpoint, critiquing the EU for having “acted ideologically, that was also a mistake” (Agerpress, 2026, May 9).

Inter-imperiality as theoretical cornerstone

To examine this Romanian context analytically, we have employed a syncretic theoretical apparatus that bridges disciplinary divides across gender studies, global sociology, and political science. We aim to pluralise Western-centric knowledge production and provide novel theoretical insights. We have enlisted the support of critical global sociology scholarship, which straddles social sciences and humanities to centre Romania, a country that opted after the Cold War to “return to Europe” (Boatcă, 2015, p. 214), and exchange “its geopolitical position of Communist periphery for the one of periphery of the European Union” (Boatcă, 2016, p. 138). We use Romania as a matrix for understanding wider political developments and to stimulate insights at the junction of several systems of social ordering. Here, the concept of inter-imperiality is most useful, since it works as “a feminist-intersectional and political-philosophical concept” (Doyle, 2020, p. 5) that provides evidence for the importance of regions often dismissed as peripheral to imperial formation and sheds light on “the sedimented layers of knowledge, intersectional configuration, and state practice that have constituted them and that are tapped within contemporary conflicts” (Doyle, 2020, p. 16). In this context, the observation that “inter-imperiality has the same connotation of being longer than the dominance of empires, and also having effects in transmitting bequeathing hierarchies to a time after independence from empires” (Boatcă & Meghji, 2024, p. 4) is noteworthy.

While deploying the concept of inter-imperiality, we are aware of Romania's peripheral position relative to the European core. It thereby serves “as a repository of negative characteristics against which a positive and self-congratulatory image of Europe and the ‘West’ has been constructed” (Todorova, 1997, p. 60). Concomitantly, we acknowledge that, unlike “silenced societies” such as “the peripheral Orient, which was constructed as an incomplete Other of Europe” (Boatcă, 2006, p. 327), Romania has been relegated to an intermediary position, featuring in the Western imaginary as Europe's “incomplete self” (Todorova, 1997, p. 18). With this important theoretical observation in mind, this special issue makes interchangeable use of both the “European periphery” and “(semi-)periphery”. The conceptual tandem of inter-imperiality and (semi-)periphery is deployed in order to undertake a *de-centred* analysis of the nationalist-cum-sovereigntist Romanian identity project, which has occupied a central place on the electoral battlefield. This identity project has manifested as vehement opposition to alleged Western “colonisation”, articulated in cultural and economic terms, as well as the exacerbation of traditional and religious (specifically Christian Orthodox) values. Within this framework, gender equality becomes a central issue precisely because it is framed as a colonial project imposed by “Brussels” which, together with sex education and LGBTQ+ rights, has constituted the metaphorical “Ebola from Brussels” (Korolczuk & Graff, 2018). By the same measure, gender equality is seen as a “sexo-Marxist”/neo-Marxist project. This “sexo-

Marxist" narrative acquires particular significance and resonance in the Romanian context, and in other Eastern European countries as well, due to their shared inter-imperial and post-socialist positionality. On the one hand, it reinforces a nationalist, anti-imperialist imaginary by portraying gender equality as a legacy of Soviet-era Communist social engineering and by framing the EU as ideologically and politically akin to the former Soviet Union. On the other hand, it draws on the hegemonic anti-Communist framework, which has served as the central ideological matrix of the post-Cold War democratic project within mainstream political and intellectual spheres. Its counterweight is provided by the traditional and conservative gender regime, which rebuilds the Romanian ethno-nationalist project in harmony with Christian (ultra-)Orthodox values, and a reinforced role for the Orthodox Church within the social and political arena (Norocel, 2016; Norocel & Băluță, 2023; Stan & Turcescu, 2007). We argue that approaching this matter requires an intersectional sensibility, capable of operationalising how "systems of race, social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation [...] form mutually constructing features of social organization" (Collins, 2019, p. 299).

Finally, from a more traditional political science perspective, this special issue critically examines the meaning and trajectory of democracy by centring on a significant country in Eastern Europe, which has witnessed a substantial corrosion of democratic infrastructures over the last decade. This has manifested as: decreasing levels of trust in democratic institutions coupled with growing civic apathy; bolstered "retrogressive mobilisation" (Norocel & Băluță, 2023) reuniting conservative forces, far-right political entities, and religious institutions in "opportunistic synergies" (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021) to oppose gender equality, sex education, and LGBTQ+ rights; the growing prominence of oligarchs and assaults on independent judicial institutions; the insidious colonisation of public administration by political proxies and increased control over the media; as well as exacerbated jingoism and xenophobia, often stimulated through the meddling of the Russian Federation. Given its inter-imperial location at the crossroad of external push/pull factors (the EU, the US, and the Russian Federation), Romania has registered no significant decline in democracy indexes (International IDEA, 2023), despite some disquieting signs of an "illiberal swerve" (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017). Unlike other Eastern European countries, such as Poland or Hungary, until recently Romania has attracted only "minor" empirical interest and little critical knowledge production in dedicated special issues (Cistelean et al., 2025), remaining the subject of anthology collections (Stan & Vancea, 2015, 2024).

About this special issue

Armed with the common conceptual apparatus described above, this special issue features five articles (Băluță & Norocel, 2026; Băluță & Tufiş, 2026; Cinpoș, 2026; Mișcoiu, 2026; Trandafoiu, 2026). The first two focus on the EU and national parliamentary elections, whereas the latter three centre the various stages of presidential elections. The articles analyse the complex electoral cycle that took place in Romania during the period we have dubbed "the long election year 2024/2025" through a dual theoretical lens. Firstly, they examine how gender (and opposition to it) shaped the electoral battlefield and the parties' and candidates' strategies. Secondly, they analyse how Romania's inter-imperial position on the European periphery illuminates broader illiberal and de-democratisation trends.

In their opening article, Băluță and Tufiş (2026) examine party manifestos for the EU and national parliamentary elections and develop a case study of the AUR to map out the role of anti-gender narratives and politics during electoral times. Drawing on the concepts of inter-imperiality and (semi-)periphery, they advance a nuanced theoretical account and argue that gender, framed as a colonial and neo-Marxist threat, acquires significant symbolic power, reinforcing the hegemony of the nationalist/sovereigntist, nativist, traditional, and Orthodox identity project. Băluță and Tufiş identify two dynamics contributing to democratic decline. Firstly, a contagion effect of anti-gender themes,

either via their uptake by mainstream parties, or through their reframing in a conservative key of gender equality. Secondly, a strategy of democratic washing adopted by radical-right or far-right parties, packaged into sanitised manifestos that actively mobilise anti-gender themes in electoral campaigns, especially on social media. By means of the case study of the AUR, the authors demonstrate that anti-gender is a diagnostic indicator of democratic decline.

Conversely, Radu Cinpoș (2026) scrutinises the role and meanings of progressive politics during these elections. Cinpoș complements his theoretical discussion of progressivism as an empty signifier with an analysis of Romania's inter-imperial and (semi-)peripheral positionality. His analysis reveals that, although "progressivism" was widely used as a label during the 2024 electoral campaign, substantively progressive themes (such as LGBTQ+ rights) were largely absent from the party manifestos. Thus, the term "progressive" acquired multiple, vague, and often contradictory meanings. When deployed positively, it remained marginal, associated with parties that did not pass the electoral threshold but adopted pragmatically reformist, rather than radical, positions. In contrast, most parties deployed the term "progressive" negatively. Both this term and LGBTQ+ rights were delegitimised, with significant implications for the Romanian democratic landscape. Cinpoș compellingly argues that Romania's inter-imperial and (semi-)peripheral position helps to explain the marginalisation of progressivism after 1989 and the convergence of retrogressive mobilisation across (semi-)peripheral contexts, as well as between the centre and the (semi-)periphery.

In her article, Ruxandra Trandafoiu (2026) examines the self-presentation strategies of the four female candidates in the 2024 and 2025 rerun presidential elections. Turning to political campaigning on social media, Trandafoiu employs a semi-pragmatic analysis of the candidates' Instagram profiles to show how motherhood is strategically instrumentalised to negotiate between traditional social and cultural expectations and the demands for presidential competence. She contends that the centrality of motherhood within the nationalist political project has been reinforced by inter-imperial legacies and Romania's (semi-)peripheral position. Moving beyond differences between the four candidates, Trandafoiu highlights how all of them mobilised motherhood both to conform to traditional gender expectations of femininity and to project themselves into the presidential role by means of a nationalist imaginary, whereby the traditional family functions as a hegemonic narrative. She argues persuasively that such a strategic use of motherhood to navigate a highly divided political landscape is intrinsically linked both to the social construction of gender roles and to the masculine domination of politics.

In their analysis, Băluță and Norocel (2026) highlight the significance of gender and sexuality in the 2025 presidential elections, by centring the performance of masculinity in politics. They conduct a theoretical exploration of the gendered dimensions of political leadership, the centrality of masculinities in politics, and the role of gender in far-right mobilisation and anti-gender discourses. By means of inter-imperiality, they shed light on how power is gendered at the European periphery and illuminate a contextualised analysis of the imaginaries of masculine leadership, nationhood, and citizenship against the backdrop of rising far-right parties. Drawing upon televised debates and digital podcast interviews with the two candidates in the 2025 presidential runoff, Băluță and Norocel trace the contours of different types of masculinities in politics. On the one hand, the far-right candidate embodies a vigilante masculinity within an inter-imperial populist frame, emphasising authenticity, family, and national morality. On the other, the centre-right candidate performs a pragmatic technocratic masculinity, stressing rationality, meritocracy, and expertise.

Finally, Sergiu Mișcoiu (2026) examines the relationship between candidate discourses and voter alignments in both the 2024 and 2025 rerun presidential elections, concentrating on three highly contentious themes: religious identity, national sovereignty, and sexual minority rights. He deploys a qualitative methodology, combining a content

analysis of campaign materials with 78 in-depth voter interviews, to analyse the congruence between political elites and their supporters. Mișcoiu shows that the candidates articulating coherent and radical positions achieved the highest levels of perceived representation and thus stronger alignment with their voters, whereas the candidates presenting more moderate and ambiguous discourses reflected a broader crisis of centrist politics. Issues of gender and sexuality emerge as central arenas of symbolic contestation, onto which anxieties concerning sovereignty and external influence are projected and negotiated. The study reveals how inter-imperial legacies, incomplete Europeanisation, and persistent socio-economic inequalities have nurtured resentment and receptiveness to nationalist and anti-systemic appeals. This finding underscores the capacity for mobilisation of radical-conservative platforms within a fragile democratic context.

Taken together, these articles offer a complex and multilayered account of how gender and politics intersect with Romania's inter-imperial positionality, and shape contemporary electoral dynamics. The articles highlight that (anti-)gender discourses are not marginal; rather, they are key to the reconfiguration of political competition, the articulation of ideological cleavages, and the electoral mobilisation of voters. Concomitantly, the inter-imperial lens explains why these dynamics cannot be fully understood outside the country's historical entanglements, its (semi-)peripheral status, and its uneven integration into European structures. Consequently, the instrumentalisation of gender – whether through anti-gender mobilisation, the emptying out of progressivism, or the strategic deployment of femininities and masculinities in politics – emerges as both a symptom and a driver of wider processes of illiberal consolidation and de-democratisation tendencies. In various ways, and to varying degrees, these articles also illustrate how the rise of far-right parties undermines democratic principles and values. This leads to either the marginalisation or disappearance of certain themes (LGBTQI+ rights, for example), or to their reframing through more gender-neutral or even conservative lenses. Taken together with the growing parliamentary presence of far-right parties, and the significant proportion of women included on their electoral lists and among elected MPs, this special issue highlights the need for a critical reassessment of existing theories of women's/gender political representation.

The collection of articles reunited in this special issue provides a much-needed critical intervention. It bridges disciplinary divides and highlights the conceptual usefulness of deploying Romania, a seemingly “minor” inter-imperial location on the European peripheries, as an empirical locus to offer explanations for wider political developments, and to stimulate insights at the intersection of several systems of social structuring (Parvulescu & Boatcă, 2022). We see this as part of a wider intellectual effort aiming at epistemic justice (Hendl & Năchescu, 2023; Tlostanova et al., 2016), which pushes for knowledge production beyond mainstream Western-centric conceptualisations. Indeed, this special issue builds and expands upon several ambitious special issue collections, published in journals with a regional focus, that explored the conceptual viability of several theoretical constructs in the larger Eastern European context (Pasięka, 2021; Petrova & Inglot, 2020; Vlase, 2025). Hence, this special issue may be regarded as a companion to other special issue projects, which have endeavoured either to provide a gendered perspective on political developments in Eastern Europe (Bogaards & Pető, 2022; Gwiazda, 2019; Norocel & Paternotte, 2023; Zaharijević et al., 2024), or to identify the effects of democratic backsliding on women's economic, social, and political opportunities from a global perspective (forthcoming in this journal, under the stewardship of Cynthia Horne and Lavinia Stan). We hope the readers of *Women's Studies International Forum* will read this special issue and find the arguments we have put forward in these articles both empirically nuanced and analytically convincing, and in so doing stimulate ongoing critical conversation on these matters.

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