

**DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF ORDINARINESS
THROUGH SMALL STORIES IN PRESIDENTIAL DISCOURSE.
THE CASE OF THE ROMANIAN ELECTIONS OF 2024-2025**

DOI: [10.56177/AUA.PHILOLOGICA.1.26.2025.art.23](https://doi.org/10.56177/AUA.PHILOLOGICA.1.26.2025.art.23)

Lect. PhD ADINA BOTAŞ
"1 Decembrie 1918" University of Alba Iulia

Abstract: *In the troubled context of a worldwide far-right takeover on the rise, following the 2024 “super-election year” in Romania with a cancelled presidential election and a rerun in 2025, this paper investigates how Romanian presidential hopefuls in the 2024 and 2025 campaigns discursively fashion themselves as “ordinary” citizens, to distinguish themselves from “the system” and gain popularity, by embedding small stories i.e. brief, self-contained anecdotes, in televised debates and high-profile interviews. Framed as political action which includes politicians, the audience and the political event¹, political discourse is described lately as a “more or less professional kind of discourse”² which, as a subgenre of media discourse, has become “the most popular way for ordinary people to encounter politics”³. Ordinarity is understood as “not something attributed to social agents per se, but rather something which participants do”⁴, i.e. a result obtained in and through interaction, used to construct reliability⁵. Building on Anita Fetzer’s theory⁶ that ordinarity is not a pre-existing social fact but an interactional achievement, small stories are one strategy through which candidates negotiate proximity with the electorate and simultaneously recalibrate the politician–voter power asymmetry. The corpus consists of a selection of 5 extracts from nationally broadcast statements and debates held between August 2024 and April 2025, plus prime-time interview specials and extracts from most-shared facebook live clips released by the top-rated candidates. The method of analysis is based on the configuration of small stories as proposed by Alexandra Georgakopoulou⁷ and*

¹ Teun A. van Dijk, *What is Political Discourse Analysis?*, in *Political Linguistics*, 11, 1998, pp. 11-52.

² Anita Fetzer, *Small stories and accountability of discursive action in mediated political discourse: Contextualisation and recontextualisation of ordinary and not-so-ordinary participants*, in *Frontiers in Communication*, 7:970215, 2022.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ Harvey Sacks, *On doing “being ordinary.”*, in J.M. Atkinson (ed.) *Structures of Social Action. Studies in Emotion and Social Interaction*, Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp. 413-429.

⁵ Thomas A. Dumm, *A Politics of the Ordinary*, New York and London, New York University Press, 1999.

⁶ Anita Fetzer, *Small stories and accountability of discursive action in mediated political discourse: Contextualisation and recontextualisation of ordinary and not-so-ordinary participants*, in *Frontiers in Communication*, 7:970215, 2022; Anita Fetzer & Elda Weizman, *The Construction of ‘Ordinariness’ across Media Genres*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2019; Anita Fetzer, *The Multilayered and Multifaceted Nature of Political Discourse*, in *The Pragmatics of Political Discourse. Explorations across Cultures*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2013, pp.1-18.

⁷ Alexandra Georgakopoulou, *Small Stories, Interaction, and Identities*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007.

Anita Fetzer⁸, circumscribing several elements to characterize the referential world of the narratives in question i.e. protagonist/antagonist, time and place, moral stance through an examination of key-words, verbs of communication, temporal particles, co-occurrence and context, also considering the perlocutionary achievement and further follow-up. Preliminary analysis indicates three emerging thematic patterns: (1) nostalgic localisation—candidates foreground provincial childhood memories to dilute metropolitan elite status; (2) family-based expertise—references to parents, spouses or children legitimise political competence through “normal” relational roles; (3) personal testimonies aimed as authenticity cues, retrieving ordinariness (e.g. “I laughed at the TV jokes about me like anyone else”). In their permanent effort to differentiate themselves from “the system” through the discursive creation of an alignment to the ordinary, candidates distance themselves blatantly from what they themselves claim to understand of what presidential discourse ought to involve, i.e. “serious people”, as well as “a certain tenor; a certain discourse, certain themes” (Crin Antonescu), turning the most recent debates into “very, very low level [talk]” (Dragoș Pătraru), as an unflattering mirror of the current socio-political and cultural status quo in Romania.

Keywords: political discourse, presidential discourse, ordinariness, small stories, Romanian elections.

1. Introduction

For one whole year, Romania underwent an electoral ‘tour de force’ between May 2024 and May 2025. 2024 was labelled by the press and commentators as a ‘superelection year’, inviting Romanians to polls for local and European parliamentary elections in June, presidential and parliamentary elections in November and December, and 2025 labelled as the year of the ‘election that counts’, namely the presidential final rerun, following the cancelled election in 2024, as a long-awaited end to the unprecedented political crisis the country went through. The general political landscape was described as displaying “the worst candidates Romania has had since the revolution⁹”, with the election campaign discourse largely displaying amalgamed rightist views, despite ideological pretence of the candidates belonging to different political parties. The entire context is described in more detail in recent related work¹⁰, integrating the present paper into

⁸ Anita Fetzter, *Small stories and accountability of discursive action in mediated political discourse: Contextualisation and recontextualisation of ordinary and not-so-ordinary participants*, in *Frontiers in Communication*, 7:970215, 2022.

⁹ <https://www.euronews.ro/articole/alegeri-prezidentiale-2024-traian-basescu-sunt-cei-mai-slabi-candidati-pe-care-i> [all online media sources consulted in June-July 2025].

¹⁰ Adina Botaș *Self- and Other-Presentations in the Romanian Presidential Race of 2024. A Discourse-Based Analysis*, in *Revue Roumaine de Linguistique*, 3-4/2025, București, 2025. (forthcoming); Adina Botaș, ‘A little kindness can go a long way’: *An overview of present-day discursive practices in the Romanian presidential debate of 8 May 2025*, in *JoLIE*, 18/2025. (forthcoming); Adina Botaș, *Pre-campaign discourse in the Romanian presidential election of 2024: An analysis of characterisations*, in *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Brașov, Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies*, Vol. 17(66) No. 2, 2024a; Adina Botaș, *Political Discourse as Identity Work for the ‘Rehearsed Self’. A Speech Act Approach to Characterisations in Local Election Campaign Slogans*, in *Annales Universitatis Apulensis. Series Philologica*, no. 25/tom 1/2024b, pp. 336-348.

a broader analysis of the campaign discourse produced in the mentioned period in Romania.

As discussed in the above-mentioned related work, from the early days of the pre-campaign period (August-September 2024), ordinariness emerged as a prioritised campaign theme in the discourses of the candidates ranked by polls in top positions, alongside high-school credential and various gender-related topics, which were developed on multiple occasions, in various forms throughout the campaign, eventually marked by a more present negativity¹¹.

The present paper develops the theme of ordinariness, focusing on its construction by means of small stories, in five examples selected from the discourses of candidates to the presidency of Romania, both in the campaign of 2024 and 2025. The theoretical section (2.) develops the concepts of ‘ordinariness’ (2.1.) as a discursive construct aimed to produce a reliable and relatable ethos for the speaker (candidate) targeting the ordinary people forming the electorate, i.e. ‘the many’ and ‘small stories’ (2.2.) as a versatile structure employed to create space for a candidate’s individuality beyond their institutional identity, foregrounding authenticity and transparency, as well as friendliness and alignment with every-day narratives.

Starting from three research questions (3.1.) pinpointing the contextual and linguistic patterns identified in these narratives, their communicative functions and follow-up in further discourse, and a preliminary assessment of the data (3.2.) configuring the dataset data selection criteria, unit of analysis and nature of discourse, the data are examined through the frame of the Self-Presentation Theory and a dialogic approach.

2. Theory

2.1. Ordinariness

The concept of ordinariness, as a discursive construct aimed to achieve reliability and alignment with the electorate, of which ‘the many’ are ordinary people, is approached as proposed by Fetzer & Weizman¹². Basically, *ordinary* is understood through a relation of semantic opposition with *epic*¹³, defined by dictionaries as extending beyond the usual or ordinary (merriam-webster). Ordinariness is not an a-priori concept, i.e. ready to be used in discourse¹⁴, rather it is constructed in and

¹¹ Andra Seceleanu & Bianca Ioana Garabet, *Communication psychopathologies in the presidential election campaign in Romania*, in *Revue des Sciences Politiques*, 86, 2024, p. 20.

¹² Anita Fetzer & Elda Weizman (eds.), *The Construction of ‘Ordinariness’ across Media Genres*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2019.

¹³ Zohar Livnat, “You bring the steaks, I’ll bring the salad”: Presenting ordinariness in PM Netanyahu’s public talks, in Anita Fetzer & Elda Weizman (eds.), *The Construction of ‘Ordinariness’ across Media Genres*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2019, pp. 51-72.

¹⁴ Harvey Sacks, *On doing “being ordinary.”*, in J.M. Atkinson (ed.) *Structures of Social Action. Studies in Emotion and Social Interaction*, Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp. 413-429.

through discourse¹⁵ to create an image all citizens can identify and empathise with. Ordinarity is described as “a self-presentation strategy”¹⁶, “a discursive resource”, “a discursive accomplishment” or “a vehicle for lowering social status”¹⁷, and most relevant to this study “a discursive construct of narrative identity”¹⁸, used to shape the speaker’s identity as ordinary through short narratives (further discussed in 2.2.).

In political discourse, included mediated interactions, ordinarity is not to be associated with social actors, as an inherent quality, it is something that the participants do rather than are¹⁹. Ordinarity is constructed strategically through discourse, shaped by communicative goals which may vary across contexts²⁰. The performative nature of ordinarity becomes particularly salient in mediated political communication, where media serve as the primary arena for “ordinary people to encounter politics”²¹. Within this interface, political actors employ small stories which tackle and challenge the private-public boundary, enabling them, as speakers, to display ordinary emotions and everyday concerns while simultaneously presenting themselves as competent elites²². These narratives aim to dismantle monolithic identities, showing that “there is more to them” than their institutional roles²³, also activating affective elements²⁴, to enhance perceived authenticity and build reliability. One of the prominent markers of ordinarity is the coda, in the case of the present dataset most frequently adding formulae such as “ca orice om (normal)” (like any (normal) man) or “la firul ierbii” (grass root).

¹⁵ Anita Fetzer & Elda Weizman (eds.), *The Construction of ‘Ordinarity’ across Media Genres*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2019.

¹⁶ Helmut Gruber, *Are Austrian presidential candidates ordinary people? Candidates’ self-presentation strategies on Twitter during the 2016 Austrian presidential election campaign* in Anita Fetzer & Elda Weizman (eds.), *The Construction of ‘Ordinarity’ across Media Genres*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2019, pp. 21-50.

¹⁷ Gonen Dori-Hacohen, “I can do math, but I’m not that smart. I’m not brilliant”: *Ordinarity as a discursive resource in United States radiophonic financial call-in interactions* in Anita Fetzer & Elda Weizman (eds.), *The Construction of ‘Ordinarity’ across Media Genres*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2019, pp. 133-156.

¹⁸ Chaoqun Xie & Ying Tong, *Constructing ‘ordinarity’: An analysis of Jack Ma’s narrative identities on Sina Weibo*, in Anita Fetzer & Elda Weizman (eds.), *The Construction of ‘Ordinarity’ across Media Genres*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2019, pp. 179-208.

¹⁹ Harvey Sacks, *On doing “being ordinary.”*, in J.M. Atkinson (ed.) *Structures of Social Action. Studies in Emotion and Social Interaction*, Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp. 413-429.

²⁰ Anita Fetzer & Elda Weizman (eds.), *The Construction of ‘Ordinarity’ across Media Genres*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2019, p. 5.

²¹ Anita Fetzer, *Small stories and accountability of discursive action in mediated political discourse: Contextualisation and recontextualisation of ordinary and not-so-ordinary participants*, in *Frontiers in Communication*, 7:970215, 2022.

²² Idem, p. 6.

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ Ibidem.

2.2. Small Stories

In the context of recent conceptions of narratives having shifted from text to practice, the concept of *small stories* is closely related to *ordinariness* (as discussed in 2.1.). In this paper, small stories are approached based on the work of Alexandra Georgakopoulou²⁵, Georgakopoulou & Bamberg²⁶, Georgakopoulou, Gioxoglou & Patron²⁷, and Fetzer²⁸.

The term ‘small stories’ is used as “an umbrella-term that covers a gamut of under-represented narrative activities, i.e. tellings of ongoing events, future or hypothetical events, shared (known) events, but also allusions to tellings, deferrals of tellings, and refusals to tell”²⁹. One of the main communicative functions of small stories is an interactional organisation of credibility, blurring traditional boundaries between public and private in order to demonstrate friendliness, sensitivity and reliability.

Small stories are considered a pragmatic strategy in the construction of *ordinariness*³⁰, i.e. situated language use aimed to position a display of contextualised identities. Small stories, as basically consisting of personal stories anchored in the private spheres of life told to a mediated general public, are strongly dependent on the uptake of the interlocutor/audience. Thus, disposing of a significant perlocutionary component, the analysis of small stories in any type of discourse, including mediated political discourse, invites a dialogic approach³¹, as small stories can either appear as an initiative act or a reactive act in a dialogic sequence of action and reaction. Furthermore, small stories are forms of interactive engagement reflecting how the teller wants to be understood by how they narratively construct the referential world³².

²⁵ Alexandra Georgakopoulou, *Small Stories, Interaction, and Identities*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007.

²⁶ Alexandra Georgakopoulou & Michael Bamberg, *Small Stories as a New Perspective in Narrative Identity Analysis*, in *Text & Talk - An Interdisciplinary Journal of Language Discourse Communication Studies*, 2008, pp. 377-296.

²⁷ Alexandra Georgakopoulou, Korina Gioxoglou & Sylvie Patron, *Small Stories Research. Tales, Tellings, and Tellers across Contexts*. New York and London, Routledge, 2023.

²⁸ Anita Fetzer, *Small stories and accountability of discursive action in mediated political discourse: Contextualisation and recontextualisation of ordinary and not-so-ordinary participants*, in *Frontiers in Communication*, 7:970215, 2022.

²⁹ Alexandra Georgakopoulou, *Small Stories, Interaction, and Identities*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007.

³⁰ Chaoqun Xie & Ying Tong, *Constructing ‘ordinariness’: An analysis of Jack Ma’s narrative identities on Sina Weibo*, in Anita Fetzer & Elda Weizman (eds.), *The Construction of ‘Ordinariness’ across Media Genres*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2019, pp. 179-208.

³¹ Edda Weigand, *Dialogue: The Mixed Game*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2010.

³² Alexandra Georgakopoulou & Michael Bamberg, *Small Stories as a New Perspective in Narrative Identity Analysis*, in *Text & Talk - An Interdisciplinary Journal of Language Discourse Communication Studies*, 2008, pp. 377-296.

From a broader perspective, small stories are usually marked by cohesion and coherence in discourse through anaphoric reference to prior discourse³³ or exophoric reference to past or ongoing events. Among the linguistic characteristics of small stories, there are specialised expressions, rhetorical organisation and formatting.

3. Method and Data analysis

3.1. Research questions

Exploring the discursive construction of ordinariness in presidential election campaign discourse, focusing on how candidates employ small stories to evoke everyday experiences to connect with their audience, the analysis is guided by three research questions (RQ). The first RQ is formulated as (1) *When and in what format are ordinary-life stories about everyday experiences and problems introduced into campaign discourse?*, using a pragma-semantic approach to reveal the contextual and linguistic patterns underpinning these narratives. The second RQ investigates (2) *What communicative functions may these stories fulfil?*, be it personalisation, empathy-building or credibility enhancement, drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to interpret the strategic value of the communicative act. Third, the paper considers (3) *How are these stories followed up in discourse?*, tracing their development or reinforcement across campaign messages (excluding audience perception or media commentaries, as a social-scientific approach remains out of the span of this paper).

3.2. Preliminary assessment of the data

As briefly mentioned in 1., the paper draws on a dataset comprising five examples of ‘small stories’ used as tools to construct ordinariness in presidential campaign discourse, in the mentioned campaigns of 2024 and 2025 in Romania. The examples were selected through ad hoc random sampling from different moment of the electoral timeline, including pre-campaign discourse and candidacy launch events³⁴, online interviews and televised debates.

Discursively, the extracts under investigation belong to the genre of political discourse, more specifically, presidential discourse, understood as being situated at an intersection of public, institutional, mediated and professional communication, and are marked by a confrontational nature, characteristic of the interaction in pre-election debates.

³³ Anita Fetzer & Peter Bull, *Quoting ordinary people in Prime Minister's Questions*, in Anita Fetzer & Elda Weizman (eds.), *The Construction of 'Ordinariness' across Media Genres*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2019, pp. 73-102.

³⁴ Discussed in more detail in Adina Botaş, *Political Discourse as Identity Work for the 'Rehearsed Self'. A Speech Act Approach to Characterisations in Local Election Campaign Slogans*, in *Annales Universitatis Apulensis. Series Philologica*, no. 25/tom 1/2024b, pp. 336-348.

The unit of analysis, as displayed by each example in 3.3., is the ‘small story’, understood, as discussed in 2.2., as a flexible micro-structure that holds space for the discursive performance of identity through brief, everyday-life narratives, which may reference past, recent, ongoing or even future events, small incidents or even seemingly insignificant moments, all contributing to the construction of a ‘sense of self’.

In the analysis, the content and communicative patterns of the shared small stories are treated as unique and context-dependent, integrating the basis for interpretation in the framework of the Self-Presentation Theory³⁵, i.e. a consideration of the “staged” nature of the constructed ordinariness and the natural tendency towards “impression management” (by the speaker on the interlocutor). ‘Small stories’ are analysed through a dialogic lens³⁶, as an integrated component of a dialogic sequence, either in an initiative or a reactive position (e.g. a ‘storied response’ as an assertive speech act).

3.3. Data analysis

Example #1

„Sunt unul dintre milioanele de români care, după Revoluție, și-au văzut de viață. Sunt unul dintre milioanele de români care, după Revoluție, s-au îndrăgostit, au clădit o familie, și-au construit o carieră.” (Elena Lasconi)

I am one of the millions of Romanians who, after the Revolution, have moved on with their lives. I'm one of the millions of Romanians who, after the Revolution, fell in love, started a family, built a career.

Elena Lasconi was one of the three women who ran for the presidency of Romania in 2024 (initially four, but one was disqualified midterm on grounds of extremism and unconstitutionality³⁷), of a total of 14 candidates. Lasconi was voted second in the first round of the 2024 elections, surprisingly won by Călin Georgescu, the controversial candidate who finally caused the annulment of the elections³⁸.

The small story displayed in #1 was first introduced on October 1, in front of the Central Electoral Bureau (BEC), during the official candidacy announcement speech, as a statement in an ad hoc interview for the media. As a main communicative function, the narrative is employed for humanisation, contributing to the candidate’s construction of ethos, creating solidarity with the public (“the millions of Romanians”) in opposition with the system and the elites. The theme was repeatedly employed throughout the political campaign, reframed as e.g. “our

³⁵ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Edinburgh, Anchor Books, 1956.

³⁶ Edda Weigand, *Dialogue: The Mixed Game*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2010.

³⁷ <https://www.rfi.fr/ro/rom%C3%A2nia/20241006-diana-%C8%99o%C8%99oac%C4%83-eliminat%C4%83-de-curtea-constitu%C8%9Bional%C4%83-din-cursa-pentru-preziden%C8%9Biale>

³⁸ Discussed in more detail in Adina Botaș, *Self- and Other-Presentations in the Romanian Presidential Race of 2024. A Discourse-Based Analysis*, in *Revue Roumaine de Linguistique*, 3-4/2025, București, 2025. (forthcoming)

Romania” vs. “their Romania”, in advancement of a new social contract and anti-system commitment.

Lasconi’s anecdote served to position her as a representative of ordinary, post-revolutionary Romanians, with clear emotional and ideological implications, i.e. to emphasize belonging and collective identity. Her use of repetition (“sunt unul dintre milioanele de români”) was used to reinforce a sense of shared national experience. Moreover, this narrative was part of a coherent campaign discourse, frequently echoed in her opposition to political privilege and her call for a president who is “has the courage to do justice”, “for all, not just some.”

Example #2

„Am muncit imediat după ce am terminat liceul. Tatăl meu m-a dat afară din casă. Voi nu ați prins vremurile acelea. Taică-miu a zis: Mă, dacă nu ești în stare să intri la facultate du-te la muncă, mă! Pe urmă m-am dus în armată. Erau alte vremuri. Ăsta e adevărul! Mi-am făcut o familie, am muncit, am muncit în mediul privat... nu-mi e rușine de absolut nimic.” (Marcel Ciolacu)

I worked right out of high school. My father kicked me out of the house. You didn't live those times. My dad said, 'Dude, if you can't go to college, go to work!' Then I went in the army. Those were different times. That's the truth! I started a family, I worked, I worked in the private sector... I'm not ashamed of anything.

At the time of the presidential election campaign of 2024, Marcel Ciolacu was the incumbent prime minister of Romania, president of the social-democrat party (PSD), taking over the mandate from the government coalition partner, liberal Nicolae Ciucă (PNL), himself a candidate in the election. Throughout the campaign, Ciolacu was ranked first by most polls³⁹ but finally ended up third in the first round of the election, shockingly not qualifying for the runoff, despite expectations. It was the first time in the history of democratic presidential elections in Romania that the social-democrat party (PSD) was eliminated from the presidential finals, a result taken as a catastrophic failure. This was part of the rationale motivating Ciolacu’s resignation as prime minister, leaving the position open to an interim replacement. The gesture was interpreted as excessive, favouring the rise of the far-right movement in Romania⁴⁰.

The small story displayed in #2 was shared in the pre-campaign period in late August 2024, during a press conference after the PSD congress, in which Ciolacu was proposed presidential candidate. In the familiar setting of the event organized by the party he represented, Ciolacu appealed to the strategy of blurring public and private spheres of life in an attempt to humanization, constructing his self-image as an ordinary man, aiming to achieve an ethos of authenticity and transparency through a contextualization of his past hardships. The story was

³⁹ see Adina Botaș *Pre-campaign discourse in the Romanian presidential election of 2024: An analysis of characterisations*, in *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Brașov*, Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies, Vol. 17(66) No. 2, 2024a.

⁴⁰ <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/demisie-ciolacu-efecte-extremism/33406419.html>

multiply echoed on later occasions, serving as an ongoing narrative against elitism and moral positioning of the candidate.

Ciolacu's story, recounted during a press conference as a 'storied response' to counter criticism over his academic record, reflected as working-class ethos. He recalled being sent to work after high school by a strict father, followed by military service. The narrative functioned as a form of ethos-building through humility and effort, and it was strategically repeated in youth forums and media interviews to reinforce his credibility. It also created moral contrast with perceived elites and privileged actors, implicitly suggesting authenticity through hardship, in an aim to resonate with, and ultimately attract 'the many'.

Example #3

„O secundă. Toată viața... Lăsați-mă, vă rog frumos, o să vă placă. Toată viața mi s-a spus, ca femeie în politică, că sunt exagerat de tânără. Toată viața mi s-a spus asta. Și am spus în felul următor: este singurul defect care trece.” (Lavinia Șandru)
One second. All my life... Let me [speak], please, you'll like it. All my life, as a woman in politics, I've been told that I'm too young. All my life I've been told that. And I've replied like this: it's the only flaw that passes.

Lavinia Șandru has sporadically appeared in different authority positions granted by different political parties over the last two and a half decades, after a short-term ascension facilitated by former president Traian Băsescu, who later notoriously “bypassed her onto the political beltway”⁴¹. She was validated as an official candidate in the election of 2025, pleading for demographic growth at a national level, but never ranked by polls among the candidates who “stood a chance”.

The small story introduced in #3 was brought in as an anecdote during the live televised debate on the national public television channel (TVR1 & affiliates) in late April 2025, during an exchange on women's age as a potential indicator of incompetence in different professions. It is an uninvited reactive intervention aimed to counter gendered critique as manifestation of “front-staged behaviour”⁴², as an attempt to manage impressions and create an affiliative effect on the audience. Reframing age as inconsequential, she appears to assert confidence and achieve humanization and ordinariness through direct address and self-reference. The instance is reiterated in the remaining part of the campaign and reinforced as part of her ethos.

Șandru's story employed personal experience to respond to being dismissed as “too young” for politics. Her rhetorical manoeuvre—framing youth as “the only defect that fades”—subverted gendered and ageist expectations. The tone was both assertive and accessible, creating solidarity with marginalized voices. This theme was consistently reiterated in her broader campaign messaging,

⁴¹ <https://adevarul.ro/alegeri-prezidentiale-2025/portret-de-candidat-cine-este-lavinia-sandru-2432315.html>

⁴² Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Edinburgh, Anchor Books, 1956.

including interviews and statements about breaking norms and enabling female leadership.

Example #4

„Am o întrebare pentru mine. Întrebarea pentru mine este de ce sunt eu aici? [...] cetățenii habar nu au de ce suntem aici. Deci, domnilor, aceasta este întrebarea către mine și nu am de gând să vă răspund.” (John Ion Banu Muscel)

I have a question for myself. The question for myself is why am I here? [...] citizens have no idea why we are here. So, gentlemen, that is the question [addressed] to myself and I am not going to give you an answer.

John Ion Banu Muscel is a less known character in Romanian politics; he is a business man who lived and is still active in the USA and who announced his intention to introduce death penalty for corruption in Romania. He ran for president in the 2019 elections, where he was ranked last. In 2025, he never appeared as a candidate who “stood a chance” in the presidential race.

The short story in #4 was shared by the candidate in late April 2025, during TVR’s live presidential debate, as a response to the moderators’ invitation for each candidate to ask another a question. As a manifestation of “front-staged behaviour”⁴³, i.e. the way an individual presents him-/herself and behave when they know they are being observed by an audience, Banu Muscel opts for a mock performance, in which he pretends to use the question-opportunity to ask himself a philosophical question on the reason of his being there, but then immediately announces his intention not to answer the question. The communicative function of the narrative is to display deliberate self-reflection, further emphasizing critical attitude towards what he evaluates as a superficial debate, with unprofessional journalists, achieving positioning as an outsider (i.e. not privileged, not belonging to any group, not even the group of candidates) through theatrical disruption. The story is followed up by one of the moderators who, sarcastically, asks him whether he would also like to request a right of reply to his own refusal to answer his self-posed question.

Compared to his counter candidates, Banu Muscel took a radically different approach by telling a small story in the form of a question to himself: “Why am I here?” His anecdote was laced with irony and served to denounce the political spectacle and media framing. Rather than engaging in confrontation or conventional positioning, he distanced himself from the process, presenting his marginality as a form of lucidity. This moment was widely shared and commented on, becoming a defining element of his outsider persona.

⁴³ Idem.

Example #5

„Mă scuzați dar vreau să vă spun un singur lucru. Eu am lucrat cu doi oameni, cu un laureat Nobel și cu un președinte de țară și niciunul nu mi-a spus că aș fi irelevant.”

(Daniel Funeriu)

Pardon me but I want to say one thing. I've worked with two people, a Nobel laureate and a president of a country, and neither of them told me that I would be irrelevant.

Daniel Funeriu is a former minister of Education in Romania and has had multiple other attempts over the years to accede to public positions. He decided to run as an independent candidate in the presidential election of 2025, after his name was vehiculated among the proposed candidate of the governing coalition (finally Crin Antonescu).

The small story he utters in #5 is a reaction to an indirect ad personam attack launched by candidate Nicușor Dan in the live televised debate organised by TVR. In an instance of theatrical performance⁴⁴, Funeriu pretends to be asking imaginary questions to all his opponents, then picking Nicușor Dan to ask him to explain why his (the speaker's) phone had rung all day to convince him to retire from the election in favour of Dan. The reaction comes in a dismissive form of a claim that not much importance should be granted to Funeriu's candidacy, as, from all the 10 candidates present, only 4 would be "relevant"⁴⁵. Funeriu introduced the small story as an on-the-spot rebuttal of the invalidation made by Nicușor Dan. From a functional-communicative point of view, Funeriu asserts his credibility via his association with elite collaborators and positions himself as legitimate and substantial. The narrative is further echoed in post-debate coverage, used by other to depict marginalisation as recognised as a defining rhetorical instance.

Funeriu's remark "I worked with a Nobel laureate and a president, and none of them told me I was irrelevant" was formulated as a personal narrative to reestablish dignity after his candidacy was downplayed. This story highlighted his elite credentials but framed them modestly, as recognition of competence rather than status. It was a moment of reasserting relevance and seriousness in the face of public doubt, and was echoed in subsequent media coverage and interviews.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

In the Romanian presidential election campaigns of 2024 and 2025, candidates of various profiles strategically employed 'small stories' as tools for the creation of ordinariness. These narrative fragments functioned not only to humanize or individualise but to reposition the speaker within a moral and affective collective, i.e. a favourable electorate. Regardless of being grounded in a commonly well-

⁴⁴ Idem.

⁴⁵ <https://www.g4media.ro/dezbatare-electorala-organizata-de-tvr-la-cotroceni-marti-seara-au-fost-invitati-toti-cei-unsprezece-candidati-la-presedintie.html>

known biographical hardship, various kinds of gendered experiences or ironic self-awareness, the use of small stories served to democratise access to legitimacy in a highly mediated electoral space.

As displayed in 3.3., these stories provided access points for identification, enabling listeners to view the candidates as ‘ordinary people’ who shared their everyday struggles and aspirations. The contexts in which the analysed small stories appeared varied from public statements or press conferences, candidacy announcements or televised debates, later being turned into much circulated social media posts. The examples selected for analysis displayed various scenarios, for example Elena Lasconi used her candidacy launch to emphasise her ‘ordinary’ life trajectory after the Romanian revolution – falling in love, building a family, building a career – thus alining herself with the “millions of Romanians” she addressed. Marcel Ciolacu recounted his father’s tough love and his early years working and serving in the military, invoking a commonly-known generational script of discipline and effort. Lavinia Șandru chose to capitalise on her repeated experience of being underestimated and invalidated because of her age and gender reframing these labels as unfair and irrelevant, through a personal anecdote. John Ion Banu Muscel delivered a rhetorical gesture of existential questioning during a televised debate, employing irony to comment on the perceived futility of his presence in the race, the race itself, and implicitly criticising the debate format and professionals. Daniel Funeriu, in turn, referenced his work alongside a Nobel laureate and a head of state to rebut invalidation on grounds that his candidacy were unimportant.

The analysed small stories served to build ethos by presenting the candidates as grounded, reliable and morally appropriate, aiming to reinforce solidarity with ordinary Romanians, such as was the case in the cases of Lasconi and Ciolacu, defend against delegitimization, such as was the case with Șandru and Funeriu or perform ordinariness staging political marginality, as displayed in the case of Banu Muscel.

As ordinariness is not an a-priori concept per se, but rather a discursively constructed and strategically performed stance, the analysed small stories enable a narration of ordinariness into being through the repeated employment of certain themes e.g. early hard work, tough family life, exclusion etc, implying contrast with the system and the elites, also drawing on affective input i.e. nostalgia, injustice or self-reflection to anchor the speaker in commonly-shared emotional landscapes.

In (mediated) presidential campaign discourse, small stories are rarely isolated remarks. They reappear and are reinforced in various forms throughout the campaign in the aim to create a coherent narrative identity for the teller, thus operating as mechanisms of narrative legitimacy. Small stories allowed marginal candidates, such as Șandru and Funeriu for example, to claim space in the crowded field of a televised debate, also disrupting and challenging debate protocols, as was the case with Banu Muscel.

The use of small stories in the selected examples highlight the performative nature of ordinariness in political communication, looking at their contribution to the humanization, legitimization or dramatization of a candidate's presence in the race for the presidency of Romania.

Looking at the broader implications of the construction of ordinariness through small stories as a strategy in presidential campaign discourse, a populist interpretation would inevitably turn this "discursive resource"⁴⁶ into a double-edged sword. "Doing being ordinary"⁴⁷ might appeal to one part of the electorate while simultaneously not living up to the expectations of another part of the electorate. This was remarked by Nicolas Sarkozy in the French presidential debate with François Hollande⁴⁸: "Monsieur Hollande, vous avez parlé, sans doute pour être désagréable à mon endroit, d'un président normal. La fonction d'un président de la République, n'est pas une fonction normale. La situation que nous connaissons, ce n'est pas une situation normale. Votre normalité, elle n'est pas à la hauteur des enjeux"⁴⁹.

References

- BOTAȘ, Adina, *Self- and Other-Presentations in the Romanian Presidential Race of 2024. A Discourse-Based Analysis*, in *Revue Roumaine de Linguistique*, 3-4/2025, București, 2025. (forthcoming)
- BOTAȘ, Adina, 'A little kindness can go a long way': An overview of present-day discursive practices in the Romanian presidential debate of 8 May 2025, in *JoLIE*, 18/2025. (forthcoming)
- BOTAȘ, Adina, *Pre-campaign discourse in the Romanian presidential election of 2024: An analysis of characterisations*, in *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Brașov*, Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies, Vol. 17(66) No. 2, 2024a <https://doi.org/10.31926/but.pcs.2024.66.17.2.8>.
- BOTAȘ, Adina, *Political Discourse as Identity Work for the 'Rehearsed Self'. A Speech Act Approach to Characterisations in Local Election Campaign Slogans*, in *Annales Universitatis Apulensis. Series Philologica*, no. 25/tom 1/2024b, pp. 336-348.
- DUMM, Thomas, A., *A Politics of the Ordinary*, New York and London, New York University Press, 1999.
- FETZER, Anita, *Small stories and accountability of discursive action in mediated political discourse: Contextualisation and recontextualisation of ordinary and not-so-*

⁴⁶ Gonen Dori-Hacohen, "I can do math, but I'm not that smart. I'm not brilliant": Ordinariness as a discursive resource in United States radiophonic financial call-in interactions in Anita Fetzer & Elda Weizman (eds.), *The Construction of 'Ordinariness' across Media Genres*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2019, pp. 133-156.

⁴⁷ Harvey Sacks, *On doing "being ordinary."*, in J.M. Atkinson (ed.) *Structures of Social Action. Studies in Emotion and Social Interaction*, Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp. 413-429.

⁴⁸ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xyH_MRJ1C0s

⁴⁹ Mr. Hollande, you spoke, no doubt to be disagreeable to me, of a normal president. The function of a President of the Republic is not a normal function. The situation we're in right now is not normal. Your normality doesn't measure up to the stakes (translation mine).

- ordinary participants, in *Frontiers in Communication*, 7:970215, 2022. Doi: 0.3389/fcomm.2022.970215.
- FETZER, Anita, WEIZMAN, Elda, *The Construction of 'Ordinariness' across Media Genres*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2019.
- FETZER, Anita, *The Multilayered and Multifaceted Nature of Political Discourse*, in *The Pragmatics of Political Discourse. Explorations across Cultures*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2013, pp.1-18.
- GEORGAKOPOULOU, Alexandra, Korina GIAXOGLU & Sylvie PATRON, *Small Stories Research. Tales, Tellings, and Tellers across Contexts*. New York and London, Routledge, 2023.
- GEORGAKOPOULOU, Alexandra, BAMBERG, Michael, *Small Stories as a New Perspective in Narrative Identity Analysis*, in *Text & Talk - An Interdisciplinary Journal of Language Discourse Communication Studies*, 2008, pp. 377-296. DOI: 10.1515/TEXT.2008.018
- GEORGAKOPOULOU, Alexandra, *Small Stories, Interaction, and Identities*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007.
- GOFFMAN, Erving, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Edinburgh, Anchor Books, 1956.
- SACKS, Harvey, *On doing "being ordinary."*, in J.M. Atkinson (ed.) *Structures of Social Action. Studies in Emotion and Social Interaction*, Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp. 413-429.
- SECELEANU, Andra & GARABET, Bianca Ioana, *Communication psychopathologies in the presidential election campaign in Romania*, in *Revue des Sciences Politiques*, 86, 2024, pp. 18-29.
- VAN DIJK, Teun A., 1998 van Dijk, T. A. (1998). What is Political Discourse Analysis. *Political Linguistics*. 11, 11-52. <https://doi.org/10.1075/bjl.11.03dij00>
- WEIGAND, Edda, *Dialogue: The Mixed Game*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2010.

Online sources

- <https://www.euronews.ro/articole/alegeri-prezidentiale-2024-traian-basescu-sunt-cei-mai-slabi-candidati-pe-care-i>
- <https://www.rfi.fr/ro/rom%C3%A2nia/20241006-diana-%C8%99o%C8%99oac%C4%83-eliminat%C4%83-de-curtea-constitu%C8%9Bional%C4%83-din-cursa-pentru-preziden%C8%9Biale>
- <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/demisie-ciolacu-efecte-extremism/33406419.html>
- <https://adevarul.ro/alegeri-prezidentiale-2025/portret-de-candidat-cine-este-lavinia-sandru-2432315.html>
- <https://www.g4media.ro/dezbatare-electorala-organizata-de-tvr-la-cotroceni-marti-seara-au-fost-invitati-toti-cei-unsprezece-candidati-la-presedintie.html>
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xyH_MRJ1C0s