“The Yokel from Teleorman”: Representations of Romanian Prime Minister in Satirical News Websites

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Abstract. *This article analyzes the way Ms. Viorica Dăncilă, the first woman prime minister in Romania’s history, is represented in the two most popular satirical news websites from Romania. Considering political satire as an important tool for critical thinking and political engagement, it draws on a qualitative analysis and approaches the main semantic fields subsuming the attributes and actions related to the Prime Minister. It appears that, on the one hand, the incompetence and the lack of good taste in fashion and hairstyle, and, on the other hand, the absurd actions, the preoccupations for housekeeping endeavors and for physical appearance stand out respectively as Prime Minister’s main characteristics and activities. This highly stereotypical depiction calls into question one of political satire’s main characteristic, as this particular journalism genre is supposed to challenge the status quo, and not to reinforce it.*

Keywords: Women politicians; Political satire; Gender stereotypes; Attributes; Actions.

Introduction

On January 29, 2018, the first woman prime minister in the country's history was appointed head of the Romanian government. The positive connotations of this nomination, which introduces Romania as a modern and emancipated country, giving equal opportunities to women and men in politics, have been overshadowed by allegations against the new Prime Minister, considered incompetent and as a mere puppet in the hands of the ruling party.

In a more or less direct manner, all the press, from quality dailies to parodic news sites, has amply echoed this negative reaction. The media denounced the fact that nothing in her career recommended Ms. Dăncilă for this high office position and that her appointment was in fact only to the interests of her party leader, in search of a perfectly obedient prime minister.

In this text, we analyze the way the first woman prime minister is represented in Romanian satirical media outlets. We start from recent insights into political satire, which point out that this particular journalism genre plays an important role in people's information and political engagement habits (Higgie, 2017, 74) and that it often performs the critical function which is supposed to belong mainly to mainstream media (Jones, 2010, xi). Relaying on irony and the impact of the visual, satire invites the reader to question what is being delivered as taken for granted and oftentimes unveils the truth behind politicians' mask (McClennen and Maisel, 2014, 14).

We rely on a qualitative analysis, based on a corpus of 269 news items published from January 16, 2018, the moment when the name of Viorica Dăncilă was appointed Prime Minister, to September 1st, 2018, in the most popular Romanian satirical news websites, respectively *timesnewroman.ro* (79 news stories) and *kmkz.ro* (190 news stories). The political orientation of the two media outlets is the same, i.e. against the current Government, but they differ from the point of view of their layout and the type of texts they publish. Although very far from its consistence and quality, *timesnewroman.ro* (or TNR) would be closer to *theonion.com*, the American satirical media outlet which covers current events, both real and fictional, satirizing the tone and format of traditional news organizations; *kmkz.ro* relays on visuals, with very short texts. For the purpose of this study, we use both texts and visuals, and we list the *attributes and actions* of the Prime Minister, in order to analyze (a) the extent to which they override or, on the contrary, reinforce a stereotypical portrayal of female politicians and b) the extent to which satire really fills, on both websites, "its goal (...) to inspire critical thinking and reasoned social engagement" (McClennen & Maisel, 2014, 108), by questioning the dominant representations of female politicians and surreptitiously imposing new, emancipated, models of women doing politics. As no academic research approaches so far the aforementioned websites, our article questions their specificity in a context where,

supported by the unprecedented development of (new) media and by their omnipresence in individuals' life, the studies dedicated to political satire and to satirical media outlets are flourishing. In the same time, it intends to contribute to a literature that it is very scarce (see, for example, Dan and Iorgoveanu, 2013), regarding the media coverage of Romanian women in politics.

Female politicians and their stereotypical depiction in media

In 2012, the Inter-Parliamentary Union *Plan of Action for Gender-sensitive Parliaments* considered gender equality and women's empowerment as "an integral part of the international political and development agenda, recognized as being at the heart of progress towards, and achievement of, the Millennium Development Goals". This document implicitly admits that, although important progress has been made in what concerns women's participation into political and social life, there are still tremendous disparities persisting throughout the world, and there is still a large amount of work to be done in order to achieve this goal¹. For, even in advanced democracies, women are still less likely to run for a political office than their male counterparts, while across the globe "the institutional and structural barriers to women's advancement in positions of real political power (...) remain largely intact and often calcified in social norms and cultural practices" (Raicheva-Stover and Ibroscheva, 2014, 3)².

In the context of the rapidly evolving digital technologies and the tabloidization of news, scholars underline the increasingly stronger relationship between news media and politics, to the point that the latter has become "mediatized" (Strömbäck and Van Aelst 2013, 354). As we shall also discuss later on, nowadays politicians tend to shape their messages and their behavior according to media logic, in order to meet their potential voters' expectations for an "entertaining" (Jones, 2010) way of doing and consuming politics.

Despite the improvements in the last decades, in the case of women politicians, news media are often one of the major factors working against them, as their depiction is biased both from a quantitative and qualitative point of view. As demonstrated in different studies related to long-established democracies, women pol-

1 In Romania, in 2016, after the legislative elections, there were 88 (18.92%) seats held by women in the Parliament, compared to 67 (11.5%) in 2012 or 44 (9.8%) in 2008. In January 2019, the government run by Ms. Dăncilă registered the highest number of women ministers, i.e. 9 (including the Prime Minister), out of 26, since the fall of communism, in 1989. While an evolution of women's representation in politics is noticeable, the gender parity is nothing but a distant goal.

2 The authors refer to a research underwent by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, in 2008 ("Cracking the marble ceiling: cultural barriers facing women leaders", *Harvard University Report*).

iticians are given less visibility than their male counterparts and are less quoted as sources (Ross and Comrie, 2012); reporting about them is significantly more likely to “make it personal” (Trimble *et al.*, 2013) and trivial. At the same time, generally, their portrayals are sexualized and gender-stereotyped (Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2012; Absolu, 2014; Cameron and Shaw, 2016, etc.).

This persistent gender mediated representation in news media makes women politicians subject to what Pierre Bourdieu called a *double bind* situation. In fact, women need to permanently find a balance between being too masculine or too feminine, for, “if they act like men, they expose themselves to losing the obligatory attributes of ‘femininity’ and they question the natural right of men to positions of power; if they act like women, they seem incapable and unsuited to the situation³” (Bourdieu, 1998, 96; we translate from French). Therefore, they are often “oxymoric” women (Achin & Dorlin, 2007), embodying both aspects of femininity and authority (quality considered masculine) at the same time. They are thus “described on one side as ‘fighters’, ‘go-getters’, ‘workers’, who are ‘stubborn’, ‘headstrong’ and ‘determined’, and on the other hand as ‘ladies of the heart’, who possess ‘intuition’, who are ‘nature’, ‘young’, ‘smiling’⁴” (Freedman, 1997, 167; we translate from French).

The same gendered-stereotyped perspective suggests that women politicians are first women, and then politicians; that they are very often “mothers”, “wives”, “girls” or “collaborators” of a man; that motherhood, marriage and household management are still their “natural” roles. As Florence Absolu (2014, 394) points out, “by obscuring their skills behind the stereotyped facade of their gender⁵” (we translate from French), women are denied their political status and denounced their deviance in the political sphere.

Satire and political engagement

According to Robert Phiddian, satire is “a rhetorical strategy (in any medium) that seeks wittily to provoke an emotional and intellectual reaction in an audience on a matter of public (or at least inter-subjective) significance” (Phiddian, 2013, 44). The merit of this broad definition is at least twofold: on the one hand, it encompasses a wide, and extremely diverse, range of satirical productions, from the

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- 3 „[S]i elles agissent comme des hommes, elles s’exposent à perdre les attributs obligés de la « féminité » et elles mettent en question le droit naturel des hommes aux positions de pouvoir; si elles agissent comme des femmes, elle paraissent incapables et inadaptées à la situation”.
 - 4 „ [D]écrites d’un côté comme des „battantes”, des „fonceuses”, des „travailleuses”, qui sont „obstinées”, „têtues” et déterminées, et de l’autre côté comme des „dames de coeur”, qui possèdent „de l’intuition”, qui sont „nature”, „jeunes”, „souriantes””.
 - 5 „ [E]n obscurant leurs compétences derrière la façade stéréotypée de leur genre”.

literary genre as such to political cartoons, Internet memes or television late night shows; on the other hand, it applies to a variety of techniques that satirical productions use, from parody, pastiche, ridicule and wit to humor, irony, exaggeration or the visual displacements of Internet memes.

Although, in a large sense, satire is “dedicated to exposing human folly” (McClennen & Maisel, 2014, 108), that may lie in one’s character or behavior etc., political satire, as a specific sub-genre of satire, plays consistently on Phiddian’s aforementioned idea of a “matter of public [...] significance”. As a public matter *par excellence*, political actors are one of satirists’ favorite targets and, although techniques and mediums might have changed throughout time, political satire’s purpose seems to be the same since the ancient times, i.e. portraying the “gap between the actualities and the ideals of democracy as a way of criticising politicians” (Rolfe, 2017, 38). Thus, political satire plays an essential role in democratic societies, as it is a genuine vehicle to free political expression, allowing both creators and audiences to “mobilise and vent the harsh emotions of anger, contempt, disgust and disdain” (Milner Davis and Foyle, 2017, 9). For satire requires an active audience, able to think critically, to question sources of authority and to resist to what is presented as taken for granted (McClennen & Maisel, 2014, 112). From this point of view, one of its key characteristics is the social critique, as satire is socially engaged, aiming at change (McClennen & Maisel, 2014, 110) or improvement. Along with its “clear intent to promote critical thought” (McClennen & Maisel, 2014, 111), this is an essential aspect that differentiates it from irony, parody or mockery, on which it is largely based, but which do not always have this social critique aim.

The context of contemporary “postmodern politics” (Jones, 2010, 27) implies new forms of political engagement and of political culture. In fact, citizens “increasingly act as bricoleurs in their beliefs and ideological commitments, constructing their own à la carte politics through mixing, and individualizing ad hoc social and political positions” (Jones, 2010, 27). Although this approach to communal life might be criticized as a “consumerist” one, it clearly shows individual’s preference for constructing their own “frameworks rather than inherit(ing) culturally received ‘packages’” (Dahlgren, cited in Jones, 2010, 27). Another important feature of contemporary political culture lies within its close relationship with the media, to the point that politics “no longer exists as a reality taking place outside the media. ... Rather, politics is increasingly organized as a media phenomenon, planned and executed for and with the co-operation of the media” (Dahlgren, cited in Jones, 2010, 23-24). Moreover, in the context of the popular culture, which, according to the passionate and convincing argument advanced by Jeffrey P. Jones, is “the primary location of our affective commitments in public life” (Jones, 2010, 38), politics and entertainment are more and more inter-

twined, as audiences search for political programming that is at once meaningful, engaging and pleasurable.

In this context, producing, reading or watching political satire is, in contemporary societies, one of the most frequent and rewarding forms of political engagement, as satire can both educate and entertain. From this point of view, recent studies (Jones, 2010; McClennen & Maisel, 2014) put forward a significant shift in the relation between mainstream media and satirical media outlets⁶. Owing to the increasing distrust of the public with the former, the latter have become to take their place, as a source, and oftentimes the only one, of serious information (McClennen & Maisel, 2014, 7). Moreover, satire has become a central mode of political engagement⁷, with important effects, such as engaging especially young voters, providing political knowledge, calling politicians and the media into account (Higgie, 2017, 74) and shaping opinion, “including a tendency towards cynicism and candidate evaluation” (O’Connor, 2017, 199).

Method

As we already stated in the introduction, we conducted a qualitative content analysis, based on the two most popular satirical news websites from Romania. We have selected all the articles related directly or indirectly to Mrs. Viorica Dăncilă, that is both the news stories that have her as the main “character” and the news stories mocking other public events or figures (such as, for example, in these items: *10 lucruri despre conferința Codruței Kövesi*[Ten things about Codruța Kövesi’s press conference], TNR, February 15; *Ceartă între pupezele PSD pentru postul de*

6 Satirical media outlets may range from cartoons, late-night shows, fake news programs (like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*), fake pundit talk show (like *The Colbert Report*), parodic activism, mockumentaries, parodic political campaigns. In what concerns the news satire, there are two slightly different types: one form uses satirical commentary and sketch comedy to comment on real-world news events, while the other presents entirely fictionalized news stories, *timesnewroman.ro* and *kmkz.ro* illustrate both categories of news satire, as they both comment upon current events, be they political, social, cultural or mondains and invent fake news whose main characters are usually politicians or media and entertainment celebrities. Both websites point out the flaws behind the generally well-regarded image of the politicians and stars, they sanction their slippages and they claim to decode the reality behind the official perspective on news. They do this by exaggerating the features of characters and reality, precisely to draw attention to what is ridiculous, inappropriate, and deceitful behind a facade often maintained by mainstream media. Their humour is oftentimes salacious, vulgar and of poor quality; notwithstanding, the public appreciates it, as both sort of escape from a gloomy reality and a possibility to take revenge on this same reality.

7 According to O’Connor (2017, 194), *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* were identified as primary sources of news during the 2008 American Presidential election, particularly for viewers aged under 30.

premier! [Fight between the bimboes from PSD for the position of prime minister], *kmkz*, January, 15), alongside the Prime-Minister. In other words, the primary units of our analysis were all the articles containing at least one of these key words: Viorica Dăncilă, Viorica, Veorica, Dăncilă.

Following our main objectives – that is, to find out how the Prime-Minister is represented in the two aforementioned websites and to what extent this representation reinforces or challenges the gender-stereotyped depiction of women in politics – we then proceeded to a twofold analysis, of both texts and visuals, in order to answer specific research question.

First, we searched for lexical sets of semantically related items associated with the Prime Minister's characteristics, namely to the way she *is*; we thus rely on binary categories such as competence/incompetence, intelligence/stupidity, elegance/inelegance. We then questioned the semantic fields related to the Prime Minister's specific actions, namely to what she *does*, and also the specific contexts and settings in which she performs these actions; we thus build on categories such as leading (the government), housekeeping, fashion.

Secondly, we approached the visuals using Paul Verschueren's model (2012) of multilevel frame analysis; more specifically, we analyzed here the *scene* which consists of a process (action, event, state of being), participants, and a circumstance (setting), in order to identify a *theme* or a prototypical representation of the Prime Minister and, at the last level, to analyze the generalization of this theme into a *master frame* or *ideological orientation*. Verschueren's model is rooted in social semiotics, which "is concerned with meaning in context" (Bezemer & Jewitt, 2009, 2) – that is, it investigates human signifying practices in specific social and cultural circumstances, and tries to explain meaning-making as a social practice. We have coded all the visuals where Viorica Dăncilă was fully exposed (either in close-up, medium or large distance) and excluded the ones in which her image appears only in a small medal shape in the corner of the frame. We thus selected 69 visuals for *TNR* and 152 for *kmkz.ro*.

Finally, we confronted these representations with the stereotypes associated to women in politics, in order to find out whether these stereotypes are being reinforced or deconstructed.

These considerations lead us to the following research questions:

1. What are the main attributes related to the Prime Minister?
2. What are the main actions related to the Prime Minister?
3. To what extent are these actions and attributes gender-stereotyped?

The attributes: the lack of competence and of good taste

Two main semantic fields subsume the attributes accompanying the representation of the Prime Minister on *timesnewroman.ro* and *kmkz.ro*: the *incompetence* and the *physical appearance*. The worst stereotypes about women in general and women

politicians in particular are thus confirmed and amplified. In what concerns the lack of competence, *stupidity* (with its derivative, the adjective *stupid*) is the dominant trait, going hand in hand with her complete *dependence* on her party leader and her *illiteracy*. On both websites, *stupid* as such is largely the most common adjective used to characterize the Prime Minister (see Table 1 for a list of the adjectives used both on *timesnewroman.ro* and *kmkz.ro*).

Table 1. Adjectives and adjective phrases used to designate the Prime Minister

kmkz	Frequency	TNR	Frequency
stupid	2	stupid	13
Nobel prize for stupidity	1	a monument of stupidity	2
functional illiterate	3	unlettered	1
immune to intelligence	1	lack of intelligence	1
illiterate	2	half-illiterate	1
codoi stupid ¹	2	intellectual scarcity	3
our great national shame	1	the worst head of the government	1
genius		undeniable geniality	
“smart”	1	unreader	1
incompetent	1	incompetent	1
immunonag ²	3	whacko	1
illiterate immunonag	1	idiot	6
immunobaboon	1	baboon	1
		Hamadryas baboon	1
scarecrow	1	monkey	1
goofy	1	servant	1
Dragnea ³ ’s pathetic puppet	1	Dragnea’s servant	1
unvoiced creature with a piece of paper	1	she does not function on a brain basis, but on reading a piece of paper basis	1
whore	1		
bimbo	1		
yokel	1		
absolute dumb	1		
the most famous forklift operator from Videle kingdom	1		
		funny	1
		housekeeper of the government building	1
		ficus	1
		protected species	1

- 1 This is a direct reference to Elena Ceausescu, supported also by the visuals which complete both articles containing this particular construction; the wife of the former dictator Nicolae Ceausescu was on some occasions nicknamed “Codoi”, referring to her alleged mispronunciation of the name of the chemical compound CO₂.
- 2 kmkz mocks heavily the mispronunciation of the word “immunoglobulin” by the Prime Minister, in a government meeting from March, 7.
- 3 The leader of PSD (the Social Democratic Party, which holds the largest number of seats in Romanian Parliament), considered to be de facto the head of government.

Journalists from both sites make use of the roughest emphasis in order to reflect Ms. Dăncilă's inability to think and to act as a mature and independent person. Her stupidity is hyperbolized, magnified as to denigrate her completely. It concerns at the same time her declarations, her decisions and her actions as head of government, as well as her everyday life activities. For example, one news item of February, 17, from *kmkz.ro*, states that *Viorica Dăncilă is so stupid, that she sold her car to have money to buy gasoline*; another news story from January, 26, in TNR, affirms that *It has already been 4 hours since Viorica Dăncilă stands in front of PSD's headquarters door and is waiting for Dragnea to tell her if, to get in, she must push or pull*. Such a humiliating situation contrasts sharply with Ms. Dăncilă's position as prime minister, just as it blatantly contradicts an entire imaginary related to the states-men and states-women. These are usually represented in charge of their official duties, and not ridiculously not being able to perform minor daily activities.

Journalists in both publications make use of every opportunity to undermine the Prime Minister's credibility. Her official addresses and her behavior in official circumstances are consistently sanctioned every time she commits a blunder⁸. In addition, her parodic statements and decisions, imagined by the journalists of both websites, further discredit her. One news story from February, 26, of *kmkz.ro*, "quotes" Viorica Dăncilă, who says that *Romania will build a barrier fence at the border, so that the cold no longer enters the country*, while in February, 20, in TNR, *Viorica Dăncilă wants to ban the stork hunt, to stop the decline in birth rates*, or in July, 25, in *kmkz.ro*, she *Intends to water the Black Sea*, etc. The absurd register underlying these parodical decisions belittles completely Ms. Dăncilă, and questions any credibility and legitimacy she might have as head of Government.

As consistently and repeatedly denounced in both websites, a flagrant contradiction opposes the Prime Minister's lack of competence and the high office she occupies. For the journalists, she is nothing but "an auntie from Videle"⁹ (TNR, February, 13), an "yokel from Teleorman"¹⁰ (TNR, January, 17), a nouveau riche coming from a very modest social environment that nothing recommends for the

8 In her official position as Prime Minister, Ms. Dăncilă committed several blunders, promptly sanctioned by the journalists from TNR and *kmkz.ro*. Among these: she included Iran and Pakistan among the EU member countries; she compared those who would misinform the European Union with regard to the current political situation in Romania to persons suffering of autism; in an official visit to Montenegro, she mistakes, in a press conference, Podgorita for Pristina, etc.

9 That is, the small city where she was born and where she used to work as high school teacher, before becoming a member of the European Parliament, and then Prime Minister.

10 That is, the county where Videle is situated, one of the poorest in Romania. The leader of the current ruling party originates from the same county, as well as many other dignitaries he promoted in high offices.

position of prime minister, except for her unfailing fidelity towards her party leader. As presented both in *timesnewroman.ro* and *kmkz.ro*, her inability to think and to act for herself makes her the perfect instrument that her superior needs in order to follow his own agenda. Since she is considered as utterly unable to express a personal idea and to produce free, articulated speeches, one of her branding images, in *timesnewroman.ro*, features her, in official occasions, as always reading a sheet of paper, filled with the party leader's instructions. The lack of instructions would allegedly put her, and the government she leads, in great difficulty, as in these news items from February, 19: *Meeting blocked in government: Viorica Dăncilă stands like a fool and looks at the microphone, because she can not find the sheet of paper on which it was noted what to say*, or March, 6: *She really does not think! As she had not received a sheet of paper with what to say, she read in today's meeting the menu of the government cafeteria*. Moreover, she would be, in the vision of the same journalists from *timesnewroman.ro*, simply illiterate. The famous sheet of paper would contain nothing in fact, except for the drawing of a cat, the only thing she would be able to understand, like in the image below (recurrent in *timesnewroman.ro*).

Image 1. The illiterate¹¹

Her precarious mastery of Romanian language, similar to that of other colleagues in her Government, is also repeatedly sanctioned by the journalists from both sites. One news story from *kmkz.ro*, of May, 27, ironically informs that *Viorica Dăncilă hired a translator for Romanian*. Her difficulty in producing coherent and grammatically correct speeches or in properly pronouncing different terms shows

¹¹ Source: <https://www.timesnewroman.ro/politic/surse-viorica-dancila-doar-se-preface-ca-ci-teste-de-pe-foi-de-fapt-trebuie-sa-i-sopteasca-dragnea-in-casca>

her poor education and fulfills two functions: on the one hand, it is a source of national shame, as, theoretically, a country's Prime Minister should be an example of human and intellectual qualities (*We have become the shame of Europe, the only country in the European Union where illiterates become prime ministers*, titles this story from *kmkz.ro*, July 26); on the other hand, she is a model for people who, like Viorica Dăncilă, are of poor intelligence, but who, provided they receive the right support, can climb on the social ladder (as in the headline of one news item from TNR, of July, 4: *Predictable results at the highschool final exams. Most students have the level of the Prime Minister Dăncilă*).

The Prime Minister's parody statements and decisions play two important roles. On the one hand, as we have already aforementioned, they emphasize the discrepancy, the inadequacy between this "auntie from Videle" and the high office she occupies. On the other hand, they reinforce one of the most persistent gender stereotypes, concerning women in general, and women in politics in particular: that is, women are devoid of intelligence; they are incapable of doing politics; when they do occupy political positions, it is because they are the protégé or the marionette of a man. Implicitly, they have to stick to the only field of competence which is theirs, the domestic sphere. But, as discussed further, journalists from both sites challenge any competence that Ms. Dăncilă might have in this area traditionally reserved to women, consistently criticizing her clothing choice and her hairstyle, and denouncing what in their eyes appears as her striking lack of good taste.

In Ruth Amossy's words (1991, 36), a stereotyped image is "the image we make less of the individual in question than of the category to which he or she belongs"¹² (we translate from French). Thus, the journalists from both websites do not hesitate to extrapolate the "qualities" of the Prime Minister to all the women member of the Social Democratic Party or even to all women in general. In this sense, a news item from January, 18, of *kmkz.ro*, states among other things: "One of the many times Viorica Dăncilă had exhibited her stupidity, i.e. the interview where she included Iran and Pakistan among the EU member states, provoked the violent reaction of both countries. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was the first to react: 'Let no one dare to ask why women do not have rights in our country! Viorica Dăncilă is the living proof that women's rights are something wrong'".

The *lack of elegance and of good taste in fashion and hairstyle* is the other major semantic field that subsumes the negative and largely stereotyped representation of the Prime Minister. In fact, as Sylvie Pionchon and Grégory Derville (2004, 113) point out, "the special status of women politicians also depends on the gendered gaze that is focused on them. [...] they are not only considered in their political

12 "[L']image que nous nous faisons moins de l'individu en question, que de la catégorie à laquelle il appartient".

function, but also as women, in their aesthetic dimension¹³ (we translate from French). Their body is *seen*, i.e. it is weighed and meticulously analyzed, which practically never happens in the case of their male counterparts. The “diktat of beauty” (Pionchon & Derville, 2004, 113) continues to weigh on them, while a “dimorphism of clothing” (Freedman, 1997, 82-83) wants that women politicians’ dress code is oftentimes a marker of their difference with male actors. From this point of view, comments on their body, manner of dressing and hairstyle emphasize their otherness and deviance in a predominantly masculine world and reactivate stereotypes of gender and female behavior.

In this sense, the representations of the Romanian Prime Minister in the two websites analyzed here put forward her deviance both in relation to the male world in which she performs – in the sense that male politicians are by far less called into question for what they wear and for their hairstyle –, and in relation to the standards of elegance and good taste. These standards pertain both to common sense and to a male perspective, as the journalists from both sites are almost entirely men. The Prime Minister is thus consistently ironized for and criticized over her hairdressing, which remembers either a baboon¹⁴, a mop (*kmkz.ro*, February, 19), a broom (*kmkz.ro*, April, 17), a scarecrow (*kmkz.ro*, April, 17) or a peasant from a famous Romanian sitcom (*kmkz.ro*, January, 16). As for her outfits, they rather make her look, in the opinion of the same journalists, like wearing oilcloths or curtains, as in the image below. Moreover, when, mocking a trend in the nowadays Romanian fashion, the Prime Minister is recurrently represented as wearing the traditional Romanian costume, her body posture and her facial expression deprive the costume of any nobleness and elegance, making it look petty and kitsch (see Image 2 below).

For the journalists of both sites, the Prime Minister would thus be nothing but a “parvenu peasant” (*kmkz.ro*, January, 16), whose appearance in the public space would be an offence to the standards of elegance and to the dresscode of women politicians.

The Prime Minister is far from being the only female politician mocked for her lack of elegance and of good taste. Many of her party colleagues are frequently criticized for their less fortunate dress or hairstyle choices, while at the same time being consistently depicted as lacking any political skill, or any competence, and

13 “[L]e statut particulier des femmes politiques passe aussi par le regard sexué qui est porté sur elles. [...] elles ne sont pas seulement considérées dans leur fonction politique, mais aussi regardées comme des femmes, dans leur dimension esthétique”.

14 Although, in the wake of a press scandal, when a famous journalist compared her, because of her hairstyle, with a baboon, Ms. Dăncilă completely changed her hairdressing, this comparison is recurrent in both websites.

Image 2. The poorly-dressed¹⁵

obeying to their party leader. Moreover, the journalists from the two websites do not hesitate to mock any possible battle of ideas or political projects whose protagonists would be women. For example, this news item from TNR, of February, 14, entitled *War at the top of the Social Democratic Party? Viorica Dăncilă and Gabi Firea both registered for "My style rocks"*, features two of the most powerful women both in the Social Democratic Party and in current political life in Romania, namely the Prime Minister and the capital's mayor, as competing in a reality show of the most questionable quality. The two women are confined to the only field of competence fitted for them, the physical appearance; when engaged in a competition, this has ridiculous stakes. Besides, according to their representation made by TNR, they completely lack style, class and elegance; they seem to be two slanderers barely out of the countryside, two new rich.

It is equally important to note the forms of addressing that both sites use with respect to the Prime Minister. They convene the semantic registers of the popular ("Veorica", instead of *Viorica*, is very frequent on *kmkz.ro*, in headlines like *The Veorica mop has just been launched!*, May, 13, or *The researchers believe that Veorica will return from her vacation just as stupid as she was when she left!*, August, 4); the pejorative ("duamna"¹⁶, in a news item like *Veorica went to Dedeman to make a complaint to*

15 Source: <http://reporteronline.net/a-comis-o-iar-dancila-alta-gafa-de-proportii-cuvantul-cheie-privele/>

16 Instead of "doamna" (engl. "lady"); the pronunciation "duamna" is irreverent; it pertains to poorly educated people.

the Parchet!¹⁷, of August, 22 august; “mizz” (see below) or “țață”¹⁸, in a news item entitled *Veorica looks at the President’s speech*: “Oh, my God, the guy knows so many words without having them written down”, August, 13) and the familiar (“fă”, a Romanian rather derogatory form of addressing, mostly used at the countryside, is one of the most frequent form of addressing, that even Jean-Claude Juncker would employ in a headline like *Juncker answered to Viorica Dăncilă: “Cut the crap, fă, bring back the curtains, to keep the sun from coming into the officies”*, March, 22). The negative connotation conveyed by these registers expresses mockery, contempt, disapproval or disgust towards the Prime Minister, whose dignity is thus trampled.

The actions: the absurd, the housekeeping and the physical appearance

Three semantic fields, namely the *absurd*, the *housekeeping* and, once more, the *concern for physical appearance*, subsume the representations of the actions undertaken by the Prime Minister. They portray Viorica Dăncilă in the most feminine stereotypical way. All the actions she undertakes contradict not only the position of Prime Minister but, ultimately, the logic and the common sense. She appears either as a spoiled child or as a person totally devoid of intelligence, as showed in news stories like these: *Viorica has a frog in her throat as she is staying in front of a doorway that says TRAGE, but the first letter fell!*¹⁹ (kmkz.ro, August, 15); *The government’s activity is suspended today because Dăncilă has seen “Look at the sky”²⁰ on a fence and looks up for 2 hours* (TNR, May, 25). For the journalists of both websites, she is so incapable of doing things right, that she missed even the moment when she took the oath as Prime Minister, as demonstrated in this news item from TNR (*She’s about that smart! Viorica Dăncilă hit her head when she took the oath under Dragnea’s desk* (TNR, January, 16). The ordinary sexism of this news story is far from being an isolated example; in both websites, many references particularly to sex positions consider the prime minister, and other female minister from her government, as a mere sexual puppets always ready to satisfy their party leader. Moreover, the actions that Ms. Dăncilă undertakes in her high office are also built in a register of the absurd, questioning and lampooning any dignity and prestige of this position, as in the headlines below: *Another diplomatic blunder! Ambassador of Great Britain, welcomed in Bucharest with a stick sling instead of a flag* (TNR, July, 9);

17 Dedeman is a hypermarket chain offering home improvement and do-it-yourself goods.

In Romanian, parchet (engl. Parquet) and Parchet (engl. The Public Prosecutor’s office) are spelled identically.

18 Pejoratively, in Romanian, the word refers to a vulgar woman who lacks finesse and good taste.

19 In Romanian, TRAGE means to pull, while RAGE means to roar.

20 A tag that appears frequently on walls and fences in Bucharest.

The good relationship with Israel has gone! At a time of inattention of Dragnea, Dăncilă bit Netanyahu (TNR, April, 26); The Government of Dăncilă, another memorandum. We move all embassies from Bucharest to Prislop Monastery (TNR, May, 15), etc.

The housekeeping semantic field finds its origins in a belief that the journalists of both sites share, according to which Ms. Dăncilă would be more suitable for the cleaning and/or maintenance duties than for that of Prime Minister, as shown in this visual from *kmkz.ro*:

Image 3. The housekeeper²¹

The specific garments and the cleaning and disinfecting products, as well as her facial expression, of a woman satisfied with the quality of the work done and of serving the others, challenge traditional representations of a Prime Minister. The two websites regularly represent Ms. Dăncilă as undertaking housekeeping tasks, oftentimes within the government headquarter. This news story from TNR, January, 31, clearly situates her level of competence as government's head: *PM to discuss model of napkins and plates to be purchased for the government cafeteria kitchen and a cross-government strategy for the new Victoria Palace curtain pattern*. Still, faithful to their strategy of denying the prime minister the least skill, the journalists from TNR consider that even as a cleaning lady, she is not qualified enough, since, in the wake of her official visit to Vatican, she fails the job interview as a maid at the Holy See (TNR, May, 13).

21 Source: <https://kmkz.ro/tags/viorica-dancila>

The preoccupation for the physical appearance is the last of the three semantic fields subsuming the depiction of Prime Minister's actions. Entries from both sites frequently feature Ms. Dăncilă while going to the hairdresser or renewing her wardrobe, by buying more oilcloths and curtains. Moreover, the government meetings often turn into hairstyling and manicure sessions, in a sort of a total removal of the boundaries between the public and domestic spheres. As noted above, this public / private confusion is specific to the entire semantic field of the appearance, either related to the attributes or to the actions. The Prime Minister do no hesitate to transfer in the very Government Palace activities pertaining to her personal space (*Viorica renews her wardrobe: A truck full with spring oilcloths parked in the Government yard; kmkz.ro*, March, 14); she allegedly publishes in the *Official Gazette* recipes for Easter dishes, instead of official laws (*kmkz.ro*, April, 1st); her appointment as Prime Minister has even change the neighborhood's geography, since "the stunners around the government have turned into hairdressers", TNR, January, 22), etc. The lack of delimitation between public and domestic spaces goes hand in hand with a lack of delimitation of roles. The Prime Minister is portrayed as utterly unable to be anything else but a housewife, incapable of assuming herself as a public figure and to behave herself at the height of her role.

As shown in the tables below, this overall representation of Viorica Dăncilă's actions is largely supported also by the visuals:

Table 2. Picture setting

kmkz official	kmkz domestic	kmkz neutral	TNR official	TNR domestic	TNR neutral
63 /41.44%	24 /15.78%	65 /42.76%	38 / /55.07%	4 /5.79%	27 /39.13%

Tabel 3. Picture process

kmkz action	kmzk event	kmkz state of being	TNR action	TNR event	TNR state of being
40 /26.31%	7 /4.60%	105 /69.07%	30 /43.47%	2 /2.98%	37 /53.63%

Tabel 4. Picture participants

kmkz Just the Prime Minister	kmkz The Prime Minister and other persons	TNR Just the Prime Minister	TNR The Prime Minister and other persons
108 /71.05%	44 /28.94%	44 /63.76%	25 /36.23%

In both websites, the most frequent *process* is by large the state of being, which correlates with her inability to fulfill her duties as Prime Minister; she is rather a part of a setting, than an active participant to her high office. When it comes to the actions, the visuals replicate the same register of mocking any meaning and any dignity her deeds might possibly have. She is frequently introduced in what

seems to be a part of an official address, with a microphone and a laptop, but on her forehead there is a small strap remembering the one of a cartoon character; this undermines any claim of being able to engage in a meaningful, valuable exchange with her audience. The official setting, both for TNR and *kmkz.ro*, is almost equally present as the neutral one; oftentimes, we are dealing with a close-up cutting from a press conference or a press meeting, with the microphones pointing at her, while her facial expression suggests that she is about the beat around the bush. In what concerns the *participants*, most visuals introduce only the Prime Minister, in recurrent images whose repetition reinforces her public perception as being devoid of intelligence and of sophistication. When she appears alongside other participants, this is just in order to deny her any credibility and competence (the Holy Father, the American Ambassador or the Serbian President are secretly laughing out loud behind her back, etc.).

Her prototypical representation is thus of a poor woman who woke up in the wrong place, the perfect puppet in the hands of the man who really holds the power.

Conclusion

In theory, political satire's goal should be to "produce healthy forms of democratic participation; in this capacity, satire can be seen to encourage resistance, promote dialogue, and enact positive change" (McClennen & Maisel, 2014, 108). In the case of women politicians, satire could be an important tool of emancipation, as it draws attention, by means of humour, to the shackles of prejudices and stereotypes that weigh on them and, in general, to all the obstacles that still prevent them from emancipating themselves.

Summing up our results, it appears that both sites are failing to fulfill this important role. By putting forward such a strongly negative and stereotyped portrait of the Prime Minister, they rather risk blocking any resistance and positive change. Judging by the way Ms Dăncilă, and also her fellow women members of her Government, is depicted both in *timesnewroman.ro* and *kmkz.ro*, women politicians appear to be devoid of any personality and any political vision. They have either a purely decorative role, useful to spice up the news and to feed heavily sexist jokes; they appear just as corrupt and dishonest as their male colleagues, to whom they are always (even informally) subordinated; or, like Ms Dăncilă, they are the perfect puppets sought after by chefs in search of perfect executive performers.

More or less veiled, mainstream media perpetuate the same image of Ms. Dăncilă: an incompetent person²², who makes one blunder after the other and who

22 The difference is significant: in mainstream media, Ms. Dăncilă is never mocked for being a woman, but for her blunders.

apparently would be able to accept any humiliation and take any blow. Moreover, television channels, either affiliated to the ruling party or not, also introduce, especially at the beginning of her term, Ms. Dăncilă alongside with her party leader; oftentimes, when reporters address questions to the Prime Minister, it is her party leader who is quick to answer. Ms. Dăncilă hardly ever speaks for herself. When she does so²³, she uses the wooden language which, for once, recommends her as a perfect politician, because all that she does is to justify her political deeds and gestures.

In the case of women politicians, when carried by a humor of rather low quality and devoid of any finesse, and when painted in very rough lines, satire rather has the role of reinforcing gender stereotypes, instead of challenging them. As depicted by *timesnewroman.ro* and *kmkz.ro*, Ms. Dăncilă is far from imposing a new model of women in / doing politics. She is utterly unable to convene even the values traditionnally associated with women, and for whom they are often called in politics, such as nonpartisanship, dedication, closeness, concreteness, gentleness, belonging to civil society, associative activism, etc. (see Achin & Dorlin, 2007).

But it is perhaps exactly at this point that opens up a space for critical thought, denouncing the perverse effect of this illusion which makes that, in the name of political correctness, women are being placed in positions of power only to be better instrumentalized by men; a space which might be used by women too, in order to stop being fooled by men and stand for themselves.

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²³ See, for example, the interview she gives on April, 27, to RomaniaTV, a channel closed to the current ruling party: http://www.romaniatv.net/live/viorica-Dăncilă-interviu-in-exclusivitate-pentru-romania-tv_416941.html

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