Gender Aspect in Communication of 2024 European Parliament Elections: Analysis of Pre-Election Communication of Political Party *Progresīvie* on Social Media Platform *Instagram*

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Abstract. This study explores the gender aspect of communication in the 2024 European Parliament elections through the analysis of the pre-election campaign of the Latvian political party *Progresīvie* on *Instagram*. The research is topical due to the growing importance of social media in political communication and the underrepresentation of women in politics. The aim of the study is to evaluate how a political party committed to gender equality communicates its candidates and how this communication resonates with the audience. The study employs quantitative content analysis to systematically assess 59 *Instagram* posts published by *Progresīvie* from 13 February to 7 June 2024. Posts focusing on the party's lead candidate, Elīna Pinto, and the second-placed candidate, Mārtiņš Staķis, were analysed for themes, engagement metrics, and adherence to gender stereotypes. Results indicate that despite the party's commitment to gender equality, the communication strategy did not fully highlight Elina Pinto's leadership, as the posts featuring Mārtiņš Staķis garnered a significantly higher engagement. Topics addressed in Pinto's posts moved away from traditional "feminine" themes, emphasizing leadership and professional expertise. However, Staķis's communication leaned on traditionally "masculine" topics such as defence and security, reaffirming his established political persona. Posts portraying both candidates together showed a neutral gender representation but did not elevate Pinto's position as a leader. The study concludes that avoiding traditional gender stereotypes and focusing on leadership did not significantly enhance Pinto's visibility or voter appeal. The findings underline the challenges female politicians face in overcoming entrenched biases, even within gender-progressive parties, highlighting the need for more targeted and assertive communication strategies to achieve equitable representation.

Keywords: European Parliament, gender, gender stereotypes in politics, *Instagram*, political party, political campaign, social media

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Introduction

Since Latvia joined the European Union in 2004, there have been five European Parliament (EP) elections – in 2004, 2009, 2014, 2019 and 2024. The share of female candidates and elected MEPs in these elections has varied over time. In the first EP elections held in Latvia in 2004, a total of 245 candidates stood for election, less than 30% of whom were women. In these elections, 2 of the 9 MEPs elected were women (Statistikas portāls 2018).

The gender ratio of MEPs elected in the following elections remained unchanged:

- 186 people stood as candidates in the 2009 EP elections, 3 of the 8 elected were women (Statistikas portāls 2018);
- 170 people stood as candidates in the 2014 EP elections, 3 of the 8 elected were women (Statistikas portāls 2018).
- 246 people stood as candidates in the 2019 EP elections, 3 of the 8 elected were women (Centrālā vēlēšanu komisija 2019, 275).

271 people stood as candidates for the 2024 EP elections. Almost 40% of the candidates were women, the highest ever (Spakovska 2024). For example, in the party *Progresīvie* women made up 66.7% of the candidates, in *Saskaņa* – 55.6%, and in *Latvija Pirmajā Vietā* – also 55.6%. However, in the first places of the lists, where candidates have a better chance of being elected, the share of women was lower – only 25% of the first places were occupied by women. Of the 9 elected MEPs, 1 was a woman – Sandra Kalniete from *Jaunā Vienotība* (Centrālā vēlēšanu komisija 2024).[1] Thus, despite the increase in the number of female candidates, the number of elected female MPs in 2024 decreased.

Although the representation of women in the lists of candidates is increasing, this is not always reflected in the number of elected MEPs. This could be due to the lower positioning of women on the lists, voters' preferences and the communication of the election campaigns.

This study focuses on the analysis of the EP election campaign by the party *Progresīvie* on *Instagram*. *Progresīvie* have been chosen for several reasons. First of all, it is the only political party in power in Latvia with gender quotas in its statutes. Paragraph 4.3 of the statutes states that a gender balance must be ensured on the party's board, i.e. no gender should be represented more than 60% or less than 40%. This requirement also applies to other Party bodies, such as the Audit Commission and the Ethics Committee (Progresīvie). The approach reflects the party's commitment to gender equality and to ensuring balanced representation in its structures. Secondly, the party has nominated a woman politician, Elīna Pinto, as its leader for the 2024 EP elections. Thirdly, voters

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1   Two female MEPs continue to work in the European Parliament: after Valdis Dombrovskis was confirmed as Trade Commissioner, he was replaced by Inese Vaidere.

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elected the second-placed candidate, Mārtiņš Staķis, to the EP. Taking into account all the above-mentioned circumstances, this case is worth exploring: how a gender-oriented political force communicates its political candidates and what is the user reactions to this communication.

Politics has historically been "a field created by men for men, making it easier for them to navigate" (Sullivan 2023, 884). This tradition is rooted in the historical association of men with publicity and women with privacy, establishing a hierarchical superiority of men over women. Despite women making up roughly half of the global population, they remain underrepresented in both national parliaments and governments worldwide (UN Women 2023). This underrepresentation perpetuates gender inequalities and reinforces hierarchical power structures in society, resulting in an imbalance in political decision-making and the exclusion of female perspectives (Magin *et al.* 2024, 158).

Social media offers female politicians an opportunity to challenge these longstanding inequalities. Unlike traditional media, which often portrays women in politics through a stereotypical lens or gives them less attention overall, social media provides a platform for women to bypass these biases and directly engage with voters. According to Van der Pas and Aaldering, traditional media's biased portrayal of female politicians and the lack of coverage they receive can have serious electoral consequences, as reduced visibility often correlates with fewer votes (Van der Pas, Aaldering 2020).

By leveraging social media, female candidates can take control of their narratives and increase their visibility, thus countering the systemic disadvantages they face in traditional media.

In modern political campaigns, social media has become a pivotal tool for engaging with voters and disseminating information. As described, "campaign information is characterized as a one-way communication practice that aims to share knowledge about the candidate's election activities such as endorsements, advertisements, campaign meetings, speeches, or discussions with voters" (Tsichla *et al.* 2021, 2921). However, the landscape of political discourse has shifted significantly, moving beyond traditional media. "Contemporary political discourse is not restricted to traditional media channels but is becoming even more prominent in the socially networked space of new media. Voters are increasingly keen to search for political information in the online context" (Tsichla *et al.* 2021, 2919).

Over the past two decades, digital media – including social media – has transformed into an essential component of political communication. Politicians have recognized the unique potential of social media to bypass traditional gatekeeping functions. According to Tsichla *et al.*, "politicians realized the astounding potential of social media, which allows them to bypass the media's gatekeeping function and control the message projected to the electorate, gain visibility,

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mobilize, engage, and nurture a two-way relationship with voters" (Tsichla *et al.* 2021, 2919). This is especially significant, as "voters rarely encounter politicians in real life, and their perceptions and evaluations of politicians likely stem from their media portrayals. Social media not only promises established, nationally known top politicians the opportunity to cultivate their image and disseminate their views, but also offers local politicians a channel for self-promotion" (Geise *et al.* 2024, 2).

Social media also empowers politicians to manage their public image. Unlike traditional news media, where influence over portrayal is limited, social platforms enable strategic self-presentation. As explained by Magin *et al.*, "politicians have only limited influence on their portrayal in the news, but on social media, they can decide themselves on their self-presentation. Thus, they can strategically either bypass or enforce gender stereotypes" (Magin *et al.* 2024, 158).

Among social media platforms, *Instagram* has gained particular significance in political campaigns due to its younger user base: "*Instagram* has younger users than Facebook, which makes it attractive in election campaigning for reaching age groups that are more difficult to reach via more traditional communication channels" (Magin *et al.* 2024, 163). As a visual-centric platform, *Instagram* serves as a strategic tool for image enhancement and direct engagement with target audiences. Uluçay and Melek emphasize its importance, stating that, "as the most popular image-centric platform, *Instagram* has become a strategic tool for enhancing leaders' self-images and directly addressing target groups. Likewise, leaders' self-framing tactics on *Instagram* influence voters' impressions of them" (Uluçay, Melek 2024, 143).

Ultimately, social media has revolutionized the way political campaigns are conducted, offering opportunities for personalization, visibility, and engagement that were previously unattainable through traditional media.

Men and women exhibit distinct patterns in their social media behaviour, which also influences their engagement with political content. As Tsichla and other researchers have observed, "although men are more likely to express their political opinions on social media, women tend to respond to public messages and like content more often" (Tsichla *et al.* 2021, 2919). This difference highlights the varying ways individuals interact with political messages and suggests gendered preferences in social media usage.

In the context of political campaigns, male and female politicians often adapt their strategies to align with gender-congruent traits and issues. According to Tsichla *et al.*, "several studies support the idea that male and female politicians align their campaign strategies with gender-congruent traits and issues" (Tsichla *et al.* 2021, 2923). These approaches not only reflect societal expectations but also demonstrate how gender shapes communication styles in political contexts.

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Traditional media have long been criticized for providing less coverage to female politicians, creating challenges for women seeking visibility in political discourse. Research consistently highlights the gender bias in traditional media's coverage of elections. Female candidates are less visible and are often portrayed differently than their male counterparts. However, social media offers an opportunity for women to bypass these biases, enabling them to take control of their public image and communicate directly with voters (Holm *et al.* 2023, 134). This possibility is especially critical in combating stereotypes that undermine women's perceived competence and leadership abilities.

Gender stereotypes significantly influence perceptions of leadership and political success, often creating unequal starting conditions for women in the political sphere. The traditional image of a successful politician aligns closely with traits typically associated with masculinity, such as dominance, power, independence, strength, and activity. Conversely, femininity is often linked to traits like obedience, dependence, anxiety, passivity, and softness – the qualities considered contrary to effective leadership (Williams, Best 1990; Magin *et al.* 2024, 159). This dynamic results in a political environment "in which masculine values and political values are often interchangeable" (Meeks, Domke 2016, 896).

Gender stereotypes extend beyond media representation, influencing campaign strategies and voter expectations. These stereotypes also affect voters' perceptions of issue expertise: masculine traits are associated with competency in areas like the economy, foreign affairs, and defence, whereas feminine traits are linked to healthcare, education, and social welfare (Huddy, Terkildsen 1993; Tsichla *et al.* 2021, 2922).

"Male" issues, such as business, military, and taxes, are often considered more societally important, both by voters and news media, resulting in greater visibility and larger budgets for these areas. In contrast, "female" issues, such as education, family, and healthcare, are frequently viewed as secondary, which further entrenches gender-based disparities in political influence and leadership perceptions (Magin *et al.* 2024, 162; Brands *et al.* 2021, 2017).

In conclusion, female politicians must navigate a complex interplay of stereotypes and expectations, balancing traditionally masculine traits required for leadership with the feminine qualities expected by voters. While social media offers new avenues for challenging these norms, the persistence of gender stereotypes continues to shape political landscapes and leadership perceptions.

Methodology

The study uses the method of content analysis to evaluate the pre-election communication of the political party *Progresīvie* on the social media platform *Instagram*.

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Quantitative content analysis is an empirical method for the systematic analysis of audio, textual, visual and/or audiovisual media content. The aim of such analysis is to show trends in media content reporting rather than to gain an absolute understanding of a particular media message (Rose 2005, 54–56). Content analysis categorizes elements of a text to create datasets that allow researchers to interpret patterns and infer meaning. The method is versatile and can be applied in both qualitative and quantitative research, helping researchers uncover underlying themes, patterns, or relationships in communication (White, Marsh 2006). This makes it particularly useful in fields such as media studies, sociology, and psychology.

The essence of content analysis lies in its ability to transform qualitative data into measurable quantitative insights. Through the systematic application of coding schemes, researchers identify themes, concepts, or recurring elements within a dataset. This allows for the interpretation of textual or visual material in a structured and reproducible manner (Hsieh, Shannon 2005). The combination of qualitative insights and quantitative data enhances the credibility and depth of the analysis.

The process of conducting content analysis involves several essential steps. First, the researcher formulates a clear research question that defines the scope and purpose of the study. Second, the sampling frame is determined, ensuring that the selected materials accurately represent the research topic. Next, a coding scheme is developed, which includes defining categories and units of analysis. Coders are trained to apply this scheme consistently, and inter-coder reliability is tested to ensure replicability. Finally, the data is analysed, and meaningful patterns, relationships, or trends are interpreted to answer the research question (McMillan 2000). These structured principles ensure that content analysis is systematic, reliable, and provides meaningful insights.

Results

The election campaign of the political party *Progresīvie* on *Instagram* commenced on 13 February 2024 with post: "🤍Your 9th list for the 8 June European elections – @Progresivie! Together with Elīna Pinto and Mārtiņš Staķis, we have prepared a powerful and energetic offer with something for everyone. 🤍 Take a look! www.progresivie.lv/ep (link in profile). #EuropeanElections #Elections #Elections2024 #Elections2024 #ElīnaPinto #Pinto #MārtiņšStaķis #Staķis" (@progresivie 2024a).

7 June is the last day of the general election campaign, as the period of silence enters. In this message, the party focuses on its two leading candidates. Although Elīna Pinto is number one on the party's electoral list, this message highlights both her and the former mayor of Riga, Mārtiņš Staķis, who is number two on the list.

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Table 1. Number of *Instagram* posts

Instagram posts		
Focus on Elīna Pinto	**Focus on Mārtiņš Staķis**	**Focus on both candidates**
30	16	12

During the pre-election communication period from 13 February to 7 June, posts on the social media *Instagram* related to the main candidates of the party have been selected for analysis, 59 posts in total.

Analysis of Elina Pinto posts

The highest number of "likes" for MEP candidate Elina Pinto is 203. The post was made on 6 June 2024 and is an excerpt from a debate between the EP candidates, the leaders of the party lists. The topic of the post is women's reproductive rights, and in the excerpt, Elīna Pinto argues against limiting women's reproductive rights. It should be noted that other posts on women's reproductive rights have also received the highest number of likes from *Instagram* followers.

- "8 June is also about your right to decide about your body and your future, not to leave it in the hands of 'self-proclaimed experts', says @ElinaPinto, candidate for the European Parliament" (@progresivie 2024b). 151 "likes".
- "Women's freedom, health and rights in Europe should not be different depending on where you live! "Cultural differences" are no excuse for politicians to take away a woman's right to decide about her own body, not in 21st century Europe, not in @progressive Europe" (@progresivie 2024c). 146 "likes".

The statistically highest number of "likes" was achieved with the entry of 30 May in collaboration with @europgreens: " Rail Baltica is a future railway line that will connect the Baltic States to the European rail network. Starting in 2030, it will be possible to travel from Berlin to Tallin with night trains and high-speed trains. Our lead candidate @terry_reintke and @eliinapinto from our Latvian member party @progresivie visited the construction site of Riga Central Station, which will become a hub for all international connections.EU For a strong & connected Europe: #ChooseCourage on 6–9 June!" (@progresivie 2024d). This post has 580 "like" marks, but that is due to the partnership with The European Green Party[2].

The post with the lowest number of "likes" – 43, is the 14 May entry: " ☑ European Parliament candidate @EliinaPinto: With Europe's help we can

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2   The European Green Party is a European political party that is also known as the European Greens. The party bring together national parties that share the same Green values, and who are active across the entire European continent – both within the European Union and beyond (https://europeangreens.eu/about/).

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protect Latvia and accelerate much-needed change. Take a look at what we have to offer:☞ www.progresivie.lv/ep (link in profile) #Progressives #ElinaPinto #Pinto #BelongingToEurope #ProtectLatvia #EuropeanElections #Election2024 #Elections2024" (@progresivie 20224e).

Analysing the number of "likes", Elina Pinto's posts have received an average of 78.3 likes.

Topics of posts

Posts of Elīna Pinto's campaign cover a wide range of topics (Table 2).

The topics represented in *Instagram* posts are not explicitly coded as areas of "female expertise". With the exception of 3 posts that directly address women's rights issues, there is no focus on welfare, education, family and health, which are marked as traditional areas of competence of a female politician.

Rather, it is an attempt to move away from the traditional representation of femininity. In the political party's *Progresīvie Instagram* account, Elina Pinto is not portrayed as a mother or a wife, private life scenes do not constitute part of the pre-election communication. The candidate is portrayed as a professional with no explicit gender coding. Two posts in particular highlight the candidate's activities, which are traditionally associated with masculine competences. These are the posts of 23 May (@progresivie 2024f) and 3 June (@progresivie 2024g). Both are small videos showing Elīna Pinto working for the Engure Volunteer Fire Brigade. The two recordings highlight the qualities of leadership and courage traditionally associated with a male leader.

Table 2. Topics of posts by Elīna Pinto during election campaign

Topics	
Meetings with voters	6
Nature protection/renewable energy	4
Poverty reduction/social security	2
Agriculture/environmentally friendly agriculture	3
Health	1
Animal protection	1
Women's rights/reproductive rights	3
International security/international cooperation/challenges	4
Call to vote	3
Labour law	1
Stories about yourself	2

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Analysis of Mārtiņš Staķis posts

It should be noted that, although Mārtiņš Staķis is featured much less frequently on the party's *Instagram* account, the posts dedicated to him have gathered a significantly higher number of "likes". The post "Why every Latvian patriot should participate in the European Parliament elections" (@progresivie 2024h) has received the highest number of "likes" – 919. This post has been published both on the *Instagram* account of *Progresīvie* and on the private account of Mārtiņš Staķis. In the post, he calls on people to vote and specifically targets the pro-Russian forces in Latvian politics.

The post with the lowest number of "likes" – 30, is the one from 11 March: "🌍 Clean air, 🖼 lower bills and 🔋 independence are what we get when we finally get off the fossil fuel needle. @MartinsStakis is ready to go to Brussels to attract investment for a cleaner and more profitable future for Latvia! Vote for this or one of seven other initiatives and choose your politicians' first acts. Your opinion is our work!✉ balso.progresivie.lv (link in profile) 🤔 What does this initiative mean in practice? It REQUESTS politicians to set up a European Union fund that will also finance renewable energy projects in Latvia. #Latvia #Election2024 #Election2024 #Election #Europe #Election #MārtiņšStaķis #Staķis #EuropeanParliament #Brussels #renewableenergy #environment #nature" (@progresivie 2024i)

Analysing the number of "like" marks received, it can be concluded that on average Mārtiņš Staķis's posts have received 179.7 "likes". This is significantly more than the number of "likes" for Elina Pinto's entries.

Topics of Mārtiņš Staķis' posts

Posts of Mārtiņš Staķis campaign cover a less extensive range of topics compared to the range of topics communicated by Elīna Pinto (see Table 3).

Table 3. Topics of posts by Mārtiņš Staķis during election campaign

Topics	
Nature protection/renewable energy	1
Poverty reduction/social security	2
Initiatives to improve Riga's urban environment	1
Cooperation with the European Green Party	3
Call to vote	3
Defence/ security of Latvia and Europe/threat of pro-Kremlin forces	6

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Mārtiņš Staķis's recordings cover a narrower range of topics, and it should be stressed that the number of posts is also smaller compared to Elina Pinto. Most of Mārtiņš Staķis's topics are European security, Europe's ability to defend itself and the threat of pro-Kremlin forces in Europe – the properly masculine themes.

Analysis of candidates' joint posts

The number of posts where both candidates are together is the lowest of all pre-election posts. However, these posts also received more "likes" than Elina Pinto's individual posts. The average number of "likes" for both candidates' posts is 147.3. The post with the most "likes", 375, is the video made on 19 April "Elina and Martins with Elevator Pitch for Europe #What'sHappeninginBrussels" (@progresivie 2024j). In the post both MEP candidates try to explain in a short and relaxed way the role of the EP as a European policy maker. Ironically, the post with the lowest number of "likes" – 43, is also about the importance of the EP and calls for face-to-face meetings with MEP candidates. This is the entry of 20 March: "We invite everyone interested, and in particular the residents of Valmiera, to a discussion on "What is the point of the European Parliament?" – During the conversation we will discuss various issues, giving the audience the opportunity to raise an important idea that should definitely be implemented at European level. EU💬 The conversation will be attended by our EP candidates Elīna Pinto and Mārtiņš Staķis, Alta Elizabete Kraukle and Madara Senkāne (Valmiera Youth Council), Maija Dukure (Valmiera Pensioners' Association "V.P. Mežābele" and others. 23 March, 14.30⚲ Concert Hall "Valmiera", Leona Paegles iela 10, Valmiera ⚲ If you are coming, please note the link in the profile description!" (@progresivie 2024k). The opportunity to meet the candidates in person did not attract much interest.

The scope of both candidates' contributions is rather narrow, more promoting the agenda of political party *Progresīvie* as such and explaining the functioning and importance of the EP. The range of topics offered does not highlight either candidate, as it does not focus on any particular set of topics that would highlight the specific competences of a candidate.

Table 3. Range of topics covered in posts

Topics	
Invitation to a meeting with parliamentary candidates	1
Explaining the work and role of the European Parliament	3
Participation in public events	1
Cooperation with the European Green Party	1
Offer of party *Progresīvie* to voters/call to vote	5
Defence/security of Latvia and Europe/threat of pro-Kremlin forces	1

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An analysis of the two candidates' joint posts shows that both candidates are presented as partners and equal politicians. The communication does not emphasise gender stereotypes, nor do both candidates focus on gender-specific themes. The communication could be described as gender-neutral. However, the equal communication between the two candidates does not highlight Elina Pinto as the leader of the list.

Conclusions

The party's pre-election communication on *Instagram* can be seen as high-lighting Elīna Pinto as the number one on the list. At the same time, the results of the content analysis show that the number of posts dedicated to Mārtiņš Staķis and both candidates is almost equal to Elīna Pinto's – 30 versus 28.Therefore, it cannot be clearly stated that the communication was 100% pro-Elīna Pinto. Content analysis also indicates that the posts dedicated to Elina Pinto receive on average far fewer "likes" than the posts dedicated to Mārtiņš Staķis and both candidates – 78.3 versus 179.7 and 147.3. Of course, it should be taken into account that Elīna Pinto was a newcomer to the Latvian political scene and much less known compared to Mārtiņš Staķis, who had been the Mayor of Riga, the capital of Latvia, from 2020 to 2023. Elīna Pinto became better known to the Latvian public in the summer of 2023, when the party *Progresīvie* nominated Elīna Pinto, the head of the association "esiLV", for the post of President of Latvia (Līcīte 2023). In view of this, the pre-election communication highlighting Elīna Pinto should have been more aggressive. However, at least on *Instagram*, this approach cannot be observed.

As mentioned above, the party *Progresīvie* supports gender equality and has included gender equality principles in its statutes. The analysis confirmed that no gender stereotypes were used in the campaign communication on *Instagram*. Elīna Pinto advocated for women's rights, but did not focus her communication and her expertise as a politician on areas traditionally reserved for women: education, welfare, health and family. Rather, Elīna Pinto was positioned as a knowledgeable leader who spoke about agriculture, energy policy and security.

A different approach can be observed in the communication of the number two on the party list, Mārtiņš Staķis. Staķis is a well-known politician, so the number of posts dedicated to him on the party's *Instagram* account is smaller. An analysis of the topics of posts shows that Mārtiņš Staķis communicates with voters on typically masculine topics, with the greatest emphasis on security and defence. This communication reaffirms Staķis as a leader, layering on top of voters' previous experiences of Staķis as the Mayor of Riga.

The gender balance of Latvia's elected MEPs has not been equal over time, with Latvian voters preferring male candidates. The experience of the political

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party *Progresīvie* in the 2024 EP elections shows that it is difficult for a female politician to win the support of voters, even if she is nominated as the leader of the party's list. Avoiding traditional stereotypes of femininity and emphasising leadership as a pre-election communication strategy did not bring the desired result.

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