

Skirmishing Femininity: Female Populist Skirmishers and the Gendered Politics of Illiberalism in Hungary and Poland

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Abstract

This article explores the role of female political actors who mobilize gendered symbolic capital to advance illiberal populist agendas in contemporary Europe. Building on the concept of the populist skirmisher, we analyze women who act as combative and hypervisible disruptors of discursive norms. They engage in performative incivility—weaponizing confrontation, vulgarity, and taboo-breaking to command attention and push ideological boundaries. Focusing on emblematic figures: Poland’s Ewa Zajączkowska-Hernik and Hungary’s Dóra Dúró, we examine how these women operate through gendered repertoires of moral defense and cultural warfare. We argue that these women embody skirmishing femininity: a strategic mode of political agency that fuses protective traditionalism with disruptive communicative practices. Here, motherhood and femininity do not soften aggression but authorize it as moral protection. Their confrontational performances help redraw the boundaries of acceptable speech and normalize radical discourse.

Keywords

anti-gender politics; femonationalism; illiberalism; motherhood; populist radical right; populist skirmishers; skirmishing femininity

1. Introduction: The Strategic Weaponization of Motherhood

A remarkable first appearance of the populist radical right Polish MEP Ewa Zajączkowska-Hernik (b. 1990) at the EP plenary session in Strasbourg made waves:

I address you as a woman to a woman, as a mother to a mother:....You are responsible for every rape, every assault, every tragedy caused by the influx of illegal immigrants.....And for what you are doing, you should be in prison, not in the European Commission. (European Parliament, 2024)

The closing slogan “Hands off Poland!” (“Od Polski ręce precz!”) has become the brand phrase of her YouTube program.

In that short time, this newly elected MEP presented her whole rhetorical arsenal: a brutal, personalized takedown framed as representing “most Europeans.” The speech connects three themes—the Green Deal, migration, and EU authority—into a single accusation of civilizational sabotage orchestrated by Ursula von der Leyen. The form is deliberately vulgar and confrontational: direct address by first name (“Mrs. Urszula”), mockery (“hangover”), and criminalization (“you should be in prison”). The “woman to woman, mother to mother” invokes womanhood and maternal identity as a handle for the status overreach: an emerging political actor performing self-elevation solely by means of shared gender to strip EC’s president of institutional hierarchy. In doing so, a previously unknown newcomer to the EP, back then representing its smallest political group—Europe of Sovereign Nations—establishes political capital by attacking the Union’s most prominent heavyweight.

The staging reinforces the dominance display (Di Mauro & Joffe, 2009, p. 48), as Zajączkowska-Hernik is standing at the podium while von der Leyen is seated, creating asymmetry. When Zajączkowska-Hernik turns toward her and wags a finger, the gesture mimics a teacher scolding a pupil. This standing reprimand, directed at someone who must remain seated, produces a visualized status overreach and a theatrical contempt display; it has become a signature spectacle for this MEP, fully utilized and multiplied by her social media channels.

Zajączkowska-Hernik demonstrates the paradox we analyze in this article: Far-right women who preach traditional family values like domesticity and the significance of motherhood are often those who most aggressively occupy the center of the (social) media stage, hurling accusations, weaponizing their gender, and pushing the boundaries of acceptable speech. They are different from men, as for men—especially within the far-right political ecosystem, understood here in line with Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017, pp. 1–8) as encompassing both the extreme right and the populist radical right—combative behavior is already normalized and expected (Sigl, 2013, as cited in Blum & Köttig, 2017, p. 370). This ecosystem constitutes a social field of politicians, activists, party cadres, movement adherents, and affiliated intellectual actors, in which it is obvious for men to put on display militarized masculinity. By contrast, women often enter politics in these milieus as an explicit alternative to liberal or progressive female politicians perceived as unfeminine (Blum & Köttig, 2017, p. 370; Sigl, 2013; see also Schreiber, 2016, p. 12). They are not numerous; women constitute roughly one-tenth of Konfederacja’s membership (interviewee A), which further amplifies their visibility within a masculinized party environment, creating a competitive advantage that is intentionally exploited through rhetorical excess and platform-optimized provocation.

A parallel configuration of gendered confrontation can be observed in Hungary, albeit in a markedly different political arena. There, Dóra Dúró (b. 1987)—a long-standing Member of the National Assembly and a leading figure of the radical right party Mi Hazánk—has built political authority through the moralized, non-traditional defense of children, family, and nation. Embedded in a consolidated illiberal environment, Dúró mobilizes motherhood to advance pronatalist policies, child-protection legislation, and cultural censorship framed as demographic and civilizational necessity. Her landmark 2020 public shredding of the children’s book *Meseország mindenkié* (Lengyel-Szabó et al., 2020), condemned by cultural institutions yet celebrated within radical right milieus, exemplifies a skirmisher-style performance whose power lies in its virality and mnemonic endurance: a moral-panic-driven act of censorship staged as maternal protection of Hungarian children, which continues to resonate several years later and evokes parallels with historical book burnings.

This article conceptualizes these actors—exemplified by Ewa Zajączkowska-Hernik in Poland and Dóra Dúró in Hungary—as female populist skirmishers, understood as a gendered subset of the broader skirmisher role (Zbytniewska, 2022). These actors accumulate political capital through confrontation, strategic norm-breaking, and the gendered performance of controversy.

Building on this framework, this article advances the concept of skirmishing femininity, a gendered political repertoire that extends the earlier notion of the populist skirmisher. Skirmishing femininity captures how women deploy gender—particularly motherhood, femininity, and moral authority—as an additional political resource that expands the tactical range and legitimacy of skirmishing practices.

2. Literature Review and Analytical Framework

This section develops the analytical framework by integrating six strands: (a) Populism as performative political style; (b) skirmishers and “social-mediatized” political communication; (c) gender as constitutive infrastructure of illiberal politics; (d) gendered role repertoires and conservative performances of femininity; (e) “symbolic glue” and anti-gender politics; and (f) femonationalism as a gender-equality register weaponized for nativist and exclusionary projects.

2.1. Populism as Performative Political Style

This article conceptualizes populism as a discursive-performative political style, rather than exclusively as an ideology or strategy. While ideational approaches define populism as a thin-centered ideology opposing “the pure people” to “the corrupt elite” (Mudde, 2004, pp. 543–544, 2007, p. 23), and strategic approaches emphasize leadership and mobilization (Weyland, 2001, p. 14, 2021, p. 185), this study aligns with the performative turn in populism research.

Following Benjamin Moffitt, populism is understood as a political style characterized by antagonistic boundary construction, the use of “bad manners,” and the performance of crisis, threat, and breakdown (Moffitt, 2016, pp. 47–48). In this perspective, populism operates through how politics is enacted—via rhetoric, affect, and mediated visibility—rather than only through programmatic content.

This approach is further developed in relational and performative accounts of populism (e.g., Casullo, 2021, 2025; Ostiguy, 2017), which emphasize embodiment, affective signaling, and the stylized opposition between “high” and “low” politics. It is particularly suited to analyzing actors whose political efficacy depends on provocation, emotional intensity, and platform circulation.

Within this framework, skirmishing femininity is conceptualized as a gendered modality within the performative repertoire of populist politics. It builds on the insight that populist performance works through hybridization: the leader’s body can combine multiple, even contradictory signifiers at once, allowing audiences to read aggression, care, ordinariness, authority, femininity, and transgression as part of the same political persona (Casullo, 2021, 2025).

2.2. Populist Skirmishers in a Social-Mediatized Attention Economy

Populist skirmishers have been theorized as aspiring political actors positioned below first-tier leadership whose central modus operandi is the systemic deployment of incivility as a visibility-maximizing strategy that accelerates career advancement (Zbytniewska, 2022). Skirmishers are therefore defined by their capacity to violate norms, attack political opponents, and probe the limits of acceptable discourse manifestly and deliberately. They function as subsidiary frontrunners—“light political infantry”—tasked with harassing opponents and radicalizing publics on behalf of party leadership, performing communicative acts that leaders cannot safely undertake without incurring reputational or institutional costs (Zbytniewska, 2022, pp. 72–76). Skirmishers thus also play an important role within party structures, where a single charismatic leader alone would be insufficient to address diverse segments of the electorate, sustain multilevel political mobilization among party supporters, and ensure a constant presence across fragmented media environments (p. 72).

Here, based on that theoretical insight, we examine a gendered subset of populist skirmishers, focusing on how womanhood, femininity, and motherhood are mobilized within skirmisher-style politics to advance illiberal projects. In radical right political contexts, these categories are typically framed as civilizational duties tied to national reproduction, moral guardianship, and cultural continuity (Dietze, 2020, pp. 158–159; Grzebalska & Pető, 2017, p. 4; Krzyżanowski & Krzyżanowska, 2026, pp. 3, 10–14). Motherhood in particular becomes a semi-sacralized and politicized status associated with authority to speak on behalf of “children,” “family,” and the “nation’s future,” often positioned as a moral counterweight to unfeminine self-serving hypocrisy of liberal or feminist claims about gender equality (Dietze, 2020, pp. 158–159; Félix, 2017, pp. 99–100; Norocel, 2018, pp. 44–45, 51; Schreiber, 2016, pp. 11–12).

Illiberalism is understood as a political order that maintains electoral competition while progressively undermining rights, pluralism, and constitutional checks and balances (Mounk, 2018, p. 51; Pető, 2022, p. 313; Sadurski, 2019, p. 13; Zakaria, 1997, p. 22). While analytically distinct, populism often provides the discursive and mobilizational vehicle for illiberal transformations, claiming exclusive representation of the homeland to delegitimize opposition and dismantle liberal constraints in the name of “the people” (Taggart, 2000, p. 97).

The contemporary proliferation of skirmisher-style political actors is inseparable from changes in political culture and media ecology. The broader rise of illiberalism has been linked to elite failure and the inability of

political elites to offer compelling programs (Pető, 2022). Under conditions of a fragmented, pillarized media landscape (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 35), constant news cycles, and platform-driven visibility incentives, political attention becomes increasingly responsive to provocation and norm violations.

The attention dynamics of social media amplify the effectiveness of this role. Research on affective diffusion and virality shows that negative emotions, outrage, and controversy increase visibility and sharing (Fan et al., 2014, pp. 12–14; Garimella et al., 2018, p. 18; Han et al., 2023, p. 560; Jakubowicz, 2018, pp. 75–77; Jamieson, 2018, pp. 47–48). In political terms, skirmishers operationalize rage bait as a systematic repertoire: short-form conflict, personalized targeting, and moral escalation.

This platform logic is reinforced by a broader phenomenon of “social mediatization,” that is, the reorganization of political practice around platform affordances and the erosion of traditional media gatekeeping as politicians bypass legacy media constraints (Zbytniewska, 2026; see also Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Gainous & Wagner, 2014, pp. 16, 18, 49–50). In such conditions, peripheral actors can leap to the center of political communication through strategic incivility and performative aggression (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016, p. 41; Schumann et al., 2019, p. 5). Research further suggests that exploiting this dynamic can translate into electoral payoffs for populist radical right actors (Schumann et al., 2019, pp. 6, 16). Skirmishers are thus best understood as roles that emerge from the interaction between illiberal party strategy and social media visibility incentives.

2.3. Gender as Political Infrastructure and Symbolic Glue in Illiberal Projects

If skirmishing describes a communicative role within an attention economy, gender constitutes a deeper political infrastructure through which illiberal projects are legitimized, reproduced, and emotionally anchored. This infrastructure is captured through the concept of “gender as symbolic glue,” and as Anikó Félix, applying this concept to the Hungarian context, observes: “gender as a symbolic glue integrates anti-EU, anti-liberal, anti-communist, and homophobic attitudes, which can produce voters for the rightists. In the case of far-right anti-government, anti-Semitic, and anti-immigrant attitudes are also included in the discourse of ‘gender’” (Félix, 2015, p. 77).

Anti-gender mobilization serves as the unifying mechanism behind far-right electoral success, condensing anxieties about liberalism, pluralism, migration, sexuality, and supranational governance into a single moralized and antagonistic register (Grzebalska & Pető, 2017, p. 2; Pető, 2015, pp. 130–131). The female skirmishers embody and apply “gender as symbolic glue,” multiplying their impact.

2.4. Gendered Repertoires and Alternative Emancipation

Research on women in far-right and illiberal movements has moved beyond treating women as marginal or auxiliary actors (Klammer & Goetz, 2017, p. 82; Matfess & Margolin, 2022, p. 14; Mulinari & Neergaard, 2017, p. 17). This shift in the literature reflects the recognition that women perform political functions that are structurally central to illiberal and far-right projects, including propaganda, welfare provision, moral pedagogy, ideological reproduction, institutional consolidation, promotion, and legitimization (Köttig et al., 2017; Matfess & Margolin, 2022, pp. 14, 49; Pető, 2020).

However, women remain numerically underrepresented within many far-right environments (Köttig et al., 2017). While this underrepresentation limits descriptive representation, it simultaneously produces a condition of *gendered exceptionality*. Because women are scarce within these milieus, their presence attracts disproportionate attention, amplifying visibility and increasing the communicative payoff of norm-breaking behavior (Guerreiro & Claudino, 2022; Norocel, 2018, p. 43; Schumann et al., 2019, p. 6). Under social media conditions, this gendered exceptionality can be strategically mobilized, granting female far-right actors a tactical advantage in attention competition and rendering boundary-transgressing performances particularly effective.

A key conceptual framework for understanding the presence of conservative women in politics is the notion of “alternative emancipation.” Félix (2017) uses this concept to describe women’s advancement within contemporary Hungarian radical right movements through forms of agency that explicitly reject feminist frames, while enabling women to occupy public, authoritative, and leadership positions (p. 98). Emancipation is hereby reframed: legitimacy derives from moral superiority, loyalty to the nation, and the performance of exemplary femininity rather than from equality claims.

Félix’s typology of women’s participation in the Hungarian radical right—the *culture keeper*, the *fighter*, and the *spiritual woman*—offers an operational lens for analyzing women of the far-right (Félix, 2017, pp. 98–106). The *fighter*, who occupies frontline positions, embraces confrontation and shows no hesitation in aggression, most closely anticipates the figure of the female skirmisher. However, contemporary skirmishing femininity cannot be reduced to this role alone. Female skirmishers selectively combine the *fighter’s* militant posture with elements of Félix’s *culture keeper’s* symbolic reproduction and the *spiritual woman’s* morally elevated self-positioning, producing a hybrid form of gendered agency that is simultaneously confrontational, pedagogical, and morally absolutist.

Casullo’s analysis of female right-wing populist leadership helps specify the performative logic behind this hybridity. Casullo argues that women in right-wing populism can combine apparently contradictory markers—toughness and care, aggression and femininity, propriety and transgression—and that this contradiction is a strategic advantage. It creates ambiguity and deniability while allowing women to support masculinist, anti-feminist politics without simply reproducing the male strongman script (Casullo, 2025).

Ronnee Schreiber’s work on conservative women further refines this logic. She identifies and operationalizes the frames of “feminine toughness” and the “conservative supermom” to show how conservative female actors present themselves as women who allegedly succeed in combining motherhood with public activism precisely by rejecting feminism and actively promoting conservative norms and values (Schreiber, 2016, pp. 7–8). In this framework, only the simultaneous mobilization of both frames allows a conservative female politician to claim the status of being “truly liberated,” as opposed to “out of touch,” “unfeminine” feminists (Norocel, 2018; Schreiber, 2016, p. 12).

Norocel’s (2018) analysis of conservative women on the “right-wing continuum” further specifies the gendered repertoires through which this hybridization of career advancement with conservatism operates. He identifies two recurring ideal types: idealized motherhood associated with care, sacrifice, and moral authority; and feminine toughness, characterized by visible femininity combined with aggression, resilience, and competence (Norocel, 2018, pp. 45–50). Crucially, Norocel demonstrates that conservative women’s

claims to emancipation hinge on mobilizing these roles as superior to feminist models, which are framed as selfish, artificial, or socially corrosive (Norocel, 2018, p. 45). The gender repertoire of the skirmishers is impactful as it combines two seemingly antagonistic political repertoires.

2.5. Femonationalism and the Instrumentalization of Women's Rights

Where gender as “symbolic glue” explains the aggregating function of gender within anti-gender politics, femonationalism explains a related but distinct mechanism: the instrumentalization of women's rights or gender equality to advance exclusionary nationalist projects, primarily through anti-immigration and anti-Muslim narratives.

In her 2012 formulation, Sara R. Farris defines femonationalism as “the contemporary mobilization of feminist ideas by nationalist parties and neoliberal governments under the banner of the war against the perceived patriarchy of Islam in particular, and of migrants from the Global South in general” (Farris, 2012, p. 185). She shows how demands for migrant “integration” are framed around “Western culture and values,” with “gender equality” positioned as a key value—while the “instrumentalization” of women's equality becomes a defining feature of the political conjuncture (Farris, 2012, p. 185). In this repertoire, nationalist actors claim to defend women (and sometimes homosexuals) against racialized, externalized patriarchal threats, as illustrated by references to figures such as Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders in Farris's discussion (Farris, 2012, p. 185). Still, following Patrick Wielowiejski, we stress that femonationalism is “in no way exclusive to the far right” and “could even be interpreted as being at odds with a far-right political agenda” (Wielowiejski, 2020, p. 141).

Farris's (2017) definition tightens the conceptual scope, referring “both to the exploitation of feminist themes by nationalists and neoliberals in anti-Islam (but...also anti-immigration) campaigns and to the participation of certain feminists and femocrats in the stigmatization of Muslim men under the banner of gender equality” (Farris, 2017, pp. 6–7).

For this article, femonationalism is used as an analytical lens: a way to identify when female skirmishers (or their surrounding ecosystems) mobilize gender equality, women's safety, or women's rights rhetorically to legitimize exclusionary, nativist, or anti-immigration positions—especially when “protection” is framed through racialized or civilizational threat narratives. This lens is especially relevant to the “protect women/children” scripts deployed in migration-related attacks and to the gendered moralization of border politics.

2.6. Summary of the Theoretical Foundation

To sum up, these concepts establish a coherent analytical framework for examining gendered confrontational actors. Skirmishing captures a strategic communicative role that thrives under social media-driven attention dynamics, where incivility, personalization, and short-form antagonism are rewarded (Zbytniewska, 2022, 2026). In this sense, skirmishing femininity is not merely the feminization of an existing skirmisher role, but a hybrid performative configuration in which gendered respectability and maternal authority intensify, rather than soften, populist norm transgression. Anti-gender scholarship explains how gender operates at the ideological level as a high-capacity integrator, condensing heterogeneous grievances

into a single, moralized, and antagonistic register (Grzebalska & Pető, 2017; Korolczuk et al., 2025; Pető, 2015).

Within this infrastructure, women's political agency is organized through conservative gender repertoires theorized as "alternative emancipation" (Félix, 2017), "conservative supermom" and "feminine toughness" (Schreiber, 2016), and idealized motherhood combined with toughness (Norocel, 2018). These concepts converge in showing how conservative women claim authority, visibility, and advancement by rejecting feminist frames while mobilizing femininity and motherhood as morally superior. Nothing in this emancipation is substantively alternative: its novelty lies solely in the framing, and as this article will demonstrate, the *modus operandi*, which constructs a binary opposition in which "our" femininity and motherhood are elevated against feminists, liberals, or leftists as ethically inferior others.

Finally, femonationalism identifies a related but distinct mechanism: the selective mobilization of women's rights or gender equality to legitimize exclusionary, civilizational, and anti-immigration projects, without presuming its universal presence across cases (Farris, 2012, 2017).

3. Methods: Approach, Cases, Materials, and Analytical Procedure

3.1. Research Design and Interpretive Orientation

This study is situated in the interpretive paradigm, treating political communication as meaning-making embedded in institutional settings, media environments, and ideological projects. Following Schwartz-Shea and Yanow's (2012, pp. 4, 10) understanding of political inquiry as reconstructing intersubjective meanings, the analysis examines how female skirmishers (and actors around them) mobilize gendered claims—especially motherhood—to produce authority, justify confrontation, and stabilize antagonistic worldviews. The design is a qualitative, comparative case study focused on mechanisms rather than representativeness: it traces how similar gendered repertoires travel across different arenas (supranational parliamentary performance versus domestic illiberal politics), and how those arenas shape the gendered payoff structure of provocation and moralization.

3.2. Case Selection and Comparative Logic

This article analyses two female skirmishers positioned in the populist radical right in Poland and Hungary: Ewa Zajączkowska-Hernik (Konfederacja; EP) and Dóra Dúró (Mi Hazánk; Hungarian National Assembly). The cases were selected for their fit with Zbytniewska's (2022) original category, especially prioritizing their (a) high visibility and sustained public presence; (b) explicit mobilization of motherhood/femininity in political attack and moral boundary work; and (c) contrasting political arenas and opportunity structures: Zajączkowska-Hernik in the EP's mediated stage versus Dúró as an established figure embedded in a consolidated illiberal domestic configuration. This contrast enables a controlled comparison of how the same repertoire—materialized, protective aggression, and anti-gender boundary policing—operates under different institutional constraints and media incentives.

3.3. Empirical Corpus

The empirical material combines these main source types:

1. Speech material from the EP: a comprehensive, manual, qualitative analysis of 29 Zajączkowska-Hernik's interventions from July 18, 2024, to Nov 12, 2025 (European Parliament, n.d.).
2. Speech material from the Hungarian National Assembly: a targeted manual review of selected parliamentary interventions by Dúró (Dúró, n.d.; Hungarian National Assembly, n.d.).
3. Social media content: systematic review of both actors' output across major platforms, collected manually from their official accounts.
4. In-depth interviews (IDIs) and qualitative elite materials: semi-structured IDIs and anonymized expert interviews were conducted to reconstruct insider interpretations of gender, skirmishing, and strategic communication within the populist radical right ecosystem. While only three interviews are quoted directly in the analysis (Table 1), additional exploratory interviews contributed to contextual understanding. All interviews quoted directly in the analysis relate to the Polish case. Interviewee gender is indicated only where analytically relevant; accordingly, interviewee A's gender is specified because she is herself a populist radical right politician and thus provides an insider perspective.
5. Corroborating sources: speeches, journalistic profiles, reporting, party materials, and selected public events used as analytically "thick" moments—like the already mentioned Dúró's 2020 public shredding of "*Meseország mindenkié*" as a durable mnemonic and moral panic-producing act.

Table 1. IDIs and qualitative materials (Poland).

Source	Position/Affiliation (anonymized)	Date	Format	Relevance
Interviewee A	Female professional party operative and politician (Konfederacja)	3 September 2025	IDI	Insider articulation of conservative liberalism; abortion as a moral absolute; and anti-feminism
Interviewee B	Political analyst and advisor (including for Konfederacja)	23 May 2025	IDI	Gender as tactical communicative resource; skirmishing logic; culture-war escalation, and enforced anti-nuance
Interviewee C	Political sociologist and advisor	23 July 2025	IDI	Gendered voting heuristics post-Polish Women's Strike (<i>Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet</i>); strategic feminization of PRR candidate lists; and tokenism vs. representation

The project also includes a cross-social-media comparison of follower counts (manually collected), used solely to contextualize attention competition and reach rather than as outcome variables (Table 2). To complement the close reading and comparative analysis of the two politicians' X platforms, parts of the X corpora were also reviewed automatically using an xAI tool (Grok) to assist in identifying patterns (e.g., recurring targets, dominant issue clusters, and recurrent framings). This review served only as an auxiliary aid to verify manually derived findings; all interpretive claims are grounded in direct textual analysis of the original posts. ChatGPT was also used for translation assistance, minor language editing, and stylistic smoothing.

On this basis, the analysis examines how skirmishing femininity is enacted, calibrated, and rewarded across the two cases.

4. Findings: Skirmishing Femininity Across Two Political Configurations

Building on the argument that charismatic leadership and party organization are not sufficient to explain sustained mobilization, the category of the populist skirmisher helps explain how parties maintain continuous output across all social media platforms—from proliferating legacy media formats to multiple social media channels and segmented audiences (Zbytniewska, 2022). Female skirmishers can further expand outreach and mobilization because their visibility is primarily achieved via narrative violence that is amplified by gendered exceptionality and by the audience demand for “women in politics.”

As interviewee C noted, Konfederacja’s strategy has capitalized on the recent gains and salience of the pro-choice movement, notably the Women’s Strike. As a result, gender-based voting—previously marginal outside progressive electorates—has begun to spread more widely. Alongside the standard criterion of “I’m looking for a party I want to vote for,” a second criterion has emerged: “I’m looking for a female candidate, not a male one, because I want more women in politics.” Even Konfederacja voters have begun to articulate their preferences in these terms, arguing: “Finally, this party isn’t discriminating against women; finally, it’s not so outdated; finally, they’ve included women too.” As interviewee C put it: “It doesn’t matter that these women have nothing to do with women’s rights—they’re already fulfilling the demand that at least women have a presence.”

4.1. *Two Female Skirmishers, Two Arenas of Payoff*

Born in 1990 in Radom, Ewa Zajączkowska-Hernik represents a younger generation within the Polish populist radical right. Trained as a historian, she previously worked as a beautician, a beauty salon manager, and briefly as a history teacher (Długosz, 2025). From 2014, she was active in the circles of Janusz Korwin-Mikke, a veteran fringe politician and, above all, a pioneer of highly social-media-savvy political skirmishing, who consciously broke taboos to capture mainstream attention (Zbytniewska, 2026). She later worked for media linked to Szczepan Wójcik, the “king of Polish fur farming,” including ŚwiatRolnika.info and wSensie.pl, the latter reportedly disseminating Russian propaganda (Długosz, 2025; Mierzyńska, 2018). Zajączkowska-Hernik’s defence of natural fur, including its defence as healthier than synthetic alternatives, became one of her early signature talking points (“Ewa Zajączkowska-Hernik w podcaście,” 2024). In 2023, she became Konfederacja’s press spokesperson and, after an unsuccessful Sejm campaign, entered the EP in 2024 with over 100,000 votes—one of the strongest results in the Warsaw constituency (Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza, 2024; Rusek, 2024). At the EP, she initially joined the far-right Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN), alongside colleagues from AfD and Mi Hazánk, before moving in March 2026 to Patriots for Europe, the Parliament’s third-largest political group. A mother of two, she repeatedly mobilizes motherhood as a source of political authority, legitimizing moralized confrontation across parliamentary, media, and social media settings.

The Hungarian case centers on Dóra Dúró, born in 1987 in Szentes, who similarly combines motherhood and polarizingly conspicuous political visibility. Trained as a lawyer, she entered the National Assembly in 2010 at the age of 23 as the youngest MP at the time, initially representing the far-right party Jobbik.

Following her expulsion from Jobbik in 2018 when the party was mainstreamed (Hyttinen, 2022), she became a leading figure of the newly formed Mi Hazánk (Our Homeland) party. She is married to the party's co-leader, and together they have four children, a biographical fact she consistently integrates into her political self-presentation. As Mi Hazánk's sole female MP and deputy leader, re-elected in the 2026 parliamentary election and serving as Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly, she occupies an influential and visible symbolic position. Dúró advocates pronatalist policies and condemns ideologies promoting "conscious childlessness," framing motherhood as empowering rather than restrictive (Félix, 2017). At the same time, she claims that women's emancipation is flawed because it has failed to include mothers. As she argued: "a mother of many children should not feel compelled to become a top executive if she does not want to, because her life can be fulfilled through raising children" (Dúró, 2023). Through initiatives such as the *Anyaparlament* (Parliament of the Mothers), she positions mothers as guardians of Hungary's future and advances legislative efforts extending child-protection laws to cultural institutions. In 2020, she shredded the children's book *Meseország mindenkié* (Wonderland Belongs to Everyone), denouncing it as "homosexual propaganda" because it reimagined classic fairy-tale characters as LGBTQ or as members of marginalized groups—a defining performance that shaped her political persona (Lengyel-Szabó et al., 2020; Rorke, 2022).

The two actors thus instantiate the same skirmishing role under sharply different arena conditions. Zajączkowska-Hernik operates in a fragmented and highly competitive Polish populist radical right ecosystem, densely populated by (predominantly male) skirmishers, as well as on the supranational stage of the EP. Here, short speaking slots, mediated plenaries, and platform circulation structurally reward high-intensity, clip-ready confrontation. As a political advisor close to Konfederacja put it: "Once you're in the right-wing climate, you can't afford to nuance too much. You have to go full bazooka—all in" (interviewee B). The EP mandate further multiplies her financial resources—MEPs receive a monthly salary of roughly €10,000 plus institutional allowances—enabling the systematic conversion of institutional stage time into social media capital and, through that, into domestic political leverage. In this environment, skirmishing is oriented primarily toward virality: attention capture, amplification, and visibility maximization.

To contextualize the visibility environment in which these actors operate, Table 2 presents their social media reach across major platforms.

Table 2. Social media reach of the analyzed actors (followers, as of December 21, 2025).

Platform	Ewa Zajączkowska-Hernik (Poland)	Dóra Dúró (Hungary)
Facebook	665,000	382,000
TikTok	408,200	—
YouTube	227,000	12,900
Instagram	208,000	12,600
X (Twitter)	190,300	10,000

Dúró operates in a consolidated illiberal environment in which cultural governance, demographic politics, and moral pedagogy are already mainstreamed. She represents a far-right alternative to Viktor Orbán's illiberal FIDESZ party in power. Her skirmishing is therefore stabilizing rather than exploratory: instead of "scouting" new discursive limits in an uncertain field, it reinforces and radicalizes an already established

ideological grammar. At the same time, she exerts pressure on FIDESZ from the further radical right position of Mi Hazánk, legitimizing increasingly punitive cultural politics as forms of “protection.”

While in the case of Zajáčzkowska-Hernik one primarily observes virality and can only ask whether the correlation between skirmisher incivility and political effects extends beyond personal and party-level support, Dúró’s case demonstrates a more direct systemic impact. Together with her party colleagues, she exerts sustained pressure on FIDESZ, contributing to the absorption of more radical moral-panic agendas into state policy. A salient example is the regulation that entered into force on 15 September 2022, requiring doctors in Hungary to present women seeking an abortion with “a clearly identifiable indication of fetal vital signs” before the procedure—the so-called “heartbeat rule”—which Dúró publicly claimed originated as a proposal of her party (Dyer, 2022). However, this sheds light on another function of the female skirmishers: to export ideas connected to reproduction to their own national context. The discourse on “heartbeat” was invented in the US, and from then on, it has been a “travelling concept and practice” of far-right NGOs globally funded directly from the US. The well-organized and well-funded international illiberal actors have developed an efficient and functional educational and advocacy system in Europe to train activists who then deliver the same message and advocate the same policies across different countries under the guise of national sovereignty and in the name of fighting so-called “gender ideology” (Pető & Svégel, 2024).

Both women enact what this article terms “skirmishing femininity”: a fusion of conservative gender repertoires with the skirmisher’s operational logic of confrontation, moral absolutism, and visibility maximization. Motherhood, femininity, and women’s moral authority are systematically instrumentalized for skirmishing purposes: they widen the space of legitimate norm transgression, recode aggression as “ethical duty,” and render denunciation harder to contest by anchoring it in protected social positions (“as a mother,” “as a woman,” “in defense of children”). Under social media conditions, gendered exceptionality—women’s numerical scarcity and symbolic salience in masculinized right-wing milieus—further amplifies the communicative payoff of such performances. These performances resonate because maternal authority recodes aggression as protection, while platform dynamics reward emotionally charged, conflictual content (Dietze, 2020; Fan et al., 2014; Han et al., 2023; Norocel, 2018; Schreiber, 2016).

As interviewee C notes, being a woman “gives extra points in the culture war,” a resource that both female skirmishers explicitly incorporate into their *modus operandi*. Academic research on the disadvantages of women’s underrepresentation in politics is being appropriated by illiberal skirmishers, who exploit their scarcity to leverage visibility and maximize their political impact.

Accordingly, both Zajáčzkowska-Hernik and Dúró mobilize femininity and anti-gender politics within broader populist illiberal projects structured around moralized claims to authority, protection, and cultural order. In both cases, gendered repertoires function strategically to strengthen political visibility, antagonistic boundary-making, and ideological cohesion.

4.2. Gendered Repertoires as Skirmishing Infrastructure

The empirical material shows that both actors mobilize conservative gender repertoires in ways consistent with the analytical lens developed in Section 2, while also extending it by demonstrating how these repertoires are weaponized for skirmishing.

First, both cases fit Félix's (2017) insight that women in the radical right can occupy roles that enable agency while rejecting feminism—"alternative emancipation"—and that the *fighter* persona can appear at the movement's front line. Zajączkowska-Hernik most clearly embodies the *fighter* updated for social media politics: visible femininity combined with aggressive confrontation, personalized insult, and contempt performance. On X, for example, she described the Polish prime minister as "anti-Polish, leftist, and truly idiotic" (Zajączkowska-Hernik, 2026a) and argued that the EU's Security Action for Europe instrument "can only be supported by an idiot or a traitor" (Zajączkowska-Hernik, 2026b).

Dúró embodies a hybrid of *culture keeper* and *fighter* within institutionalized illiberalism: she governs the symbolic universe (culture, childhood, and education) while staging acts of moral coercion and censorship. Her social media communication reflects the same confrontational logic, combining moralized authority with aggressive denunciation; in one post, for instance, she claimed that "in recent decades, the LGBTQ lobby has been completely brainwashed by culture and international corporations" (Dúró, 2026). Migration is framed in similarly alarmist terms. In a post addressing border policy, Dúró declared that "Mi Hazánk demands immediate tightening of measures and stronger rights for border guards so that there will be no Hungarian victims of the migrants' invasion" (Dúró, 2022).

In both, traces of Félix's *spiritual woman* are present as moral elevation: conservative womanhood is performed as ethical superiority, enabling denunciation rather than argument.

Still, Zajączkowska-Hernik introduces an additional tension that is analytically instructive. While she foregrounds womanhood and motherhood—especially in securitized narratives about women's and children's safety in the context of migration and "gender propaganda" (Zajączkowska-Hernik, 2025)—her communicative style otherwise mirrors that of male populist skirmishers: aggressive, insulting, personalized, and performatively domineering. In the end, her speeches or X posts are, most of the time, gender neutral. What differentiates her is not the form of skirmishing but the "gendered license" under which it is exercised. By "gendered license," we mean the additional legitimacy and visibility conferred on boundary-breaking behavior precisely because a woman enacts it. Identical acts of verbal aggression are reframed as morally justified feminine outrage and thus, as interviewee C notes, earn "extra points." Femininity here does not soften skirmishing; it intensifies its payoff by converting masculine-coded aggression into morally shielded feminine outrage.

Second, Norocel's (2018) typology clarifies the internal mechanics of skirmishing femininity. Zajączkowska-Hernik enacts a high-intensity hybrid of idealized motherhood and feminine toughness, with a clear emphasis on the latter: she invokes maternal authority ("as a mother of two") to claim exclusive rights to define protection and morality, while simultaneously practicing post-shame aggression—vulgarity, intimidation, ridicule, and delegitimization—optimized for circulation. This hybridization is precisely what makes her repertoire unusually potent in a masculinized party environment: it renders boundary-breaking both more visible and more defensible.

Dúró, by contrast, aligns more closely with Norocel's configuration of dominant idealized motherhood. Every day, maternal imagery and "family-first" authenticity form the moral substrate for punitive cultural politics, including calls for extreme punishment, exclusion, and zero tolerance. She thus exemplifies idealized motherhood weaponized for authoritarian governance, where toughness is reframed as an ethical duty

rather than transgression—and where, as evidenced by the resonance of her social media output, this illiberal moral register finds sustained audience uptake.

Zajăczkowska-Hernik’s hybrid persona arises from her media-centered professional trajectory and long-term involvement in confrontational right-wing politics, which began under the patronage of the most prominent and enduring skirmishing personas in Polish politics, preparing her for visibility-seeking, post-shame communication styles typical of digitalized far-right milieus. Dúró’s maternal moral register, by contrast, reflects her embeddedness in Hungarian far-right parliamentary politics, where she has built a career on family policy advocacy and symbolic cultural governance, making idealized motherhood an effective vehicle for legitimizing punitive actions. In Hungary, after 15 years of illiberal rule, the idealized representation of motherhood promises greater political gain. These different institutional pathways—media-driven skirmishing versus parliamentary moral authority—produce distinct feminine political repertoires, even within similarly illiberal, masculinized party ecosystems.

Third, Schreiber’s (2016) “conservative supermom” frame helps explain how both convert motherhood into public authority while rejecting feminist emancipation claims. Yet the cases demonstrate different operationalizations. Zajăczkowska-Hernik uses supermom credibility to legitimize attack and humiliation—maternal authority as a license for confrontation. Dúró uses supermom credibility to legitimize governance—maternal authority as a license for censorship, demographic moralization, and pedagogical nationalism. In both, motherhood is a political strategy.

Finally, the “symbolic glue” perspective (Félix, 2015; Grzebalska & Pető, 2017) is crucial for distinguishing ideological centers of gravity without overstating difference. Dúró’s repertoire aligns most directly with a femonationalist configuration: motherhood fused with nativist protection of the nation conceived as an extended family, with childhood as the privileged site for defining belonging and legitimizing exclusion. Zajăczkowska-Hernik’s repertoire is more sovereigntist and EU-centered (or rather, anti-EU-centered), but gender functions as an accelerator within that sovereignty: “women and children’s safety,” “protection against migration,” and anti-gender boundary policing are repeatedly used to moralize EU conflict and to stabilize an antagonistic worldview in which “Eurocrats” and “loony-left” (*lewackie*) elites become civilizational enemies. In this sense, the cases are not simply “different.” They show how the same gendered infrastructure can be anchored either in domestic illiberal demography and culture (Hungary) or in supranational conflict and social-mediatized outrage production—still focusing on the national audience (Poland), while remaining recognizably skirmisher in function.

5. Conclusion

Taken together, these findings clarify the conceptual contribution of skirmishing femininity as a distinct analytical extension of the populist skirmisher framework. While the original concept explains how subordinate political actors deploy incivility to generate attention and advance politically, skirmishing femininity shows how gender itself becomes integrated into this mechanism. Femininity—especially motherhood—provides (a) moral authority, (b) a socially protected platform for denunciation, and (c) heightened visibility that allow female actors to perform confrontational roles that might otherwise appear politically excessive or norm-violating. In neither case is gender an emancipatory claim. It functions instead as a tactical asset within populist illiberal strategy: a means to widen the range of legitimate aggression, shield incivility from contestation, and translate outrage into political leverage.

Our study refines the skirmisher concept by showing that gender is not an “add-on” to skirmishing but a constitutive part of its *modus operandi*, thereby multiplying skirmishers’ effectiveness in masculinized radical right milieus and in media environments that reward outrage. Second, the analysis clarifies that female populist skirmishers are not simply “women who are skirmishers.” The category proposed here is narrower: it refers to those women who actively mobilize femininity (and motherhood) as an additional tactical and narrative card within skirmishing logic—consciously instrumentalizing their gendered identity, aestheticized public persona, and maternal authority as resources that further increase the payoff of provocation.

The comparative lens presented in this article also cautions against simplistic claims of effectiveness. The Polish arena is larger, more competitive, and saturated with populist skirmishing, privileging virality, making it difficult to infer political impact from visibility alone. Hungary’s consolidated illiberal context, by contrast, makes the translation of symbolic performances into policy pressure more visible.

The cases are not representative of all women in radical right politics. Rather, they identify mechanisms through which gendered symbolic resources can be integrated into skirmisher-style communication across different political contexts. A fuller reception-side analysis remains a task for future research.

Finally, the findings demonstrate that gendered resources that were historically politicized through feminist struggle can be captured by anti-feminist beneficiaries who use the “womanhood/motherhood” card to legitimize exclusion, censorship, and illiberal pedagogy. Whether comparable gendered performance resources can be mobilized elsewhere on the ideological spectrum is a separate question; analytically, the key point is that gendered authority is politically portable and, under social media conditions, can be converted into attention and leverage, even when deployed against pluralism and rights claims.

In short, skirmishing femininity names a recurrent contemporary mechanism of illiberal politics: a deliberately exploited “gender as superpower” that converts conservative womanhood into a protected vehicle for denunciation, moral absolutism, and scalable mobilization.

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Conflict of Interests

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To complement the close reading and comparative analysis of X platforms of politicians under analysis, parts of the X corpora were also reviewed automatically using an xAI tool (Grok) to assist in identifying patterns (e.g., recurring targets, dominant issue clusters, and recurrent framings). This review served only as an auxiliary aid to verify manually derived findings; all interpretive claims are grounded in direct textual analysis of the original posts. ChatGPT was also used for translation assistance, minor language editing, and stylistic smoothing. This disclosure is also included in the article (Section 3.3).

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