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Legitimacy First: Marine Le Pen's Visual De-Demonisation Strategies on Instagram

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Abstract

Recent research on populist visual communication has found a predominance of positivity in the way the populist radical right (PRR) communicates on Instagram. This counters the understanding of PRR actors as "dark" communicators, relying on appeals to negative emotions and attacks against perceived enemies and wider outgroups. This article tests the novel conceptual framework of "visual de-demonisation" that has been proposed to capture the interplay between populist strategic communication, radical right mainstreaming, and positive content on visual social media. This article uses Marine Le Pen's Instagram account (2015–2021) as a case in point, to illustrate the dynamics of visual de-demonisation and unpack how the three angles of the strategy (legitimacy, good character, and policy) are performed visually. The study offers two contributions to the literature on populism and leadership. First, it expands theory-building around visual de-demonisation by operationalising the framework, testing its empirical application, and producing further theoretical considerations to support concept development. Second, it contributes to debates on the mainstreaming of the radical right, by empirically unpacking its visual performance and evidencing the role of legitimacy-signalling as a prominent concern of populist leaders interested in de-demonising.

Keywords

de-demonisation; Instagram; legitimacy; Le Pen; populist radical right; visual communication

1. Introduction

The idea that an image is worth a thousand words finds particular resonance in social media research on politicians' self-presentation. Social media allow direct communication with the public and when it comes to

sharing visuals such as photos, videos and "stories," politicians retain full control over the carefully curated image they wish to disclose to the public.

Visual-centred social media platforms have witnessed incredible growth and this growing popularity has not gone unnoticed: politicians are increasingly using them as a political tool to manage their persona, provide visual diaries of their campaigns, and mobilise supporters by projecting authentic and trustworthy images (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019; Liebhart & Bernhardt, 2017). For this reason, scholars have recently started to investigate the use of visual social media, such as Instagram and TikTok, as tools for political communication (see e.g., Albertazzi & Bonansinga, 2024; Grusell & Nord, 2020; O'Connell, 2018; Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019).

Social media, including visual platforms, provide the perfect logic for populist communication because they enable unmediated access and a direct relationship with the public (Engesser et al., 2017). Populism denotes a thin ideology centred on people-centrism, anti-elitism, and the appeal to popular sovereignty (Mudde, 2004). In communication terms, populist features are manifested in ideology-infused key messages that praise and stress the people's virtues, blame and discredit the elites, and demand popular sovereignty (Ernst et al., 2017).

Combining populism with authoritarianism and nativism, the populist radical right (PRR) is the most successful variety of populism in Europe (Mudde, 2007). Scholars have recently started to pay close analytical attention to their visual communication on social media, finding mixed results. On Instagram, some PRR leaders emphasise their professional images, while also providing peaks at their private lives; others maintain a more negative and hostile style (Bast, 2021). The projection of professionalism and ordinariness relies on positive content: in building this type of image, populists communicate competence, trust, hope, authenticity, and familiarity. Albertazzi and Bonansinga (2024) have shown that the prevalence of positive content in populist visual communication is particularly evident on TikTok. On this new platform, heavily oriented to new and young generations, PRR actors are rebranding themselves as funny, approachable, connecting, and caring individuals.

These findings are puzzling because they counter the established understanding of PRR actors as "dark" communicators, relying on strong appeals to negative emotions, such as anger and fear, and attacks against perceived enemies and wider outgroups (Nai, 2021; for a review on populism and emotions see Bonansinga, 2020; Verbalyte et al., 2022, 2024). Bonansinga (2024) has recently argued that the use of positive content in PRR visual communication can be better understood through the lenses of "visual de-demonisation."

Bonansinga (2024, p. 4) conceptualises visual de-demonisation as a three-fold strategy that helps radical parties improve their image by emphasising their legitimacy, the good character of the leader, and their ample policy platform. While all politicians strive to present themselves in a positive light, her work stresses that this dynamic serves a specific function in populist politics: the desire to de-demonise and communicate legitimacy and integration into the party system. This is because populist communication is split between a desire for distinctiveness and a wish to perform competence, seriousness, and professionalism (Curini et al., 2024). In line with this nascent scholarship, the present article suggests that, while populist parties may continue to signal their distinctiveness from mainstream actors via discourse, they have an incentive—provided by visual social media—to portray their leaders as credible, caring, and "normal'' politicians.

Building on Bonansinga's (2024) conceptual framework for visual de-demonisation, this article illustrates the empirical application of the concept by analysing Marine Le Pen's Instagram account from its opening in 2015 to 2021. Le Pen represents an ideal case study that allows us to examine her visual communication during the crucial transition of her Front National into the new and re-branded Rassemblement National (RN). By focusing on a qualitative visual analysis of Marine Le Pen's posts, this article unpacks the visual content of her de-demonisation strategy, exploring how the different aspects of Bonansinga's (2024) framework are performed visually.

The application of the visual de-demonisation concept offers crucial insights into understanding how Le Pen communicates with her followers on Instagram and why her profile appears very different and considerably less hostile than on other platforms. The analysis shows that Le Pen focuses most of her visual de-demonisation efforts first and foremost on building legitimacy. Glimpses at her character are also offered, in posts featuring interactions with targeted subjects such as children, pets, and the elderly to underscore qualities such as care and compassion. Finally, references to policy themes suggest that Le Pen has also tried to communicate broad policy interests, going beyond the traditional anti-immigration stances attributed to her party, hence performing a fully-fledged visual de-demonisation.

The article provides two contributions to the literature on populism and leadership. First, it expands theory-building efforts around the novel concept of visual de-demonisation by operationalising and empirically applying the framework, and detailing what specific content comes attached to different visual de-demonisation strategies. Building on the analysis, the article produces further theoretical considerations to support concept development. Second, it contributes to debates on the mainstreaming of the radical right, by empirically unpacking its visual performance and evidencing the role of legitimacy-signalling as a prominent concern of populist leaders interested in de-demonising.

In the next sections, the present article will introduce the theoretical background and the concept of visual de-demonisation, before proceeding to its operationalisation, then delving into the analysis.

2. Populist Communication and Visual Social Media

Research on visual social media as tools for political communication is part of a wider research agenda on the power of visuals in politics. Visuals are important for political communication because they elicit strong emotional reactions (Brader, 2005). Compared to text, visuals are easier to process thanks to the quick associations they prime and are also more memorable (Stenberg, 2006; for a review see Dumitrescu, 2016).

Research on Instagram as a tool for political communication has focused on strategy and content. Studies have revealed that, in strategic terms, politicians tend to use the platform in similar ways as other social media. That is, they mostly broadcast their issues, showing the depth of their engagement with the policy domain; they also use the platform to promote their candidacies and to a lesser extent, to mobilise their followers (Filimonov et al., 2016; Russmann & Svensson, 2016). Overall they interact quite little with their supporters, showing that their presence within the platform is mostly to open a channel of communication without reciprocation.

In terms of visual content, studies have shown that politicians tend to emphasise their professional images, corresponding to what Grabe and Bucy (2009) labelled the "ideal candidate frame." For the authors, this means

visualising competence and trustworthiness via the use of professional images that show the account holder at work, engaging with peers, being interviewed, and posing with international leaders at specific events. Several studies across the globe have confirmed this finding, providing evidence for the predominance of the ideal candidate frame in the 2016 US presidential primaries (Munoz & Towner, 2017), in the self-presentation of Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019), or in the 2018 Swedish general election (Grusell & Nord, 2020). Some studies have confirmed that this strategy is successful with audiences in generating visual attention and forming impressions (Lindholm et al., 2021). However, Brands et al. (2021) found that, in the US and Netherlands, politicians showcase a humanised and relatable version of themselves, more than their authority and legitimacy, with a number of studies in other contexts showing this strategy to be particularly popular with followers (see e.g., Ekman & Widholm, 2017; Larsson, 2019; McGregor, 2018; Metz et al., 2020).

This variance has similarly surfaced in the first studies to tackle the question of political communication on Instagram from the perspective of PRR actors. For example, Sampietro and Sánchez-Castillo (2020) noticed that Vox's leader Santiago Abascal uses sports and his private life to showcase an authentic, positive, and inspiring image. Looking at a range of leaders, Bast (2021) found a variegated picture, with important differences. While most PRR leaders adhere to the ideal candidate frame and emphasise statesmanship, some others, such as Nigel Farage, offer glimpses at their private life to build an informal image alongside their professional role, and project their authenticity and approachability. However, other leaders, such as Geert Wilders, maintain an aura of negativity on their accounts, as their content features hostility, attacks, and overall negative campaigning. Despite his controversial persona and hostile discourse, Donald Trump did not focus his Instagram communication on nativism or negativity during his first presidency. According to Dobkiewicz (2019), the former US president—now re-elected for a second term—attempted to self-present as a tough but good leader, emphasising inclusivity through pictures and mobilising patriotism.

Expanding the toolkit of visual analysis to the video-based app TikTok, Albertazzi and Bonansinga (2024) have shown that in the case of the Gen-Z-oriented platform, PRR content is almost exclusively positive. The authors found that negative content such as hostile references and attacks is negligible, and in most cases, still comes attached to funny content resulting in the production of TikTok videos that utilise memes and sarcastic or derisive content to denigrate the elites.

Scholars have recently called for more research on populist visual communication, to better conceptualise this under-researched area (Moffitt, 2022a) and specifically enrich our understanding of radical right mainstreaming (Bonansinga, 2024). As Curini et al. (2024, p. 15) put it, PRR parties:

> Have been forced to work out ways in which they can communicate their radical right ideological bona fides, while at the same time seeking to demonstrate that they are no longer "just" upstart challenger parties, but rather credible parties who want to be taken seriously. While there is an existing literature on how PRR parties attempt to communicate this through their policy platforms, organizational changes or their discourse (see Akkerman et al., 2016), there is a much smaller literature on the role of their visual communication.

Indeed, the strategies of radical right mainstreaming that have received the most scholarly attention to this date are those aimed at the dilution of radical discourse, the expansion of the policy platform beyond

immigration, and the strategy of collaboration with established parties (Akkerman et al., 2016; Mayer, 2013; Moffitt, 2022b). As scholars have noted, these strategies have contributed to the self-presentation of radical right parties as less radical, less niche, and more "coalitionable," and, hence, to their de-demonisation (Ivaldi, 2014). However, the ways these actors utilise visual self-presentation strategies to de-demonise is still an under-researched area (see Caiani, 2024, for a broader review of the visual politics of the radical right).

The next section unpacks the recently proposed concept of visual de-demonisation, which brings together studies on populist leadership and communication to capture how radical leaders are weaponising professional and personal content to rebrand themselves.

3. Operationalising Visual De-Demonisation

Bonansinga (2024) argues that the PRR's predilection for positive content on visual social media can be better understood through the conceptual lenses of visual de-demonisation, understood as a three-fold strategy comprising a legitimacy, good character, and policy angle. This framework builds on existing research establishing legitimacy, credibility, and policy diversification as key elements of radical right mainstreaming and de-demonisation (see e.g., Mayer, 2013), while originally delving into how these strategies can be performed visually. It further builds on the literature on self-personalisation that has observed how the media focus has increasingly shifted "from the politician as occupier of a public role to the politician as a private individual, as a person distinct from their public role" (Van Aelst et al., 2012, p. 214). The framework thus complements and extends existing scholarship by shedding light on the role that visual strategies, image management, emotions, and storytelling play in processes of mainstreaming and de-demonisation.

Following Bonansinga's (2024, p. 4) conceptual framework, the "legitimacy" angle of visual de-demonisation builds the party's credibility and trustworthiness by projecting "an image of the radical right leader as a competent and skilful political actor, capable of guiding the country." This is what scholars have labelled the "hard side" of personalisation, which focuses on representing professionalism and competence (Poulakidakos & Giannouli, 2019). Empirically, this would mean presenting the politician: (a) in a professional or public context, such as at work or during an official trip; (b) wearing formal clothes, notably a suit; (c) interacting with targeted groups projecting endorsements, such as crowds or institutional actors; and (d) performing work-related activities, such as giving a speech or being interviewed.

A visual de-demonisation strategy, however, is not solely oriented on establishing legitimacy, and the two should not be equated. Legitimation is one of the desired processes engineered by visual de-demonisation practices, ultimately supporting the concerned radical right actor in achieving mainstream status and widespread acceptance. However, according to Bonansinga's (2024) framework, it is not the only one. Radical right actors interested in improving their image and visually de-demonising also seek to communicate credibility and broad policy interests beyond immigration.

Therefore, the second angle of visual de-demonisation (the "good character" sub-strategy) goes beyond legitimacy to establish credibility, trustworthiness, and relatability. It strives to showcase the radical right leader "as authentic, approachable and credible because 'normal'" (Bonansinga, 2024, p. 5). Scholars have labelled this the "soft side" of personalisation, as politicians focus their self-presentation on their informal

persona and "average" self (Poulakidakos & Giannouli, 2019). It can be operationalised as a strategy comprising: (a) a private or informal context, such as the leader's home or outdoors; (b) wearing informal clothes such as jeans; (c) interacting with targeted groups suggesting intimacy and closeness, such as family and specific social groups (e.g., older people and children); and (d) performing non-work-related activities, such as eating and drinking.

Finally, the third sub-strategy of visual de-demonisation, the "policy" angle, was described as "entail[ing] the visual (re)presentation of the number of issues the leader cares about" (Bonansinga, 2024, p. 5). Empirically, we expect posts to feature verbal mentions of policy themes, showcasing areas of policy work that the leader intends to prioritise and pursue once in office.

Building on Table 1, the present article suggests that the policy angle should not be considered in isolation, as it can help reinforce the legitimacy or character side of visual de-demonisation strategies. Insights from the nascent literature on gender, image, and the radical right, point out that gender stereotypes extend to the policy domain, depending on what issues are stereotypically associated with each gender (Bast et al., 2021; Brands et al., 2021). Specifically, education, welfare and family are considered "softer" policy issues and are labelled "feminine" because they supposedly communicate that politicians "care" about their communities (Lee & Lim, 2016). In contrast, policy issues such as defence and security are considered "harder" policy areas because they communicate confidence and leadership, and are therefore stereotypically labelled "masculine" (Lee & Lim, 2016). This suggests that the gendered dimension of policy cues can steer visual de-demonisation attempts towards the legitimacy or the character strategy. A focus on feminine issues would communicate care, a quality at the centre of the "good character" strategy. On the other hand, a focus on masculine issues would project competence and statesmanship, the qualities radical right leaders aim to project when employing a legitimacy-oriented strategy.

Table 1. Operationalisation of visual de-demonisation strategies.

Visual de-demonisation strategies	
Legitimacy	• Professional/public context • Formal clothing • Showcase of endorsement groups • Work-related activities
Good character	• Informal/private context • Informal clothing • Showcase of intimacy groups • Non-work-related activities
Policy	• Mentions of policy areas/themes

4. Marine Le Pen: An Illustrative Case Study

With the aim to contribute to theory-building around visual de-demonisation, the author analysed the Instagram account of Marine Le Pen, the presidential candidate of the re-branded RN, formerly Front National, which boosts nearly half a million followers (as of October 2024). Le Pen constitutes what the theory labels an ideal or typical case study (Gerring & Cojocaru, 2016) because, as party leader, she expressed a desire to de-demonise both her party and her image. When led by her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen,

the party was involved in several antisemitic scandals and overall perceived as a racist and dangerous political force (Mayer, 2018). This case thus illustrates the content of the visual de-demonisation construct.

Instagram posts were retrieved via the Instagram API, from 2015 (the year her account was opened) to 2021, with a total sample of 1069 posts. This enabled the examination of a period of time covering the re-branding of RN, as well as campaign and non-campaign periods (i.e., the 2017 presidential and legislative elections, and the 2019 European Parliament elections), alongside the global pandemic. Videos and slideshows were excluded, as the analysis of multiple images and video scenes would require an ad hoc methodology. A random sample of 25 posts per year was selected, resulting in an in-depth qualitative analysis of 175 posts. The unit of analysis was the entire Instagram post, including the image, its caption, and any emojis, tags, or hashtags.

The analysis was carried out in two steps: First, I applied the operationalised visual de-demonisation framework to classify whether posts fell under the category of legitimacy, good character, or policy. In order to understand the relevance of this content vis-à-vis hostile discourse, the study noted any reference to negative campaigning, based on whether posts featured anti-immigration, anti-Islam, anti-elite, anti-vax, and anti-expert content. These are broad categories that generally capture the "enemies" of populist communication. Second, I qualitatively analysed posts to explore in-depth the specific types of professional or private settings on display, the activities performed, the groups and individuals featured, the types of interaction, and clothing.

5. Le Pen's Visual De-Demonisation Strategy

The analysis revealed a focus on legitimacy-oriented visual posts, featuring professional contexts, work-related activities, and interactions with crowds of voters, the media, and other political leaders. This is in line with other studies that noticed Le Pen's heavy focus on projecting a statesmanship image on Instagram (Bast, 2021). These posts indeed appeared as the norm on Le Pen's account, except for 2020. Likely due to the pandemic and the restrictions on movement and gatherings in the year 2020, posts performing legitimacy via interaction with others and professional contexts were less common in that period. At the same time, images showcasing private and more informal contexts, and outdoor spaces appeared more frequently.

Images falling into the legitimacy category focused heavily on representing Le Pen as a skilful leader both domestically and internationally (see Figure 1). Domestically, she was portrayed as a "beloved" leader by using images featuring large crowds at every appearance. In such posts, she was often presented while hugging supporters or taking selfies with them, blurring the lines between showcasing legitimacy and approval, while also communicating a good character (see Section 6 for further elaboration on these overlaps). Her Instagram account appeared in sync with the overall visual strategy of the party, which as Dumitrescu (2017) has noted, focuses on personalised campaigning and communicating "closeness." Le Pen's account projected competence by sharing photos that showed her visiting power plants, economic fora, and schools, hence presenting herself as a politician in touch with various sectors. Internationally, Le Pen was portrayed as a globally "recognised" leader. This recognition was signalled by images showing Le Pen engaging in international trips, being welcomed by prime ministers and party leaders across Europe for official institutional visits and international congresses. Le Pen was also shown attending media interviews in a variety of locations, from Italy to Britain or Japan. This type of image acts as a media endorsement (Liebhart & Bernhardt, 2017), hence signalling that the RN presidential candidate is a "trusted" leader whose opinion
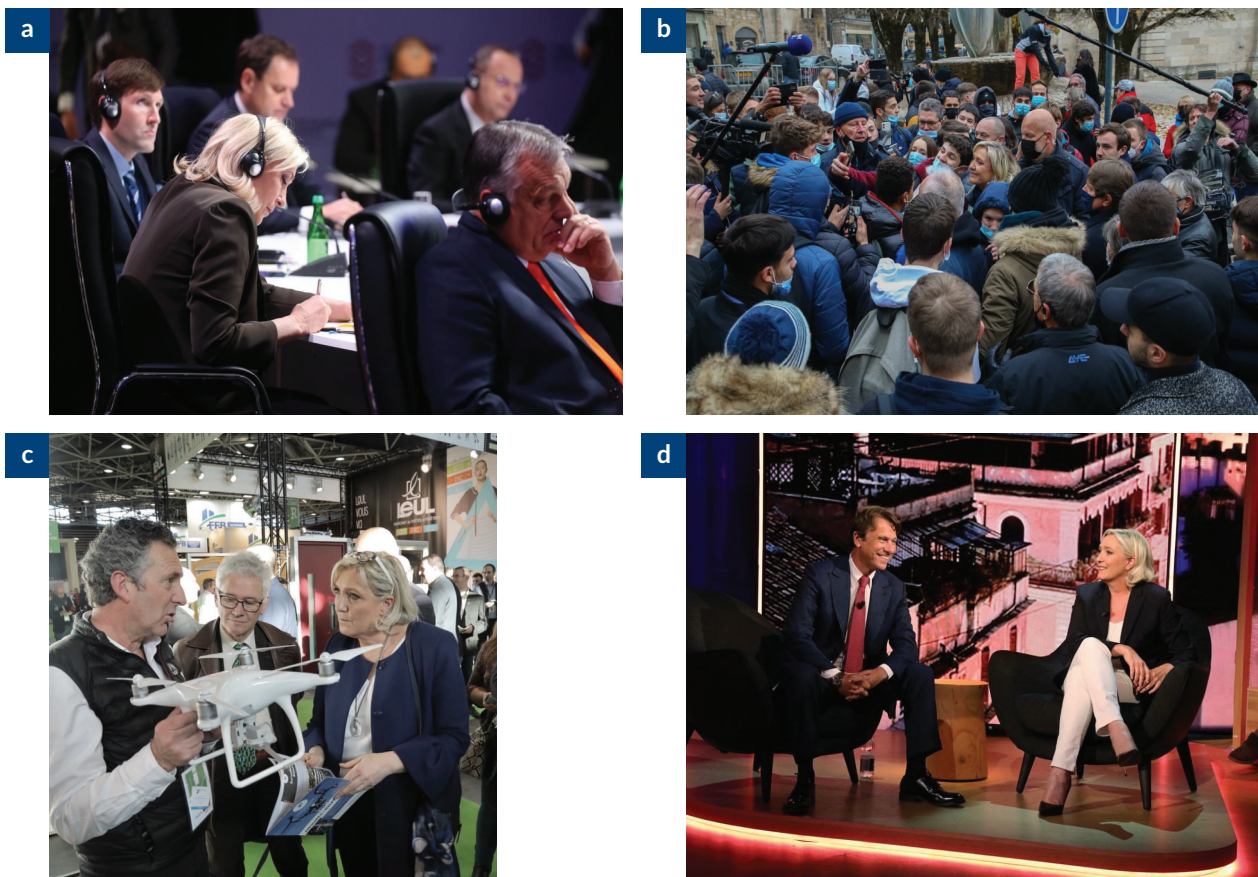
Figure 1. Examples of legitimacy-oriented visual de-demonisation: (a) @marine_lepen, Instagram post, 4 December 2021; (b) @marine_lepen, Instagram post, 25 November 2021; (c) @marine_lepen, Instagram post, 14 February 2019; and (d) @marine_lepen, Instagram post, 8 October 2018.

is sought out by established outlets across the globe. This appears as an example supporting Wajner's argument (2022, p. 422) that "international legitimacy can be used as a source of domestic legitimation."

However, there was friction and incoherence between the normalised image Le Pen attempted to project and the "alliances" she visualised on Instagram. In fact, the other politicians featured in her posts to enhance her image as a respected leader were very often representatives of PRR parties. Among these were: Matteo Salvini (Lega, Italy), Santiago Abascal (Vox, Spain), Heinz-Christian Strache (FPÖ, Austria), Viktor Orbán (Fidesz, Hungary), André Ventura (Chega, Portugal), Mateusz Morawiecki (PiS, Poland), Tomio Okamura (SPD, Czech Republic), Veselin Mareshki (Volya, Bulgaria), Tom Van Grieken (Vlaams Belang, Belgium), and Geert Wilders (PVV, The Netherlands). Two posts also featured Steve Bannon, Donald Trump's former strategist.

Given the small sample under examination, this is certainly a strong representation of radical leaders and a controversial strategy for Marine Le Pen for two main reasons: On the one hand, RN's presidential candidate showcases her international trips to meet fellow politicians in Europe, projecting the image of a leader who is respected, well-connected and welcome, if not celebrated, abroad. This is what the literature labels a "populist transnational performance" which helps populists gain legitimacy by mobilising the transnational sphere (Wajner, 2022). On the other hand, however, Le Pen's posts establish a clear and visual link with controversial figures who embody the extreme rhetoric and practices she supposedly wishes to clear from

her party. This incoherence is at the heart of what Curini et al. (2024, p. 3) label the "Janus face of populist visual communication": populist parties and leaders desire to establish themselves as mainstream actors, while at the same time attempting to stay true to their identity as anti-establishment actors, going "tough" on crime, and breaking the taboos of political "correctness."

Overall the showcase of legitimacy took place by emphasising the approval of large crowds and the endorsement of media and political personalities. This aimed at establishing Le Pen as a respected leader and a viable option for the presidency.

Although a less popular strategy, Le Pen has also increasingly turned to Instagram to showcase her qualities as a caring, kind, and approachable politician. Posts in this category showcased her in private, informal, or outdoor settings (such as her home, the market, bars, restaurants, or the beach) and featured activities where she was not performing work duties. Among these, were posts that focused on food and drinks (for example drinking coffee or picking a dessert), playing with her cats and puppies, hiking, and interacting with limited groups of supporters, as opposed to large crowds (see Figure 2).

Animals and specific social groups are usually utilised by politicians to project qualities such as tenderness, sensitivity, and care. In Le Pen's case, cats, children, the youth, and the elderly, took up this role. These subjects seemed to be used strategically to communicate the image of a caring woman, a mother, and a

Figure 2. Examples of good character visual de-demonisation: (a) @marine_lepen, Instagram post, 28 October 2021; (b) @marine_lepen, Instagram post, 8 August 2020; (c) @marine_lepen, Instagram post, 23 November 2019; and (d) @marine_lepen, Instagram post, 2 September 2018.

compassionate individual. Indeed, when these groups appeared in the pictures, the latter were most commonly also featuring contact and interaction, such as hugging, kissing, laughing together, and taking selfies, all visual representations of warmth, proximity, and empathy (Bast et al., 2021). Given the positive affect cues generated by smiling and the caring inspired by these image types, this is likely the content that puts Le Pen most in sync with the norm infrastructure of the platform.

While most of the posts showed Le Pen in formal clothes such as dark suits, several images presented her in jeans or hiking clothes, often in posts that were appreciative of nature and landscapes, both in metropolitan France and the overseas territories. Although a minority, these posts particularly stood out given the predominance of professional pictures, because they appeared to craft a humanised and relatable image of Le Pen, underscoring her ordinariness and potentially generating feelings of closeness in the audience.

Finally, the analysis looked at the policy-oriented angle of visual de-demonisation and found a total of 60 mentions of policy areas and themes, which were coded inductively as they appeared (see Table 2).

Table 2. Policy themes.

Theme	Frequency
EU integration	14
Industries and workers	13
Rights and liberties	9
Security and defence (including migration and terrorism)	7
Anti-globalisation and sovereignty	4
Commemoration	4
Education	3
Comment on breaking news events	2
Overseas territories	2
Covid-19	2

The most common theme concerned EU integration, and featured posts showcasing state visits to other EU member states, and calling for a Europe of Nation, a typical trope of RN's discourse (Lorimer, 2020). The second most common theme concerned what was labelled "industries and workers," as these posts called for solidarity and protection for a range of professions, from miners to firefighters. The latter category was weaponised often, using the indisputable heroism of firemen to lend Le Pen legitimacy by proxy, as she presented herself as the "heroine of heroes" (Freistein et al., 2022). Posts also featured visits to farming sites, sector-specific federations, or innovation labs, underlining how these would be policy priorities for a Le Pen presidency. Finally, the third most common theme concerned "rights and liberties," capturing a series of posts celebrating women's rights, defending the freedom of the press, and particularly calling for the recognition of animal rights, in line with the party's increasing interest in this topic (Goodliffe, 2018; Schwörer & Fernández-García, 2023). Research on RN's policy positions similarly confirms that the party has widened its policy platforms over time to include an increasing proportion of socioeconomic issues, which ultimately made up 36% of its 2022 programme as opposed to 17% in 2002 (Zhang & Tang, 2024).

Interestingly, and to a certain extent incoherently, the themes owned by the PRR, such as the critique of immigration, globalisation, and Islam, appeared as minimal mentions in the sample. More generally, the hostile,

racist, and anti-system attacks that are traditionally attributed to Le Pen's party were almost negligible, and no anti-vax or anti-expert content was present altogether despite the examination of the pandemic period. Following Ivaldi and Pineau (2022), this may be an indication of Le Pen's desire to "triangulate" the party's policy positions, becoming more liberal on social and family issues while maintaining far-right values on cultural issues. This further suggests that visual social media are perhaps used strategically to communicate the positive side of this policy triangulation, while the rest is left for other channels.

Overall the policy themes in the posts under examination spanned across different sectors, creating a balance of what the literature has labelled feminine and masculine issues. Part of the themes fall in the category of feminine issues, such as education, rights, and liberties; however, there were also mentions of defence, terrorism, and references to some industries from energy to transport and farming, which are usually considered masculine issues (Brands et al., 2021). This balance in projecting both masculine and feminine virtues is typical of Le Pen, as she has strived to present herself as a "daughter," "mother," and "captain" embodying the stereotypically feminine values of family and care, and the masculine attributes of authority and leadership (Geva, 2020a, 2020b).

Her policy signalling has two implications: First, it suggests that Marine Le Pen is attempting to showcase that her policy interests are wide, and her policy platform can go beyond the cultural and symbolic dimension of politics. In other words, her strategy attempts to respond to critics who dismiss the PRR are mere anti-immigration parties. Second, the balance between feminine and masculine issues points to a policy platform that is equally split between "hard" and "soft" issues that communicate a leader is both competent and caring enough to address both. It is important to note that her policy-related posts did not go in-depth about her proposals and were, most of the time, general references to the theme she "cherishes." However, this still signals to the public that there is much more to uncover about the party, and hence can function as an invitation to follow and learn more.

6. Discussion

This study has shown how the visual de-demonisation framework applies to the case of Marine Le Pen. Le Pen appears as a skilled communicator on Instagram, who has embraced the aesthetic, personalistic, and positive core of the platform. Her account is highly personalised, as she appears in virtually all posts. It uses plenty of close-ups that signal closeness to the audience; it also combines more private and amateur shots, including selfies, with professionally taken pictures. This suggests the visual side of the platform has been fully weaponised; however, other aspects are misused or ignored altogether. For example, although most posts contain hashtags, Le Pen fails to use them for the purpose of post circulation and virality. On the contrary, they are used in the place of geotags to indicate geographical locations (e.g., #Paris). Only during electoral campaign times, more context-specific hashtags were used, based on the election taking place (for instance, #regionales2015, #Législatives2017, #Municipales2020, and #Européennes2019). Overall it appears she has partially embraced the norms that structure communication and expectations on Instagram, without fully exploiting the platform's affordances in terms of virality and circulation.

Despite these shortcomings, Le Pen communicates professionalism and good leadership and suggests that her policy platform is close to the interests of ordinary people. This is combined with a positive image of the leader shown in friendly and relatable settings, in close physical contact with citizens and showcasing her

personal qualities of empathy and care. Therefore, by integrating elements of professionalism, ordinariness, and policy signalling in her Instagram strategy, Marine Le Pen is performing a visual de-demonisation that focuses, although in differential ways, on establishing her legitimacy, proving her good character, and showcasing her broad policy goals. Based on Bonansinga's (2024) framework, Le Pen is performing a fully-fledged visual de-demonisation that prioritises signalling legitimacy.

For younger generations, who constitute the majority of users of the platform both in France (Statista, 2024a) but also globally (Statista, 2024b), and have not been exposed to the old Front National of Jean-Marie Le Pen, the new RN can appear as a viable option. This means that her visual de-demonisation strategy enables Le Pen to sanitise her image both in the eyes of users who know the party and are willing to take a second look, and in the eyes of young users who begin to form their political identities and opinions before they head to the polls for the first time. The concept of visual de-demonisation is therefore useful to better understand Le Pen's increasing appeal to the electorate, especially the youths.

Conceptually, the study has highlighted several ways in which the novel visual de-demonisation framework can be improved. The empirical application has shown that the three central strategies of visual de-demonisation should not be considered as strictly separate but rather intertwining. First of all, the analyses showed that clothing is not a useful variable to differentiate between projections of competence and showcase of ordinariness. A number of posts featured Le Pen wearing formal clothes, such as blazers and heels (operationalised as elements of the legitimacy strategy); however, those same posts showed her in intimate moments, such as a coffee break with colleagues and friends, hence offering a personable image as part of the good character strategy. Moreover, the analysis evidenced how interaction with large crowds cannot be solely taken as a performance of legitimacy and approval. As some posts in the sample showed, Le Pen was often visualised interacting with the crowd, for example hugging supporters and taking selfies, which was initially operationalised as a showcase of the good character strategy, because of the closeness, warmth, and authenticity these actions project. Finally, the gendered dimension of policy-signalling, with its distinction between feminine and masculine issues, communicates stereotypical qualities that may at times be in contrast with the other attributes cued by the same image. For example, the analysis noted some instances in which masculine policy references to certain industries or security and defence (a stereotypical projection of competence and professionalism), were accompanied by outdoor settings, informal clothing, or warm interactions with targeted groups (i.e., a display of good character). Therefore, the preliminary evidence offered by this study suggests that visual de-demonisation may be better conceived as a single strategy comprising micro-dynamics that build and intersect with one another, altogether contributing to providing a well-rounded image of the populist leader as a legitimate and personable politician, interested in a wide range of policy areas.

7. Conclusion

This article has applied the novel concept of visual de-demonisation to the case of French radical right leader, Marine Le Pen, to empirically test the relevance of this new construct and contribute to theory-building. While scholars have previously concluded that broadcasting is the most used strategy on Instagram, this article builds on the new scholarship suggesting that for PRR parties, the option to visually de-demonise is also an important strategic goal of their presence on the platform. The empirical analysis has shown that there is an identifiable strategic utility in the way the Marine Le Pen uses the platform. Le Pen has harnessed Instagram's positive

aura to de-demonise both her party and her own image. For Le Pen, Instagram is a political communication tool that helps her visualise different aspects of professionalism to project the idea of a respected, competent, and legitimate leader. This is matched with glimpses of her character, which portray the person behind the politician as a caring, loving, and approachable individual. Moreover, the near-complete absence of negative content suggests that the platform is almost exclusively envisaged as a space to abandon hostility in favour of positive and aesthetic content.

As PRR parties and leaders continue to gain traction across Europe, this article has highlighted that the visual de-demonisation strategy can appear to populists as a viable way forward to address the dilemma pointed out by Curini et al. (2024) of maintaining an anti-establishment and radical appeal while seeking governability and further integration into the party system. Visual de-demonisation enables those PRR actors interested in improving their profile, to present themselves in a new and positive light. This could be particularly useful to reach groups the PRR traditionally struggles to attract, such as women and youngsters, which represent the majority of users on most visual social media (Bonansinga, 2024). Visual de-demonisation has, therefore, a strategic utility for the PRR, and holds considerable potential for contributing to its mainstreaming.

This article provides two contributions to the literature on populism and leadership: First, it has produced empirically informed theoretical considerations that contribute to further developing the new construct of visual de-demonisation. By detailing what specific content comes attached to different visual de-demonisation strategies and mapping the areas of overlaps, this article has refined our understanding of visual de-demonisation as comprising intersecting micro-dynamics rather than strictly distinguishable strategies. Second, it has contributed to debates on the mainstreaming of the radical right, by empirically unpacking its visual performance, hence complementing and extending studies that have focused on discourse and party competition. By doing so, it has highlighted legitimacy-signalling as a prominent concern for populist leaders interested in de-demonising, opening the way for further research to unpack for whom this is the case and under what conditions.

To further test the validity of the visual de-demonisation construct, future research should compare a wider sample of populist parties with differential interests in de-demonising. Future studies should also examine the impact of this strategy, and to what extent the different aspects of visual de-demonisation are successful in shifting the audiences' perception of these parties and with what impact on voting behaviour. Additional unanswered questions remain, particularly in relation to left-wing populism. Although these actors do not share the nativist and racist stances of the radical right and are perceived as generally less dangerous for democracy, they are still often stigmatised as radical and problematic (the example of Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France being a case in point). Future research should explore to what extent left-wing populists similarly engage with practices of de-demonisation, and with what strategies, variance, and effects.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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