

ONE FROM US, ONE FOR US.
VIKTOR ORBÁN IN VERNACULAR CULTURE¹

Conceptualizing politicians as stars is not a new phenomenon; indeed, in addition to everyday language use, this can also be found in the scholarly literature. Perhaps the first sign of this – within democratic political systems – would be the cult of Winston Churchill and serial expressions of mass hysteria that followed the death of John F. Kennedy, which seemed to be repeated on a global scale in 1997 with the tragic death of Princess Diana. Scholarly studies on the latter were published in rapid succession.² The cult of personality that arose in various dictatorial regimes could be pointed to as the forerunner of all of this, which are expressions of the emergence of a cult rooted in the political realm, but in recent times certain studies have explored the folk expressions of these cults when a phenomenon forced from above becomes an internalized conviction of the individual.³

It is a commonplace that contemporary reality is thoroughly politicized. Political points of view prevail in almost all areas of culture, education, and the economy. As a rule, the outcome of this situation is that the political figures presented in the mass media become part of our contemporary popular culture and appear within the framework of “postmodern folklore” and its various forms (prose, poetry, jokes, rhymes, graphic art, paintings etc.) as well as in the area of morality. In parallel, popular culture has gained gradually more ground in politics as well. As a result, in politics, in the case of leading political figures, known attributes of stars in popular culture have also emerged. Contemporary political style is increasingly dominated by tabloidization and personalization. This includes a focus on the leader,⁴ which is characterised not only by the fact that political messages shift rather from organisations to individuals, but also by popularization, that is the representation of political events through the lives of ordinary people. This is all primarily realised through leading figures in politics. It is impossible to capture an entire party in the viewfinder of a camera. It is, however, possible to create an image when only one person is speaking and acting, the leader who represents the institution through his person. The personalization of politics increases the role of non-rational elements, such as the faith and trust invested in the charismatic power of the leader. A political leader may increase his or her acceptance through his or her personal power of attraction, image, and actions. When presidents and prime ministers are elected, their main role in this is not their political position, but rather their personal power of attraction and image

1 The research was supported by the OTKA NK81502 project, the MTA Bolyai Ösztöndíj project and the MTA-SZTE Research Group for the Study of Religious Culture.

2 Walter 1999; Bowman 1999, 2001; Blackman and Walkerdine 2001; Daxelmüller 2003.

3 Belaj 2008; de Jonge 2008; Gabanyi 2000.

4 The term leader is used here to refer to a political leader, and it is void of any other implications.

and their ability to win loyalty among voters and to gain support and mobilize their followers. The trust of the believers is grounded in the leader's personal image, characteristics, and power of attraction – and therefore they evoke subjective emotions that cannot be explained through rational arguments. Personality becomes more important than political programme (or interests).⁵ All these operate in tandem with tabloidization⁶ and operate with the help of and through the mass media. The moral function of the media – primarily television – can perhaps best be observed in the case of star politicians as it is the message of politics that is most closely related to the worldview of the common people, their understanding of the world, value systems, and course of life. This medialization, however, also results in the need for politicians to develop internal and external value systems about themselves that satisfy the values of the consumers of mass media most thoroughly. As Kéri put it:

“It is not enough to be news, one must appear that way as well.... It is not enough to be attractive, interesting and worthy of news on one's own, it is not enough to bring in surprises again and again through newer and newer ideas, but one must also be able to represent symbolically the most important values of the particular political party through a colourful presentation. Personalization thus is not only representation, but also symbolization. Thus, a political performance is not simply performance worthy of the media, but is also an amateur production that should also stand as its own refutation. One cannot simply be an excellent actor as there are professional actors for that; a politician cannot play a role as he is expected to be honest. A role cannot be a role because he must truly believe in the truth of what he is saying. Indeed, if he does not believe it, then he cannot expect his believers to do so.”⁷

From the beginning of this process, the political leader is no longer only a politician, but a media personality who is continually in the centre of the news; he is at the centre of public attention and becomes famous, and after a while a group of sympathizers from his party become distinguished as his followers, his believers. He has become a star but has also remained a politician.

In this regard, we must not forget about the phenomenon according to which contemporary political culture is structured more and more on the basis of archaic patterns. The message of politicians and political parties begins to resemble a religious worldview in part (1) because (a) it reflects a sort of thinking in totalitarian terms and (b) voting for a particular party implies the promise of a kind of earthly paradise and in part (2) because it reflects a way of thinking in binary oppositions. It uses only good or bad characters in absolute terms; thus, the good character provides a pattern to be followed by his followers, who can

5 Körösesnyí 2003: 14.

6 Cf. Kiss 2003.

7 Kéri 2005: 88.

imagine themselves in the struggles of that figure. Their struggle is therefore no longer symbolic; it becomes a real duel. Each election campaign represents such a duel by now, when the prime ministerial candidates from the parties with the best chances fight against each other and are reduced to absolutely good or evil figures based on binary oppositions. After their struggle, pollsters hurriedly examine which one was more effective and which one was more able to convince the people of his own truth, ideas, and worldview.

In addition to symbolic struggles, politics by scandal have become the simplest and at the same time the most effective tool to illustrate the differences between political camps. According to Kéri, "In most cases, political scandals can most easily be traced back to some basic moral testimony. Therefore, the champions of heroic struggles and media triumphs can represent themselves in rather simple terms as representatives of values that have or may have outstanding significance in what is called identity politics. If a particular politician is lucky, he may more often come across as the angel and not the devil in relation to his or her opponent. ...[T]he leader and the message that is embodied by him every minute, which is spectacularly reduced to black and white truths, become the most important political message."⁸ (In fact, the opponent's followers make their judgement the same way, except, from their perspective, their own leader is qualified as good and the other as bad.) Here we see not only politicians as sources of information and news, but also a kind of political circus; that is, emotional responses of empathy are activated that are similar to those at sporting events. This competition, however, is not merely a sporting event. It is the clash of worldviews and moral world orders; that is, a newer function comes into play.

Viktor Orbán

Before I demonstrate the impact of star politicians on the folk culture of the postmodern age, I would note that I have chosen Viktor Orbán not because I support or oppose, follow or reject his personality, views, and actions, but because I find his figure well-suited to demonstrate my points.⁹ This may be concluded based on his political career since 1989, his constant presence in the news, his (symbolic) role in the eyes of his followers, the opinion his followers have of him, and his personality so inspirational in numerous areas of popular culture. The fact that Orbán's personality is ambivalent, that is, he is significantly rejected by the voters' camps among rival parties, while his acceptance reaches a similar scale among the voters of his own (party), does not constitute a rebuttal of my train of thought, but the exact opposite. The way researchers of civil religiosity have stated, the social view of civil religion is far from homogeneous, but this does not mean it does not exist. Similarly, we judge our historical heroes in different ways.

⁸ Kéri 2005: 89.

⁹ Viktor Orbán has been the prime minister of Hungary from 1998 to 2002 and again from 2010 to the present.

Many, for example, reject the figures of Lajos Kossuth or Imre Nagy, while others blindly join the ranks of their followers. This is how it is nowadays in connection with contemporary political figures. Viktor Orbán sharply divides public opinion, but it should also be noted that since the regime change he is the only Hungarian political leader who has continually maintained the support of a significant portion of society and his figure, due to effective media efforts, has been (neo)folklorized and has continuously been maintained within the folklore of the postmodern age. This role has resulted from the interplay of various factors.

One, his emergence in the public eye started in a situation that automatically predestined him to fill a significant symbolic function. In 1989, Hungary was characterised by a revolutionary climate. Orbán appeared in this situation in a politically sacred situation as the central figure of the rite connected to the reburial of Imre Nagy and his fellow martyrs on 16 June 1989. His speech that since then has become one of the symbolic acts of the political regime change in that political environment – according to historians dealing with the topic – pushed the boundaries of recklessness. A young man came almost out of complete obscurity and suddenly stood in the centre of a sacred event; he determined its atmosphere and with that to some extent also the course of political events to come. It was not merely a political event, but a rite with cultic significance, where national heroes, whom it was not allowed for us to remember, were buried with dignity.

These repressed emotions were set free by the reburial, and these emotions – for the millions following it through the media – were at the same time also re-interpreted in Orbán's speech. In that situation, that speech completed the catharsis, for which the majority of the society had been longing. He appeared in a seemingly prophetic situation, not as a politician, but as a preacher of sorts who constructs the new framework of interpretation of the way the past may connect to the present as well as outlining the possible salvific versions the future may hold for the present. It is worth re-examining certain segments of his speech from the perspective of reconstructing cultural memory.

“Since the beginning of the Russian occupation and the introduction of the communist dictatorship forty years ago, the Hungarian nation has only had one opportunity, has had sufficient courage and strength only once to make an attempt to achieve its goals set as early as 1848: these are national independence and political freedom. Our aims have not changed to date. We won't give an inch on '48 and thus we won't give an inch on '56 either. ...

These are the statesmen for us, those who even in the shadow of the gallows refused to stand in the same line as the murderers who decimated the society and those who refused, even at the cost of their lives, to deny the nation, which had accepted them and had put its trust in them. ...

We believe that we should not be grateful that we are permitted to operate political organisations today. ...

If we believe in our strength, we can put an end to communist dictatorship. If we are committed enough, we can force the ruling party to submit

to free elections. If we keep our eyes on the ideas of '56, we can choose a government for ourselves that starts immediate negotiations that begins with the immediate withdrawal of Russian troops. If we have enough boldness to want all this, then and only then can we fulfil the will of our revolution. No one can believe that a one-party state could change on its own."¹⁰

As can be seen from these excerpts, his speech was constructed on the temporal continuum of past-present-future, that is embracing all three dimensions of temporal existence in such a way that cultural memory could operate. As Assmann has also emphasised, memory not only reconstructs the past, but also organises the experience of the present and the future.¹¹

His first appearance resulted in quite extreme emotions in his audience. All of a sudden, he had some followers, while many rejected his new bold and revolutionary tone. These were also manifestations of generational differences since youthful fervour was not viewed as a considered and wise choice by a population that had lived through relative peace and quiet, which had been suffused with the authority of the party under the Kádár regime, while young people lined up behind him based on their conviction that a lot of tiny jumps would not get them over to the other side.

His political career and legitimacy tie him to Imre Nagy on the one hand but his relation to him is quite ambivalent. On the one hand, he could not follow Nagy since he had been a communist politician,¹² but at the same time he bowed his head before him in connection with the events of the revolution and his conduct during his false punishment. In this respect, it is interesting that the fervour of 1989 that was most characteristic of Sándor Petőfi and Lajos Kossuth was replaced by the political (ideological) orientation related to István Széchenyi,¹³ embracing the principle of considered measures, after Orbán became the head of government in 1998, which he also maintained during his second term as of 2010. Besides age-related changes in his own life, another important reason for this might have been that Széchenyi's political views and thus reforms to be achieved through considered political engagement, that is, based on the economic development of the country, were more acceptable for broader cross-sections of society than Kossuth's radicalism of 1848. It was then that significant changes were also introduced in Orbán's symbolic politics. His return from liberalism to conservatism and the emphatic appearance of the value system of Christianity are all elements

10 <http://www.fideszfrakcio.hu/index.php?CikkID=22> Access: 11 November 2008.

11 Assmann 2004: 43.

12 Imre Nagy, the martyred prime minister of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, considered himself a faithful communist until the day he was executed.

13 Sándor Petőfi was a poet of the 1848–'49 Hungarian Revolution, one of the best-known figures of Hungarian poetry. He espoused radical liberal political views. Lajos Kossuth was a liberal politician, a governor of the country during the Revolution, one of the most well-known Hungarian statesmen. Count István Széchenyi has been considered the greatest Hungarian, one of the leading politicians of the Age of Reform and Kossuth's political opponent.

of this.¹⁴ It is neither my task nor my aim to judge Orbán's political endeavours, but it is important to stress that archetypes deeply rooted in folk culture also appeared in the process. Indeed, a kind of compensation can be observed, located behind the slogan "Dare to be great". After the idealized type of person during communism, the member of the proletariat made uniform and trained to economize, he outlined a new attitude which became popular since the little man no longer wished to stay little. He wanted to break out of his own insignificance. He wanted to perform great deeds, similarly to the way of the youngest hero of folk tales that comes from poverty but breaks out and performs great deeds.

Now, let us examine what sort of phenomena and changes symbolic politics have generated in the system and operation of popular culture. First of all, let us study the basis for all further impacts and cultic manifestations, the symbolic image that evolved around the personality of Orbán. In order for someone to become a star, it is necessary to have an organic relationship, a shared social background between the fans and the star. If it does not exist, the emblematic identification with the star does not develop and the fans do not feel that they belong together. Thus, they cannot project their own desires, and similarly they cannot identify with the struggles of the star. As far as the bond exists, all of these can be realised and the figure of the star – in this case, Orbán – can become, in a certain sense, what they themselves would like to become.

"I really don't know much about him or about politics as such or what exactly they did then or do now, but it's for sure that Orbán is a nice person. He's down-to-earth and he's more understandable than Gyurcsány.¹⁵ He's not as stuck up as him. But that doesn't make him a hero or anything like that. I just respect him, more than the others. ... Actually, I don't respect any other politicians but him."¹⁶

"Viktor is a family-centred man. He's a lot more human and honest than other politicians. He sees people's lives much better. So it's like when we're in the same boat. We're in the same boat, I think. He has five children. In that way too, he's got a big family too."¹⁷

The manifestation of this bond is when Orbán, a member of the larger community, is identified with the nation and is its sole saviour, having been granted

14 It is interesting to note that the reduction to binary oppositions appears in relation to ideological positionings as well. When I asked the interviewees to tell me in what ways Orbán was different as a person from his political opponents, in their opinion, I received the following answers:

"Medgyessy [socialist prime minister, 2002–2004] is a selfish bloke. He is bloody selfish.... Not like Széchenyi or Orbán!"

"Gyula Horn [socialist prime minister, 1994–1998] is a murderous beast! Quite an evil man. A good soldier for the system. If I mention '56, my blood starts boiling, even if I think about it or say the name of Imre Nagy. They are murderers, damn it, nothing more. They have to be fought against; there are no two ways about it. Viktor must beat them!" 31-year-old man from Szeged, 6 April 2006.

15 Ferenc Gyurcsány, socialist prime minister, 2004–2009.

16 32-year-old man from Szeged, 14 November 2008.

17 29-year-old woman from Szeged, 14 October 2008.

almost messianic attributes on entering office. Orbán represents the nation as the leader. People expect him to solve all problems, even the ones that they themselves cannot solve. They expect him to lead them out of recession, create a flourishing economy and culture, and re-establish safety and public morality. Orbán is a politician, but these expectations refer to the totality of political life. However, if a politician is expected to introduce total changes that impact almost all walks of life, this person – in terms of functionality – is manifested as the object of a religious attitude.¹⁸ This is captured in expressions such as “Take care of us, take care of our Homeland,” which compare him to a patron saint and assign similar roles to his person.

“Dear Prime Minister,

Thank you for your self-sacrificing and highly appreciated work, which you have done for us, for the Hungarian People, and for the Country. ... Only you and your party represent the right path ...”

“Dear Prime Minister,

Not a day, not even an hour passes by without me thinking about the upcoming elections and the future of the country. With all my respect, I ask you to take care of us, to care of our homeland. ... I ask God’s good blessing on all your work and efforts. Long may you lead the Hungarians!”

“Dear Prime Minister,

I wish you all the success, endurance, and boundless peace for your future work in the coming months. Make your dreams, which are also ours, come true. ...”

“Dear Orbán family,

I wish you happy holidays and many good blessings from God. May you have the strength to lead us out of this bleak situation. Go, Hungary, go! Go, Hungarians, go!!!!”

“With all the warmth in my heart, I wish you and your lovely family peaceful Easter holidays full of spiritual renewal! Please rest because you are badly needed by our HOMELAND!”¹⁹

“From the ‘sacred mountain’ of the Székely people, the peak of Hargita in Madaras, I ask that the blessing of the Virgin Mother of Csíksomlyó should follow every step you take.”

¹⁸ This is what the cult of personality is about.

¹⁹ These quotations have been selected at random from the forum section of Orbán’s official homepage from 2002 to 2008. Available: <http://orbanviktor.hu/vendegkonyv.php> Access: 12 November 2008.

"All better? I'm sure you are because God helps a Man like you to get better."²⁰

The parts in cursive refer to the appearance of national identity and religion/religiosity. The sense of national belonging and communion with the nation is supported by "Take care of our Homeland" and "Go, Hungarians, go". Religious content is expressed by "I ask God's good blessing" and "peaceful Easter holidays full of spiritual renewal", which are aimed at a person who is able to "take care of our homeland" on his own since "only he represents the right path" in order "make the dreams of the nation come true" and "lead them out of their bleak situation". In connection with the texts, it is worth citing Ernst Cassirer: "We easily understand the assumption in savage life that all human powers and all natural powers can be condensed and concentrated in an individual man. The sorcerer, if he is the right man, if he knows the magic spells, and if he understands how to use them at the right time and in the right order, is the master of everything. He can avert all evils, he can defeat every enemy; he commands all natural forces. ... Yet, if modern man no longer believes in a natural magic, he has by no means given up the belief in a sort of 'social magic'. If a collective wish is felt in its whole strength and intensity, people can easily be persuaded that it only needs the right man to satisfy it."²¹

This is of course accompanied by a conscious image-making which attempts to meet as much as possible the needs of the masses. This is why we see the appearance of writings and images in some media, such as Internet sites, stressing his connection with the people – which are also created for propaganda reasons among other purposes. In this case we are not dealing with the construction of the folktale-like life path as seen in the case of other stars. We are not encountering the role of the youngest child, of poverty in childhood, of an early appearance of talent, of not being understood at an early age, and of resultant forced migration since these are not emphasised in the case of a star politician.²² In the case of star politicians, what counts is not their own childhood and past (and it is not about the dubious political past that has come to light again and again in the case of certain politicians) but primarily their future, the image of the future that he is able to promise to the community through his own person.

"It was different in his day. There was still a future then. Now there's not. There's nothing now. The young had opportunities then, but what have they got now? Nothing. You can leave the country, and then that's it."²³

²⁰ www.facebook.com/orbanviktor Comments from 2 October 2013. Access: 24 November 2013.

²¹ Cassirer 1974: 281.

²² Cf. Povedák 2011.

²³ The interview was conducted in 2008, when Orbán was in the opposition. 32-year-old man from Szeged, 14 November 2008.

*"I'm sure he would have done it! The situation would be different now. He cared about the people. Of course, he was a Christian. Or he still is.... Help your neighbour and God will help you."*²⁴

In the event that the development of the vision for the future is received with success – for example, elections – in the next step, his present and past come to the centre of public attention. This step is already linked to the process of creating stars. It is a process guided from above, but it is absolutely necessary for the community to be receptive and to have a demand for it. This is what comments on Orbán's homepage demonstrate:

*"Dear Prime Minister,
We were so moved that for long minutes my wife and I were mulling over how we should express our appreciation after we looked at your homepage on the Internet. We thank you for giving us ordinary citizens a glimpse of your life and the details of your work. We would like to encourage you with this little rhyme of ours since even you may have hard days:*

*When the skies above turn grey,
Just think back to the day
They'd kick the ball and race
And the tyre ruts they'd chase:
Their future, their world, their dream....
So don't forget that team
Still with you on that day
When the skies above turn grey."*²⁵

We can see community censorship is still in place today, albeit not in a preventive form. However, it follows the publicity created by the media in such a way that this kind of censorship determines the extent to which a particular person becomes a leading personality in the eyes of the people in the age of the consumer society. It is partly because of this communal need that we see images (see Annex) in which Orbán converses spiritedly with the common man, the retired and the young, about their everyday lives, problems, and joys. The face of Orbán that can be seen in these images proves that he is interested in the people and in the fate of his nation, and he communes with them. (One of these is the image in which Orbán is a tour guide for school groups in Parliament.) What the receiving community concludes from all this is that the politician, regardless of how great a man he has become, is the son of the people. He has not left them, the little people. He is a person who aids people in their problems even if it inconveniences him, such as in 2001 and then in 2006, when he himself appeared in wellingtons to assist the flooded regions and pitched in to stack sandbags to shore up an embankment.²⁶

24 28-year-old man from Szeged, 22 October 2008.

25 <http://orbanviktor.hu/vendegkonyv.php> Access: 12 November 2008.

26 <http://origo.hu/print/itthon/20060403gumicsizmaban.html> Access: 12 November 2008.

“What I like about Viktor Orbán is that beyond his big family and tough governing style, he always enjoys himself, he is a real MAN because you can’t pretend to do that.”

“Yes indeed, it is like he is one of us ordinary people. That’s why he is such an empathetic soul because he never forgot where he came from!”

“Viktor Orbán is one of us, he just did something very well, and actually knowledge is a great power. And he knows how to put that to use!”²⁷

“He’s religious man. I think he gave his help sincerely, and there was no politics in that. Why couldn’t he also be helpful? Because he’s a politician? I believe in him. Look at him now too. They are the ones helping people. That is, they’d like to help people, but they are watching out for them and they want to lower taxes. That would be good for us, wouldn’t it? It might be bad for the state, but it would be good for us. This is what matters to Orbán and his people, while that is what matters to Gyurcsány and his people.”²⁸

This role can be authenticated, not only through personal contacts but also through the ordinariness of his present-day life and private sphere. However much Orbán has become a national leader and however much he works for the country and the people, he also has a private life that he enjoys as much as those for whom he works as leader. Reports appear on the news that are not about his struggle with his opponents, but about the peaceful daily lives and events that are so ordinary that perhaps they do not really represent news value but still play an important role.²⁹ This is the news through which we can learn about the value system and morality of the politician. We learn that Orbán is also religious since we can see images of him appearing in church or blending in the crowd of pilgrims without any fuss at the Whitsunday feast in Csíksomlyó. We find out that he likes sports, cheering at football matches (and not in the VIP section of the stadium). Moreover, he even plays football himself. Besides all this, he is a family-centred, responsible father. (We can also read about his family life, his five children, and his wife, and we learn that he would like to have twenty grandchildren.) “Yesterday, it was my turn to tell Flóra a tale, by heart, mind you, because they appreciate it a lot more than when you read it. I tried to be entertaining with the story of the little pigs and the wolves since her pacifier was just taken away forever ‘by the cat’ and my little angel finds that difficult to accept.”³⁰ He likes being natural.

²⁷ Comments from 29 October 2013. Available: www.facebook.com/orbanviktor. Access: 24 November 2013.

²⁸ 28-year-old man from Szeged, 22 October 2008.

²⁹ “It is quite usual that press gives some kind of background information on the family of the politician, but if those efforts are regularly fed by the politician, then we should talk about an attempt to turn celebrity.” Kiss 2005: 11.

³⁰ Excerpt from an interview with Viktor Orbán. *Story*, 7 August 2008, p. 8.

As a result, he has built a rustic adobe house in the country, not in a showy spot, where in his own butcher shop, he has bacon, ham, and sausage hanging. "Before we got into it, we looked around the area for days with the architect to discover the folk motifs and accommodated to that when we made the house out of adobe. I didn't want to use modern building materials if you can make an equally good – an even better – house using traditional techniques."³¹ The lifestyle choice of returning to nature that is seeing a renaissance nowadays can also express for readers that through his return to nature, being natural, and village life, we also witness his return to the life of the common man, and Orbán no longer blends into the crowd in the image of the media, but he does so in the reality of his daily life among the residents of Felcsút. He blends among the people as if he were a postmodern folk leader in disguise – although he is not actually in disguise. He lives his daily life without any media events, fuss, or hint of being special, he busies himself in the kitchen. "My fatherly authority is strengthened by scrambled eggs, in which I am unbeatable. If we all sit down together at the table, I make them with twenty eggs and slide some fatback under it. Cooking at our place is actually a family tradition. I was 13 years old when my mother taught me the basics.... I also follow my mother's example, and, when the children reach that age, I also have them try their hand at the cooker."³² These beliefs may become the personal opinions of the readers.

"See, here it is. 'Viktor Orbán wants 15-20 grandchildren.' We're in the same boat there too. And he lives in an adobe house, there it is. Something else we share!"³³

Orbán is an ordinary person, therefore; however, for his followers, he is more deeply a leader and saviour to his people. He is a multiple, heterogeneous personality, the common and great man all in one. His followers expect him to show that he knows something that no one else knows and can do something that anyone could do. The son of the people, who, by becoming the leader of the nation, is conceived as a personal hero to everyone who has come from the people, deals with the problems of the people and therefore is one of them. One manifestation of this is that his first name, Viktor, is widely used as a term of endearment. His name is shouted in chorus in a sort of cheer at public gatherings and on tours of the country,³⁴ and he is addressed this way in electronic messages, in which attachment to him is also extended to his entire family.

31 Excerpt from an interview with Viktor Orbán. *Story*, 7 August 2008, p. 6.

32 Excerpt from an interview with Viktor Orbán. *Story*, 7 August 2008, p. 7.

33 29-year-old woman from Szeged, 14 October 2008.

34 These evoke the atmosphere of sporting events in the participants since they are expecting the appearance of their own man and they are eager for him to succeed. Orbán does not leave them disappointed because "he tells it to them like it is" and the participants leave the rite feeling that they have triumphed over the – only symbolically present – opponent.

*“Dear Viktor,
I wish you and your lovely family very happy and blessed Easter holidays!
Yours, with affection and respect,
Mrs KJ”*

*“Dear Viktor,
...on behalf of my friends and the mayor, please accept my invitation to
our village day celebration on 13 September 2007, where we could talk some
at a public forum.*

*Go, Hungary, go
Go, VIKTOR, go”³⁵*

In addition to the media, centrally organised rites, commemorations and speeches strengthen Orbán’s influence. His sudden emergence in the world of politics was due to just such a rite in 1989, and by now these events – primarily national holidays – provide a platform for the masses to come to know and then integrate into their own lives, first, his political convictions and, second, his worldview. For this it is also necessary to turn these rites from merely political events into something of a much broader spectrum, into politicized cultural events. These should be “not holy days, but holidays,” where people become excited not about ideas and the victorious past, but are simply enjoying themselves.³⁶ The rites that I have examined unite both types of days in their characteristics. The mythological forms, religious characteristics, and heroic representations are in the foreground in terms of his speeches, while entertainment dominates during the performances by various singers and dance ensembles. In rites of remembrance, Orbán’s speech never breaks out of the flow of the profane entertainment in its sacredness, but he departs from the profane present and leads us by baby steps closer through various stages of the rite to the sacred peak.³⁷ Examples of these include the celebration of 23 October, in which it can be observed that the heroes of our day play an outstanding role in maintaining and re-interpreting tradition. This also holds true for some of the national party events that encourage various age groups in the populace to engage in some sort of secular pilgrimage. While the event is about commemoration, people participate in it much rather because of someone who is an outstanding figure for them and is still alive. Orbán’s personality generates a mass movement to a large extent, but he uses his message to lead his fans to the past and to outstanding heroes of the past, thus revitalizing and strengthening their cult. Therefore, besides guiding public morality, he also plays a significant role in re-interpreting traditions. At times like this, he re-evaluates the past in relation to the present in such a way that he also outlines the future of the community. Turns of phrase he uses in his speeches at times of such (political) rites

³⁵ <http://orbanviktor.hu/vendegkonyv.php> Access: 12 November 2008.

³⁶ Feischmidt and Brubaker 1999. <http://www.c3.hu/scripta/scripta0/replika/honlap/> Access: 18 November 2008.

³⁷ Ferenc Pataki defines the group of people participating in such events as the “devout masses” (*áhitatos tömeg*). Pataki 1998: 132-136.

are extremely significant. Besides his representations in the media, these speeches strengthen the feeling in the community that Orbán is from among them and shares a community with them, a sense which is strengthened in them by his frequently used ways of addressing them, for example "My friends in freedom" and "Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends".

An important element of my research is the fact that the connection to the heroes of the past takes place partly through the representation of our contemporary heroes. The stars' power to shape public opinion is considered when famous people living today appear on the stage at an event. These are people who are loved by the audience, many of whom are considered national heroes by the public. These people are primarily sportsmen³⁸ and musicians and actors, who have become very popular in their own field. The star politician, therefore, attracts other stars, he or she uses them and their cult so that their previous achievements, independent of politics, justify their political activities.

Viktor Orbán in folklore

Finally, let us examine the inspirational role of Orbán in various genres of folklore. His political career of over two decades is a long enough period to have a long-lasting effect on popular culture. As a result, his figure appears in various genres of (postmodern) folklore. First, I would like to survey various examples of prose tied to his person. In line with the process through which folk poetry has changed most recently, folk poetry about Orbán does not represent significant aesthetic value, but fits into what Vilmos Voigt described as early as 1972: "The anecdotes, rumours, erotic, political and other sorts of jokes and so-called true stories, accounts of personal experiences ... and other stories appear as independent genres."³⁹ This list, however, must be supplemented with election period rhymes and text and email messages. Accounts of memories connected to some of the more humorous or memorable elements of a media appearance of Orbán's or a speech given by him at a public gathering should not be explained at length since it is clear that such stories involving politicians are common after every such event. We can look at rumours in a similar vein. I must note that a significant portion of rumours about him result from the folklorization of news about him in the media, in the spreading of which missing information is significant as well as the basic human feature people share of enjoying it when they are in possession of information.⁴⁰ I need to emphasise with regard to rumours (slander and libel) that their truth value and information content often have a more powerful manipulative role and influence than truth itself.

38 Members of the legendary Hungarian football team from the 1950s, the Golden Team, who are still alive are Gyula Grosics and Jenő Buzánszky. Hungarian Olympic champions include swimmer Krisztina Egerszegi and boxer István Kovács.

39 Voigt 1972: 241.

40 It is a well-known observation in social psychology that within groups the person who is in possession of the majority of the information, that is, extra knowledge in relation to the other members of the group, becomes the central figure.

The most recent epic folklore creations, text and email messages, can be a great deal more exciting for us than rumours. These can be divided into three categories. First, there are political scare tactics regarding Orbán acquiring (and retaining) power, jokes, mobilizing campaign messages, and rhymes. The tense political situation undoubtedly favours scare tactics. Humour, however, has also been able to relieve political tension.⁴¹ People send round some of the same jokes that they tell each other in person. Various creations are characterised by powerful variability. The names in them change frequently. Moreover, they are also characterised by the simplification to the most extreme and sharp oppositions – the good and the bad here are absolutely that. In jokes, Orbán – depending on which political camp sends it – appears as a positive as well as a negative character. “Having checked with experts, László Kovács⁴² made Viktor Orbán responsible for the fall of the Roman Empire.” Some jokes related to religious themes should be emphasised in particular: “Viktor Orbán is not just religious. He is religion itself!” “Viktor Orbán didn’t go to school to study. He just wanted to check out where they would be teaching about him.” “God left the Earth to itself. He knew that he would have nothing to do next to Viktor Orbán!”

Texted jokes are characterised by a kind of tightness and formal simplicity because of the limited character count. We can conclude the same in connection with messages related to mobilization. Some of these call attention to a particular event at which Orbán also appears, while others are funny rhymes related to elections.

*“All you dopes in Budapest.
You think Gyula Horn is best,
But the countryside’s agreed
It’s no henchman that we need.
Our victory’s all the sweeter.
We’ve got Orbán as our leader.
Pass it on today.”*

*“You commies, be afraid.
Eat the cherry cakes you’ve made.⁴³
Libero libs, just own up.
Viktor’s got it sewn up.
Hun-gar-i-ans know where to be:
KOSSUTH SQUARE, THIS SATURDAY, AT 3!
Pass it on!”*

41 We witnessed an incredible increase in the number of political jokes, which was promoted by the fact that jokes were used directly in political rivalry as well. Voigt proved to be right then when he said that “although the number of political jokes decreased around and after 1989 by now (I wonder why) they have regained their daily presence” (Voigt 1998: 322). And a further increase can be expected in this regard.

42 László Kovács is a leading socialist politician.

43 This is a reference to Péter Medgyessy, the socialist prime minister. The Hungarian word *meggy*, which sounds like the first syllable of his surname, means “(sour) cherry”.

*“VIKTOR ORBÁN WRITES:
WE NEED MORE FOR THE FIGHT.
WHEN NEXT WE HERE THE CALL,
IN LINE WE ALL MUST FALL!
LONG LIVE OUR HOMELAND!
PASS IT ON TO FIVE PATRIOTS.”*

These rhymes and political tunes are most similar to the shout-outs in the old marketplace and the advertisement copy that developed from them. Although they lack any aesthetic excellence, I must note that text messages are folklore creations in the strictest sense of the word in contrast to mass culture since they are both expressions of a community with the power to form a community. With regard to their sources, I must note that they often draw on certain works of high culture (*gesunkenes Kulturgut*), earlier works of folklore, or international material. However, independent of these, the way they are selected and transformed expresses an independent and contemporary folk culture. The variability of works of folklore, however, does not merely represent the exchange of certain personal names or changes in certain details; rather, temporal migration and variation exist as a result. In connection with the elections in 2006, some of the text messages from 2002 became topical again, and there was no significant change between the two, except that the material collected in connection with the 2002 elections is significantly richer than that from four years later.⁴⁴ Therefore, it is proved yet again that the same works can be related to different people. The works therefore are passed down in keeping with the rules of folklore.⁴⁵ Election rhymes belonging to the first group of emails are related to these latter works of mobilization; they reflect the political preferences of their creators and transmitters in broader, poetic, humorous, and, at times, vulgar forms.

*“To the polls I went,
Where some commies had been sent
To try and defeat ‘em,
But FIDESZ will beat ‘em.
Pack your bags, there’s the street.
Here comes Viktor, there goes Pete.”
“We love this land, we’re here to stay.
Mark our words, we’ll have our day.
In two weeks’ time, there is no doubt,
We’ll grab the bums and vote them out.
Long live Viktor, down with Pete.
Give him time to beat his meat!”*

⁴⁴ This number decreased further by 2010.

⁴⁵ In addition to a Viktor-Péter (Pete) name switch from a previous rhyme, also note the appearance of the name of former socialist prime minister Gyula Horn in the 2002 campaign and then that of former socialist PM Péter Medgyessy.

I must note that the trickling down of high culture can be observed here too since parodies of longer poems such as *Toldi* and *The Bards of Wales* by János Arany appear within the framework of email folklore in which the figure of Orbán also emerges. This material is therefore no longer a pure folklore phenomenon but a unique blend of folklore and official art, public poetry.

Ilona Nagy discovered an anecdote in connection with Orbán in the news daily *Romániai Magyar Szó*: "When he was still only chairman of his party, Viktor Orbán, prime minister of Hungary, visited Székelyudvarhely and stayed at the home of Molnos the solicitor. In the morning, he saw that the solicitor's wife was cleaning his shoes. Surprised, he asked: 'What are you doing, Miss Irénke?' 'I'm cleaning your shoes so that I could one day say: I cleaned the shoes of Hungary's prime minister!' So then he grabbed Miss Irénke's shoes and started cleaning them. Then Miss Irénke also asked: 'What are you doing?' 'I'm cleaning your shoes so that you could say one day: Hungary's prime minister cleaned my shoes'."⁴⁶

I will close this series of prose works with a tale that was borne out of the most recent political events and includes the oppositions outlined so far:

"The king with the dancing feet

Once upon a time, nothing even remotely like this ever happened. In a land far, far away, where even an ox could become a great lord and where short-tailed pigs shoved red carnations⁴⁷ away with their snouts, there was once a king whose name was Feri and he had dancing feet.⁴⁸ He loved dancing so much that he had spent all his fortune on expensive shoes, but the soles of the shoes wore out quickly. His poor people had a bleak future in store since a king with dancing feet was ruling their country. When Feri danced, he showered abuse on the country. He shouted that the country is a whore, which was awfully rude. He told off everyone in the country, the young and the old alike, thinking they would not hear it anyway. Our little saint was having such a good time. If only he could have kept the country in order. He danced away the fortune of his people so in order to keep from being butchered, he set up many thousands of lead soldiers in front of his palace. The treasury yawned with emptiness, as did his head, which he was busy scratching. And lo and behold! One gold coin glistened in the middle of the treasury, but it was not enough for him to save his country. In order to ease the great chaos, he sent for Viktor, the great wizard. He was his old rival, and he would have liked Viktor dead. 'How can we make a hundred gold coins out of one?' Viktor was the right man to ask. It was difficult to outsmart this wizard. He was nobody's fool. The king called for the wizard so that he could save the kingdom. Viktor didn't want to lose his head because he liked it to stay on his neck since there was so much knowledge there. So Viktor said the magic words very quickly: 'Dance, Feri, dance! Dance till

46 Nagy 2006: 428-429.

47 The red carnation is the symbol for the socialists.

48 This is a reference to former socialist prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsány.

your shoes wear out!’ And so the king danced happily ever after, although not so very happily since he could no longer steal from the treasury.

A short tale for adults.

2 March 2009”⁴⁹

An increasing number of examples can be noted nowadays within Internet folklore to confirm the theory of technological determinism. Humorous memes dominate in which the person to be ridiculed is a character in a well-known work of high or popular culture (e.g. a painting and a film). Accordingly, Orbán appears on a banknote and a film poster for and excerpt from *The Godfather*, *The Matrix*, and the *Star Wars* films. Besides these, to a lesser extent, Orbán’s figure is also present in conventional paintings as well. Moreover, his portrait may appear cut out of a newspaper or magazine and may be displayed on the wall of a room or office or on a t-shirt in a traditional manner.

The profane cult of relics is by far not as significant and varied in association with his figure as it is, for example, in connection with stars who are singers. I must add that Orbán is a living figure and therefore objects related to him are not unique since one can practically meet him at any time. His followers, however, consider contact with him a key moment in their lives, as borne out by images taken of crowds of people gathered to shake his hand and of an elderly lady who is kissing his hand and by an email whose writer was deeply touched because he had been able to get a glimpse into Orbán’s life: “We thank you for giving us ordinary citizens a glimpse of your life and the details of your work.” His autograph can also be extremely important; indeed, people are willing to wait for hours for an autograph with Orbán’s newly published book in their hands.

It can thus be concluded that the cult of star politicians is the closest to that of historical heroes. Clearly, the similarities also stem from the fact that the political profession means that a politician must serve the interests of the community and the nation. It is much easier, therefore, for a charismatic person to emerge from this environment and become a hero since personal success is basically possible here in a way that blends with the success of the broader community as well. Direct ties with the politics of an historical heroic predecessor is also important, which the star politician continually reiterates. It was no coincidence that in 1989–’90 Orbán referred to his party a number of times as *Petőfidesz*, that his government introduced the *Széchenyi Plan*, named after the great nineteenth-century Hungarian statesman, and that it backed the making of the film *A Hídember* (*The Bridgeman*) about the same man and his achievements. Besides these, Orbán has reached back to other national heroes. In honour of Hungarian football legends, he has established the *Puskás Ferenc Football Academy* to support talented children and has also launched the *Bozsik Programme*.⁵⁰

49 The writer of the tale lives in Szeged and spread the tale by photocopy among his acquaintances. This is how I received it on 7 April 2009.

50 The name *Petőfidesz* contains a reference to the revolutionary poet Sándor Petőfi. József Bozsik was on the legendary Golden Team with football legend Ferenc Puskás, “the most famous Hungarian”.

Nowadays Orbán is clearly a star in his own political camp. At the same time, approaches to him link him more to historical heroes. His cult is ever growing. He may, of course, be pushed into the background as a result of a political turn that is unfavourable to him, but the fact that his cult has not weakened after two lost parliamentary elections – indeed, his leading position has been reinforced within his camp during this period – suggests otherwise.

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