

CROWDS AND PLEBISCITARY REPRESENTATION

Rituals of Presence in the Orbán Regime

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The paper aims to characterize the role of crowd events in plebiscitary representation, complementing the original Weberian – Schmittian characterization with Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's notions of crowd and presence ritual. Additionally, it shows the relevance of the theoretical argument by analyzing the role three types of presence rituals play in maintaining Viktor Orbán's plebiscitary regime in Hungary, based on available video footage of the events and Orbán's speeches. Such an investigation has a threefold relevance. Firstly, it contributes to understanding Orbán's domestic successes by emphasizing a hitherto underappreciated aspect of his politics. Secondly, focusing on presence rituals' bodily and sensory elements complements existing research on populist rallies. Thirdly, it also contributes to broadening the focus of contemporary constructivist approaches to representation, which usually emphasize linguistic and non-linguistic performativity (claim-making, style, and stagecraft) but only marginally reflect on the role of the bodily and sensory processes in making constituencies.

Keywords: representation, plebiscitarianism, populism, constructivism, Viktor Orbán

Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán's Facebook cover photo condenses some of the most significant changes in political representation in recent decades. The image shows the PM in focus, with his back to the camera, facing and speaking to a large crowd. The faces of the members are mostly blurred because of the photograph's focus, which results in an impression of a quasi-indistinct mass. The crowd fills a large Hungarian square, with national flags abounding and all eyes fixed on him.

The dissolution of stable collective identities and the resulting crisis of party government (Mair 2013) is usually seen as the origin of this new configuration, with the mediatized and personalized setting of „audience democracy” (Manin 1997) as a catalyst. While some authors speak about the „end of representative politics” (Tormey 2015), this move seems premature to the majority of the literature because of the flexibility of the concept of representation (Brito Vieira and Runciman 2008). They contend that we are instead witnessing the crisis of a specific *form*, mandate representation (Disch 2019). In the latter setting, authority from the people is transferred to distinguished and accountable representatives at competitive elections with a circumscribed mandate constraining them. Additionally, the pluralistic interests in society are mediated through intermediary institutions (e.g., parties) towards political elites (Caramani 2017).

One of the new, alternative forms of representation, the one condensed in Orbán's Facebook picture, is usually called „populist” (Caramani 2017; Casullo 2021; Diehl 2017; Müller 2016; Urbinati 2014; 2019), or sometimes – following Max Weber and Carl Schmitt – „plebiscitary” representation (Illés and Körösenyi 2022; 2023; Urbinati 2014). In this representative setting, electoral competition and authorization lose at least some of their importance, the relationship between leaders and their constituency becomes direct (i.e., not mediated by partisan links), and the leader claims to represent the unified popular will and to embody the people. Consequently, the distinction of representatives *vis-à-vis* the constituency

(the „democratic aristocracy” – Manin 1997) gives place to similarity and identity, and accountability is discarded since populist politicians claim that it is the sovereign people that acts through the leader. Additionally, claiming to represent the unified popular will is coupled with discursively and symbolically excluding parts of the population from „the people.”

The emergence of new forms of representation is logically connected to the constructivist turn in theories of representation, as these forms do not see the social as the „substrate” of politics that would contain fixed identities and interests (Disch 2019). Therefore, leaders, instead of being constrained by a circumscribed mandate, have wide leverage in forming the preferences and identities of their constituents: instead of a „transmission belt” model (cf. Brito Vieira 2020) that would forward given popular preferences and identities to policy-makers, the representative process in such a setting is constitutive of the preferences and identities of the represented (Disch 2021; Saward 2010).

However, an important element of Orbán’s Facebook picture has only got scarce attention in the literature up to now: systematic reflection on the role of the sensorial, bodily elements and physical popular presence (i.e., crowds or masses) in the mentioned new representative setting, is still largely missing in theories of representation.¹ This lack fits well with the general marginalization of the concepts of ‘crowd’ and ‘mass’ within the social sciences in the last decades (Borch 2012) and might have various reasons. Firstly, in a plebiscitary setting, the crowds are primarily the reactive audience of a leader: the shimmering aura of citizen activism manifested in protests is completely missing here.² The memory of 20th-century totalitarian

¹ Nadia Urbinati’s scattered but important reflections on the topic (2014, 171–241) can be seen as exceptions.

² It is perhaps no coincidence that reflection on the sensorial-bodily elements of crowd events has primarily focused on such instances of citizen activism (see Butler 2015).

mass events might add to this aversion. Even the works that use the concepts are rather interested in how the individual agency of citizens can be squared with mass events (Gebauer and Rücker 2019). Secondly, the justifiable interest in the role of virtuality and new technologies (most recently, social media) and their potential impact on representation might also have contributed to the marginalization of the concept of crowds. Thirdly – and this points towards the broader theoretical relevance of the article for contemporary theorizing about representation – the „discursive bias” (Brito Vieira 2020) of contemporary constructivist theories should be mentioned. While focusing on „representative claims” (Saward 2010) opened up new theoretical avenues for theorizing representation, it runs the risk of eclipsing the role of physical presence and sense-perception in the representative process. Although the recent theorizing about non-linguistic performativity (Ostiguy, Panizza, and Moffitt 2021; Saward 2017; 2020) has done much to resolve this bias, we shall show that there is still ample room for theorizing in this respect.

Our aim in this article is to clarify the roles sensorial-bodily processes at crowd events may play in plebiscitary representation or, more precisely, how populist politicians might use these to get approval for their representative claims. To do this, we shall use insights from constructivist approaches but, at the same time, complement them with reflections on the role of non-discursive elements in the representative process. Borrowing primarily from the work of Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht, our aim is to show the role of certain factors in the process of representation that are non-discursive and are not even filtered through interpretation on the side of the represented. More precisely, we shall highlight how the oscillation between „presence-effects” and „meaning-effects” (Gumbrecht 2004) brings about plebiscitary representation.

The first part of the article will clarify the notion of plebiscitary representation and the role of crowds in it, relying on the works of Max Weber and Carl Schmitt, and show where the

Gumbrechtian notions of crowd and presence might contribute to their ideas. Then, the second part analyses the case of the Orbán regime, a paradigmatic case of plebiscitary representation (Körösényi, Illés, and Gyulai 2020), focusing on three types of „presence rituals” (Gumbrecht 2021). We mean by rituals periodic events where physical presence, sensory processes, and the sustained mutual focus of attention, possibly complemented by discursive elements (claim-making), can lead to intense bodily experiences, heightened emotional states and contribute to collective identity formation (Gumbrecht 2021; see also Collins 2005). The conclusion shall gesture towards the broader theoretical relevance of our findings and possible further avenues for research.

The role of crowds in plebiscitary representation

First of all, let us briefly clarify the notion of plebiscitary representation. Because there have already been attempts to do this (Illés and Körösényi 2022; 2023³; Körösényi 2005; Pakulski and Körösényi 2012), we shall confine our discussion to the essential elements, proceeding from Weber to Schmitt, and then from Schmitt to Gumbrecht.

When Weber speaks about „leader democracy,” an amalgam of rational-legal and charismatic rule, he emphasizes that „the leader feels legitimated as a representative of the masses, and is recognized as such” and additionally that „[w]herever legitimacy for this kind of rule is sought, it makes use of plebiscitary recognition by the sovereign people” (2019, 406–407). Two points need mentioning here: firstly, the relationship between the masses and the „sovereign people” remains unexplained. Secondly, the plebiscite, as a means, serves the aim of directly authorizing the leader-representative to act in the name of the people, and the latter

³ While Jeffrey Green’s (2010) monograph is arguably the most important recent reconceptualization of plebiscitarianism, unfortunately, it completely discards the notion of representation.

takes responsibility for the leader's actions (Pitkin, 1967, 38–39). This way, the role of mediating institutions such as parties can be bracketed. At the same time, setting the alternatives cements leaders as proactive actors in the process, while voters are supposed to react to their proposals: Weber emphasized the formative role of leadership (the „' dictatorship' of the masses demands a 'dictator'” – 1994, 305), and saw representation – similarly to contemporary constructivists – as a constitutive process, where political manipulation (with his word: the „demagogy” of charismatic leaders) plays an important part, transforming social identities and existing interest-patterns. He hoped that this formative potential of the representative process would give charismatic leaders leverage to counterbalance the sectional interests, the „horse-trading” of parliamentary politics, and prevent political disintegration (Beetham 1974, 240–245; Weber 1994, 304).

In his vision, plebiscitary politics would contain a competitive element, where the leader's authority would stem from proving their skills in continuous open contestation, infusing politics with contingency and eventfulness (Green 2010, 19–23, 143). As we can see, we find in Weber's original idea of plebiscitary representation a mixture of elements that are usually associated today, on the one hand, with classical party government (competition, electoral authorization, distinction of the representatives, and even a vague hope of accountability – Radkau 2009, 543); and, on the other, which can be connected to new contemporary forms of representation (representation as a constitutive process, unmediated leader-follower relationship, the emphasis on the unitary will of the people). To get a more radical notion of plebiscitary representation, we should turn to Carl Schmitt.

Much depends on how we make sense of the „masses” in the above Weber citation. Weber did this by sticking to methodological individualism: he connected authorization to individual consent expressed through a secret ballot (Brito Vieira and Runciman 2008, 53–57). At the same time, he was rather wary of the „rule of the street” (1994, 125) and saw parliament as an

important constraint on mass politics (Selinger 2019, 196–203). Contrary to him, Schmitt replaced individual judgment expressed at a secret ballot with public acclamation by a collective (Brito Vieira and Runciman 2008, 53–57; McCormick 1997, 157–205; Urbinati 2014, 183–184). While Schmitt bracketed the competitive, eventful element present in the Weberian variant, his notion of acclamation gives more precise contours to the role of physical presence in plebiscitary politics – a role he qualified at the same time, claiming that „[i]n modern, large states, the acclamation [...] has changed its external form [...] it expresses itself as public opinion [...] Public opinion is the modern type of acclamation” (Schmitt 2008, 131, 275). For example, a leader making a television address to get the backing of the active part of the citizenry might be interpreted as a bid for this modern form of acclamation (Rasch 2017, 333–335), and social media might also function this way (Davies 2020).

However, one might argue that something is lost in such mediatized and virtualized acclamations, namely, how intensely we are affected on the bodily level (cf. Collins 2005, 53–66). Nadia Urbinati rightly claims that the power of the original form of acclamation resided in its „monoarchic nature,” the „convergence of the presence of the people and the opinion of the people,” and similarly to the Roman forum, in a plebiscitary context „the public [is] not an abstract ‘public opinion’ but a physical context in which magistrates shaped their words anticipating the reaction of the crowd” (2014, 289, 225). At this point, Gumbrecht’s notion of „presence,” tailored to the field of politics, might be useful in deepening the analysis of plebiscitary representation, complementing its radicalized Schmittian variant. The notion aims at capturing the „spatial relationship with the things of the world [...] and the possibility that the things of the world affect our bodies” (2012a, 297). He refers to such things as the „exteriority of language” (ibid., 178), the „materialities of communication” (ibid., 183), or the „non-hermeneutical” (ibid., 191). These all „contribute something to meaning without being meaning themselves” (ibid., 183). Interest in these things is intimately connected with the focus

on sense-perception (*Wahrnehmung*), ways in which we relate to things of the world that involve no conceptual mediation. He analyzes various phenomena under the rubric of presence, e.g., how rhythms at a football or soccer match can stimulate our imagination without being filtered through interpretation (2012a, 261–290; 2021, 87–92), how the prosody of texts can trigger specific moods (*Stimmungen*) that affect our bodies (2012b); or how individual concentration on bodily movements can create an intense experience of the self (2021, 79).

Gumbrecht's emphasis on presence and crowds can help study plebiscitary representation in at least two respects. Firstly, it can give us a vantage point to reinterpret key concepts connected to plebiscitary representation. The Schmittian notions of acclamation and homogeneity are a case in point. While Schmitt was ready to broaden the term's meaning to include virtual acclamations (such as public opinion), it is possible to argue for the distinctive nature of presence rituals following Gumbrecht. The presence perspective can also shed light on the role sensorial processes play in manufacturing homogeneity. Similarly, the Schmittian claim that the friend-enemy distinction, constitutive of the homogeneity of the people, is a criterion that „denotes the utmost degree of intensity of a union or separation, of an association or dissociation” (2007, 26) can be given an original twist by connecting it to the Gumbrechtian notion of intensity and the role of the physical presence of the enemy in it.

Secondly, the presence-perspective can also serve as an important complement to the contemporary constructivist theories of representation, more specifically to Saward's (2010; 2020) claim-making approach, by specifying what role sensorial and bodily elements play in the process of „making constituencies” (Disch 2021). While Disch (2019) is undoubtedly right that the constructivist perspective, by denying that representation would be based on a pre-given „social substrate,” is in the best position to understand new contemporary forms of representation, it might still be plausibly claimed that that constructivism, especially the claim making approach, suffers from a „discursive bias” (Brito Vieira 2020). The reference to bodily

reality and physical presence, the „referent” of claims (Saward 2010, 36–38; 2020, 13), functions primarily as shielding his position from the charges of idealism (Decreus 2013; Thomassen 2019, 165–170). Recent iterations of the theory (Aiolfi 2023; Daloz 2021; Moffitt 2016; Ostiguy, Panizza, and Moffitt 2021; Rai 2014; Saward 2017; 2020) could only alleviate this problem by emphasizing non-linguistic performativity. Because they primarily focus on the meaning aspect of performances and on the body of the leader (their clothing, manners, and stagecraft), it can be rightly claimed that they largely leave out the role bodily processes play at crowd events (Wall 2021, 665). We might say that they see politics as a theater where bodies are merely important as a „carrier of meaning,” thereby neglecting „theatre’s materiality” (Fischer-Lichte 2005, 24). Similarly, the attempt to put affects on the map of constructivist representation (Knops 2022) while acknowledging the broader theoretical relevance of the notion (being able to affect and be affected on the bodily level), in the end equates affects with emotions, leaving the potential of the concept largely untapped.

We claim that Gumbrecht’s notions of presence and crowds can fill this void in theorizing by showing that an element of the representative process transcends the logic of signification, of referring to something absent, and makes something materially present. Gumbrecht calls this process „re-presentation” (with an intentional dash) and connects it to the Aristotelian distinction of substance („something that is tangible, constitutes presence and therefore occupies space”) and form („what at any given time gives the substance a certain shape and with what the perception of this substance is possible”) (2012a, 218). In his example, the ritual of medieval Eucharist, Christ’s body and blood became materially present and perceptible through the wine and blood.⁴ Translated to our case: in plebiscitary politics, besides

⁴ This Gumbrechtian reference to the medieval concept of representation could be fruitfully compared to some of Schmitt’s earlier work, especially the *Roman Catholicism and Political*

representing the people in a symbolic (Pitkin 1967) or synecdochal (Casullo 2021) way, representing it by organizing crowd events is also crucial. Through physical presence and sense-perception, such events can bring about extraordinary, intense experiences, epiphanies, „i.e., states of a quantitatively higher degree in the awareness of our emotions and of our bodies” (Gumbrecht 2014, Ch. 4).

It is important to note that Gumbrecht does not aim to substitute meaning for presence but is rather interested in the oscillation between „presence effects” and „meaning effects” (2004, 2). Although in the field of aesthetic experience, the two often interfere with each other (you cannot comprehend the semantic complexity of a tango lyric while following the rhythm with complicated steps – Gumbrecht 2012a, 342; 2014, Ch. 1), this seems to present no problem with plebiscitary representation, where simplistic, „demagogic” appeals are complemented by popular applause and shouts of acclamation. Here, presence and meaning effects might have a complementary relationship: crowd gatherings and representative claims – or more broadly, discursive constructions (Zicman de Barros 2021, 516) or „proclamations” (Guasti and Geissel 2019) – by leaders might interact with each other to bring about plebiscitary representation. By showing how this interaction occurs, we might elaborate on the elements and preconditions of representation that are not discourse or meaning. The result would be a modified

Form essay (Schmitt 1996). While a detailed comparison is outside the scope of this article, two things are worth noting. Firstly, Schmitt’s references to medieval representation are not integrated into his description of plebiscitary politics, their relationship are far from clear (cf. McCormick 1997, 157–205). Secondly, the Gumbrechtian emphasis on the material and the bodily seems an altogether different take on medieval representation than the Schmittian one. Taken together, these two considerations justify in our eyes the integration of Gumbrecht’s considerations into the theory of plebiscitary representation.

constructivism, where there *is* something outside meaning-making that constitutes constituencies (*pace* Decreus 2013; Thomassen 2019), but this something is not pre-political identities, interests, or a „social substrate,” but rather material-bodily preconditions (i.e., the presence of a crowd) and sensorial processes.

In the points below, we aim to show at which points precisely the notion of presence can help us analyze plebiscitary representation.

A) Making the sovereign perceptible

One crucial problem plebiscitary representation faces at the beginning is connected to the notion of popular sovereignty: that of the imperceptible sovereign. Lefort’s well-known argument (1988) that democracy displaced the king’s body and instituted a void, an empty space as the locus of power in its stead, highlights the problem’s origins. The literature on contemporary populism is undoubtedly correct that populist leaders aim to fill this void through ways of symbolic representation (Pitkin 1967) – either as „empty” (Laclau 2005) or „overflowing signifiers” (Ostiguy and Moffitt 2021) or by trying to embody the people (Casullo 2021).

However, another element of the problem has merited less attention up to now. Plebiscitary representation is not only about populist leaders symbolically representing the people but also about making present the latter in the form of a crowd: the leader-people relationship should be substituted by a triangular leader-crowd-people relation. This is crucial since the people „in its immediate reality” is a mass or crowd (Schmitt 1927, 35). Nadia Urbinati’s argument is closest to the mark when she argues perceptively that populist politicians do not give themselves content with the *fictio iuris* of the people: the „*fictio* is operationalized *as if* it were not a fiction at all but a factual reality” (Urbinati 2019, 104). It is at this point where Gumbrecht’s argument can bring us a step further: the people in plebiscitary representation is not a fictional entity but something substantive, not just in the sense that it would be glued together by religious,

national, or moral similarities, but in the sense that substances cannot exist without representation, they need a form to be perceptible (Gumbrecht 2012a, 218–219). Therefore, organizing crowd events and thereby making the new sovereign visible, audible, and tangible is an essential task in this form of representation.

This aim was already present in the crowd rituals of the French Revolution, such as the 1790 *Fête de la Fédération* that brought together some 400000 participants on the *Champ de Mars* in Paris (Sloterdijk 2008): „[T]he notion of the sovereign French people was tied to the idea that the people could and should materialize as a co-present crowd” (Borch 2015). That every popular gathering can only be partial, i.e., an approximation of the people, constitutes no problem for plebiscitary representation. The inclusive Rousseauian view of the *volonté générale* (that the participation of everyone is needed for its formation) was quickly abandoned during the French Revolution (Rousselière 2021). Similarly, for Schmitt, acclamation does not need to have such an inclusive character: it is entirely appropriate if a politically interested minority of the population with a political will decides (2008, 303–307).

What needs to be noted is the crucial role of leadership in this process: it is not only the performances of the leaders that are crafted (cf. Casullo 2021; Saward 2017); creating the conditions of re-presenting the people also requires careful orchestration, from organizing an event to building appropriate architecture to support it (Sloterdijk 2008). Urbinati’s claim that in plebiscitary politics, masses are the „unshaped matter the leader put [their] mark [on]” (Urbinati 2014, 180) is not only valid in a figurative way (popular will formed by demagogy)⁵ but also in a literal sense.

⁵ To the limits of this formative capacity see Illés and Körösnéyi 2023.

B) Unification through sensorial means

While the gathering of bodies precedes the uttering of words, the claim that such a gathering would in itself enact the popular „we” (Butler 2015, 156) seems to short-circuit the presence element. Since the sovereign is not a single person, the ritual needs to unify the multiplicity, and the latter needs to speak with a single voice. Beyond discursive constructions of that unity, sensory manipulation can also play a crucial role in rituals of presence (cf. Borch 2015). This sensory unification is arguably the most powerful, physical way of manufacturing Schmittian (2000) homogeneity or identity. Consequently, contrary to other forms of popular assembly (Butler 2015, 157), here, acting in concert means acting in conformity. Additionally, while it is surely right to emphasize the visual, spectacular element in plebiscitary politics (Urbinati 2014, 183–189; 200–204), unifying a physically present crowd through sensory means is, in fact, a synesthetic enterprise. Peter Sloterdijk’s analysis highlights the acoustic moment of (self-)unification that complements the visual spectacle very well, calling it „sonospheric melding”: „by cheering and screaming [the assembled crowd] transform[s] itself into an acoustic we-phenomenon *sui generis*. [...] The quasi-nation assembled in the circus/stadium experiences itself in an acoustic plebiscite, the direct result of which, the jubilatory noise that rises above everyone’s heads, breaks forth from the assembled qua emanation and returns to the ears of each individually. The autopoiesis of noise approximates the realization of the cliché of the *vox populi*” (2008, 55).”

This description might still be complemented by bringing into play the tactile dimension: soundwaves do not only affect our acoustic sense but also lightly touch our bodies in their entirety (Gumbrecht 2014, Ch. 1). It is such autopoietic sensorial, bodily processes that render plausible Schmitt’s claim that „[there is] no people without acclamations” (Schmitt 1927, 34). Coordination of individual bodies through rhythm (Gumbrecht 2021, 87–92), as well as transitive attention – we might say, the collective gaze – paid to a singular object (Gumbrecht

2021, 78; cf. Collins 2005; Green 2010) also play a part in this melding. While constructivist accounts are indeed right about the constitutive nature of representative claim-making, the cited analyses underscore the importance of non-discursive factors at crowd events in this process: representation in plebiscitary politics is as much unifying crowds as „making constituencies” (Disch 2021).

C) The acclamation of the leader

Up to this point, we were concerned with what Gumbrecht (2021, 62–75) calls the „lateral” dimension of crowds: the relationship between crowd members. However, there is also a „vertical” dimension: the relationship between the leader and the crowd. The former is an indispensable part of the picture because, in a plebiscitary setting, the *vox populi* is always reactive: „The so-called sovereign can never directly speak; however, it can applaud its representatives when they take the stage” (Sloterdijk 2008, 55).

Acclamation of the leader at a crowd ritual is surely not formal authorization in a contemporary electoral regime, but this fact does not at all cancel out its importance. As Schmitt emphasizes, acclamation is independent of any voting process: „Where there are still people somewhere, even as a crowd of spectators at the racecourse, and it expresses signs of political life, it expresses its will by acclamation” (Schmitt 1927, 34). This broad definition renders a wide range of crowd events as potential sites of acclamation. Even the need for „authoritatively formulated” questions by the leader aiming to obtain acclamation arises only when we aim to combine acclamation with the secret ballot (ibid., 36). When Schmitt characterizes acclamations as an „obvious and unchallenged presence” (2000, 16), one might add that „presence” is most obvious as a perceptible *physical* presence. The popular will, shown to be easily manipulable by democratic realism (Achen and Bartels 2017), obtains a peculiar kind of objectivity through the sensorial and bodily aspect of acclamation, i.e., being physically exposed to the popular voice acclaiming the leader.

Naturally, claim-making plays an integral part in the acclamatory logic of crowd events. Leaders may try to claim a quasi-authorization after successfully mobilizing crowds, and certain interactions may very well be described as accepting representative claims (e.g., shouting „aye” or the name of the leader after they make a claim during their speech). But the sensorial elements are indispensable parts of the picture that are intertwined with the discursive ones: following Butler, we might say that there is a chiasmic, back-and-forth relation between linguistic performativity and bodily presence (2015, 9).

D) Stimulating the imagination

Crowd events might also provide non-interpretive mechanisms that help collective identification with broader „imagined communities” (Anderson 2006) by stimulating the imagination of the participants (Gumbrecht 2021, 88–92). This stimulating effect can help bring about the „homogenous, empty time” (Anderson 2006, 24) in which the same community strives for the same goals throughout centuries. In the constructivist idiom, these mechanisms help leaders to make credible „nested” representative claims, i.e., appealing to higher level abstractions (Saward 2010, 90–91), such as the nation, understood as an imagined community which – unlike the people – has historical depth and is connected by „multigenerational memory” (Urbinati 2019, 89).

This stimulation can happen in various ways. Firstly, the overwhelming architectural setting (cf. Sloterdijk 2008) can have a stimulative effect in itself. Secondly, as Gumbrecht argues, rhythm (such as the singing or chanting by the crowd) also has a „conjuring up” effect by placing us into a lower „tension of consciousness” and thereby „turning off” the conscious filtering of the contents of our imagination (2021, 90–92). Applying his argument to the political realm, the singing of well-known patriotic songs (where there is no need for interpretive filtering, and the rhythm becomes at least as important as the text) might make present national heroes and events of the past. Thirdly, atmospheres and moods (the German

original, *Stimmung*, stems from *Stimme*, 'voice') from the past, transmitted through songs, pictures, or literary works, can also contribute to the process: „*Stimmungen* from the past can strike us directly and without mediation, provided that we are open for them. *Stimmungen* are capable of leaping across the boundaries of hermeneutic interpretation. [...] Atmospheres and moods [...] are dispositions and states of being that are not subject to control by the individual they affect” (Gumbrecht 2012b, Ch. 6).

If the notion of atmosphere is understood as a spatial dynamic, an „affective tone of space” (Wall 2021, 665) generated by bodies acting on each other, then gathering at the same place in a similar fashion and being exposed to the same sensorial stimuli might recreate historical atmospheres. These ways of stimulating the imagination might conjure up memories of national history, analogously to Ankersmit’s „historical experience”: a superficial but intense „mutual embrace of past and present” (2005, 156) that is not grounded in the linguistic representation of the past by the speaker, but is primarily triggered by a cityscape and the sensorial aspects of the ritual themselves. This, in turn, might enable a sense of identity: seeing the crowd we are part of as a form of the transhistorical substance of the nation. This way, „presence effects” might once again strengthen the „meaning effects” emphasized by constructivist authors.

E) Presenting physical force

Crowds might have another role in plebiscitary representation, which is connected to the ever-present possibility of violence not denied even by the more optimistic students of crowds. Some literature captures this aspect of plebiscitary politics as „soccer-stadium democracy” (Holmes 1996, 49; Posner and Vermeule 2017, 617) or „hippodrom” (Illés and Körösnéyi 2022), where such sporting venues are associated with ultras and soccer-hooliganism.

Adam Przeworski’s well-known argument (1999, 48) that elections are „flexing muscles,” a kind of simulated civil war, captures very well the fragility of political order and the looming possibility of violence even in a democratic order (not to mention other electoral regimes). But

his central point becomes even more forceful if we substitute the electorate as an aggregate of private individuals with the assembled crowd in a Schmittian manner: it is like substituting a list of possible conscripts with an actual army. This is what the liberal Weber fearfully calls „the democracy of the street” or „the rule of the street” (1994, 125, 231). However, Posner and Vermeule are right to emphasize that „torchlight rallies and thuggish street violence” in a late-Weimar fashion are only the most extreme versions of a general form of politics, where influence on political opponents is exerted „not through persuasion or democratic deliberation but through credible threats of resistance or armed conflict” (2017, 617). Violence does not have to be actualized for a crowd to make an impression on political opponents and supporters – instead, what matters is the leader showing their „ability to occupy spaces with bodies” (Gumbrecht 2012a, 347).

But how do threats of using force fit into plebiscitary representation? Contrary to Weber’s intentions, despite the synecdochal (van de Sande 2020) claims of representing the whole people, there is an inevitable factional remainder in such a setting, identified perceptively by Urbinati (2019, 48). However, instead of locating the root of this factionalism in the antiestablishmentarianism of populism (as Urbinati does), we might rather trace it to the more general political logic described by Schmitt, where manufacturing the homogeneity of the people involves identifying and fighting against the other, the enemy that threatens this unity, with the – we might add: ever-receding – horizon of eradicating heterogeneity (2000, 9). Factionalism is an ineliminable feature of plebiscitary representation, and one dimension to act it out is in the spatial, as a struggle in physical presence. Occupying symbolic spaces and organizing marches with numbers superior to the political rivals might all play a role in this factional rivalry. Here, superiority in numbers, sheer physical presence, and the potential of violence mark the limits of unification.

Crowds in the Orbán regime

In the Hungarian political context, despite important demonstrations, plebiscitary crowd rituals were largely missing up to 2002, with politicians (Viktor Orbán among them) usually holding political speeches in front of selected smaller audiences on national holidays. The watershed was losing the first round of the 2002 parliamentary elections, which led Fidesz to discover the possibilities of street politics. It organized a huge mass rally at Kossuth tér, where the Hungarian parliament building is located. The events between the two election rounds marked a new era for several reasons. Firstly, because of the public debate, whether party-organized crowd events are an acceptable part of democratic politics or dangerous aberrations. Orbán, presumably inspired by aides from Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia*, defended such events as standard elements of democratic politics: „When people get together, many people get scared. If you look at an election march in otherwise highly respected Western countries, they don't usually have a problem. In Italian election rallies, one or two million people come together” (quoted in Rényi 2021, 235). On the other side, former socialist PM Gyula Horn sent an open letter to Viktor Orbán accusing him – echoing the classical fear of mass politics – of „taking politics to the streets, unleashing tempers and fanning them further,” and concluding that „You are playing with fire!” (Horn 2002). Nevertheless, at the next election in 2006, the socialist party held its own mass rally, which illustrates well the plebiscitary direction Hungarian politics took after 2002. Secondly, the event featured elements that later became more pronounced in such rituals, like singing the Kossuth song, a tight-paced recruitment song from the 1848/49 Hungarian freedom fight against the Habsburgs. The song complains about the insufficient number of soldiers, thereby suggesting a parallel between Kossuth's famous recruitment tour in 1848 and Orbán's appeal to his supporters that „Everyone should bring another person” to the second round of the election. Thirdly, a heated „war of numbers” took place after the rally between the two political sides about how many people were present:

estimations varied from some ten thousand (on the side of the opposition) to two million participants (on the side of Fidesz).

The above elements foreshadowed the role of crowds in the Orbán regime, where plebiscitary politics became even more pronounced (Körösenyi, Illés, and Gyulai 2020). In the following, we will analyze three forms of presence rituals. Firstly, political rallies on national holidays (15 March and 23 October) that were transformed into large crowd events and rituals of presence after 2006 (cf. Kiss and Szabó 2015). Secondly, the so-called „Peace marches,” organized by the Civil Union Forum (*Civil Összefogás Fórum*), a Hungarian GONGO in support of the government, in a top-down way and with an identity-building purpose (Metz 2015). Finally, soccer matches of the Hungarian men’s national team, which, even if only indirectly political, carry important representative functions in the Orbán regime.⁶

Rallies

Crowds at state memorials, which have been effectively functioning as Fidesz rallies since the party came back to power in 2010, provide excellent material for re-presenting (with an intended dash in Gumbrecht’s fashion) both the sovereign people and symbolically represent the nation. The crowd’s unification occurs on both the visual and the auditory plane. The abundantly present Hungarian flags convey the picture of a homogenous mass. Additionally, the often present cardboards with settlement names on them (both from present-day Hungary

⁶ Orbán’s quoted speeches and interviews, if not otherwise indicated, were obtained from the following official websites of the Hungarian government: <https://2010-2014.kormany.hu>; <https://2015-2022.miniszterelnok.hu>; and <https://kormany.hu>. The social media material referred to can be found on Orbán’s official Facebook page. Regarding the non-discursive elements, we relied on Hungarian television footages about the events, available in the National Audiovisual Archive.

and the greater historical Hungary), flags of the ethnic Hungarian Székely community in today's Romania, and symbols of Greater Hungary convey on a more abstract level the feeling of „geographical” unification: people from all parts of the historical country are present at the same place. Besides, flags with so-called Árpád stripes associated with the founding dynasty of Hungary, characteristic elements of Hungarian folk costumes often worn by organizers and participants, as well as traditional hussar or parade dress uniforms worn by ceremonial guards contribute to the feeling of „historical” unification: those who are present embody the historical constancy of the nation. Re-presentation of the people by the attending crowd and representation of the transhistorical entity of the nation is woven together in Orbán's claim that „[t]he council of the ancestors, today's fighters and the choir of the future. This is how Hungary is present together today on the Main Square of the Nation” (Orbán-speech, 15 March 2022).

On the auditory plane, unification means primarily synchronization: singing together the national anthem at the beginning of such events, the *Szózat* (Hungary's other national song) at the end, and occasionally the *Székely anthem* or the Kossuth song (for example, directly after Orbán's speeches during the 2021 October and 2023 March events) has such a function. Similarly, common expressions of contempt (e.g., booing at the naming of groups that collaborated with foreign powers ruling Hungary) or shared laughter at the speaker's jokes can also serve this synchronizing function. Additionally, at every 15 March memory, Orbán quotes a passage from Hungarian poet Sándor Petőfi's *National Song* that played an essential part in the 1848 uprising. As the song is taught at every Hungarian elementary school, it is easy for the crowd to join the speaker in reciting the – once again tight-paced – patriotic lines that urge to rebel against oppression.

The remembering function of rhythm is paired with spatial concurrences (Kiss and Szabó 2015, 230). The crowd usually takes the same physical perspective as the revolutionary crowds of 1848 and 1956: the March 15 rallies most often take place before the National Museum,

where, according to tradition at least, the 1848 Revolution had started by Petőfi reciting the *National Song*; the October 23 events mostly at Kossuth square, where some of the most dramatic events of the 1956 uprising played out. These elements of the ritual stimulate the imagination of the attending people and enable Orbán to re-present the „freedom-fighter nation” (Speech by Orbán, 15 March 2017) of Hungary in the form of the assembled crowd. This identity between the freedom fighters of 1848 and 1956 and the crowd of the rally is once again reinforced on the discursive level: „Is it not possible, my dear Friends, that the Hungarian believers in freedom have been fighting the *very same revolution* since 1848?” (Speech by Orbán, 15 March 2014, emphasis added). While oppositional criticism often accuses him of misrepresenting past events and using flat historical analogies, these criticisms – while factually often right – seem to miss the whole point of the ritual: it is not about representing, depicting (*darstellen*) past freedom fights, but making present a freedom fighting community.

These above-mentioned presence- and meaning-effects create a *Stimmung*, an atmosphere of defiance, physically enveloping the crowd and bursting out in spontaneous reactions to the speaker’s claims (e.g., Orbán claimed in the March 2012 event that „we will defend the Constitution,” the crowd responded by chanting repeatedly: „we will defend it!”). Lousy weather conditions might strengthen these atmospheric effects, shaping the *Stimmung* of participants (cf. Gumbrecht 2012b, Ch. 7) by compelling the crowd and the speaker to defy the elements physically. That Orbán did not ask for someone with an umbrella to accompany him in the beginning rain at the 2016 March event might have enhanced his performance of defiance: the materialities of the political theater (the leader physically affected by the weather) reinforced the performance of a political persona in a spectacular way on that occasion. No wonder he later posted his soaking-wet speech manuscript on Facebook with the caption „Relentlessly” (Facebook post, 15 March 2016).

Orbán is, of course, never in complete control of the situation; the synchronization between the leader and the crowd is never perfect: parallel noises with the speech (Kiss and Szabó 2015, 231) or shorter than expected applause do happen. Sometimes, he can't suppress a contented smile when his punchline is met with storming applause (such as at the 2015 March event). However, based on the video recordings of the events, contingencies for the leader seem rather marginal. The crowd is neither autonomous nor seems to hesitate to acclaim the leader. Conforming to the logic of plebiscitary representation, the crowd is almost always reactive in these moments of „sonospheric melding”: creating unity plays out in responding in a unitary voice to the leader's claims. At the same time, Orbán often acts as if crowds were active participants in a deliberative process, discursively summoning a proactive sovereign instead of a merely reactive crowd („It is an old tradition among Hungarians that when the fate of the country takes a turn, we gather, deliberate, and jointly decide how to avoid trouble and which course to take.” – 15 March 2022). Some of the above validatory crowd reactions can be seen as signs of acclamation, such as rhythmic chanting as a response to the speaker. We might even speak of acclamatory interactions, where Orbán incites the crowd by rhetorical means (e.g., by an enumeration) to applaud even before his punchline, which creates the impression that „the crowd is making the speaker say the words that they will greet with their peak of coordinated noise” (Collins 2005, 73). However, the strongest acclamatory element is the crowd rhythmically chanting the name of the leader („Viktor! Viktor!”) before and after (and sometimes also during) Orbán's speeches. While applause is often expected by the speaker (which he signals with a pause), they can be spontaneous, as can the eruptions of the „Viktor! Viktor!” chants.

It is of no coincidence that during the period of large-scale popular unease with the government's public education reform during 2016–2017 (and also at the 2014 March event), disgruntled citizens and opposition parties tried to disrupt specifically this acclamation

mechanism by organizing whistling groups to the memorials. Their non-discursive vocal presence aimed at undermining the unificatory fiction of plebiscitary politics, namely that the people would have a single acclamatory voice. This is a forceful example of how popular presence can influence the process of representation without claim-making or speaking at all. Therefore, it is also of political significance that Orbán and the event security teams did everything to displace these groups: the latter physically, by removing them from the crowd; the former discursively, by identifying them as the outgroup, the heirs of Jacobinism and Hungarian Bolshevism with a gesture at the 2016 March event (with the implied consequence of them being alien to the nation). Physical displacements, besides preventing the outbreak of violence between Fidesz supporters and protesters, also aim to maintain the fiction of popular unity against the plurality of voices. Nevertheless, direct interference in the acclamation mechanism can end up in physical violence committed by Orbán's followers against protesters, causing injuries to the latter (e.g., during the 2015 March and 2016 October events). As Orbán often articulates the ingroup norm to his followers that they personally engage in the political struggle (e.g., „If we want to protect our constitution, our jobs, our pension, our salary and utility cost reduction, that is, if you want to protect the freedom of your daily life, you must personally participate in the struggle.” – 23 October 2013), this type of physical violence can be seen as an extreme form of responding creatively to the leader's demand, a form of „engaged followership” (Haslam et al. 2023). Besides, these acts serve as the demonstration of the physical force presented by the crowd, uncovering the basis of „soccer stadium democracy.”

Orbán's speeches make clear that he understands not only the logic of elections as „simulated civil war” („Opponents no longer smash each other's heads in, but count them. This has brought democracy.” – 15 March 2015), but also the latency of assembled crowds, equating multiplicity with strength and force at the same place. The perceived importance of the size of

crowds – as an echo of the mentioned 2002 debate on the topic – has been haunting Hungarian politics up to now.

„Peace marches”

The so-called „Peace marches” have become one of the basic presence rituals in the Orbán regime since 2012, regularly demonstrating Fidesz’s ability to mobilize crowds physically. These events are officially organized by a Hungarian GONGO (Civil Union Forum) with a systematic attempt to characterize them as the activism of the patriotic pro-government civil society. Emphasizing this intention, Orbán did not hold a speech on two of the early “Peace marches,” explaining that they were mere civil society demonstrations. However, they became more and more openly connected to and controlled by Fidesz and financially supported by the Hungarian government. In fact, most “Peace marches” took place on national holidays right before Fidesz rallies, taking marchers to Orbán’s speeches.

Nearly all “Peace marches” took place in Budapest, an electoral stronghold of opposition parties. Therefore, the transportation of participants from territories where Fidesz has an unquestionable hegemonic position, such as rural areas across the country and parts of neighboring countries inhabited by Hungarian minorities, can be interpreted as a show of force, especially since 2019, when the opposition took back the mayoral position of Budapest. By its sheer spatial presence, the government-friendly crowd „occupies” the capital by marching through it, erasing the boundaries of electoral geography, and – in unison with the logic of plebiscitary representation – „inserting” the capital into a spatially unified, homogenous country.

All this requires careful orchestration on the material plane: transporting the participants’ bodies that will make up the crowd in an organized fashion. The unifying effect of these events starts long before the actual march unfolds. The physical togetherness of participants during these often long, coordinated bus routes contributes to forming a sense of collective identity

and prepares them for the unifying elements of the presence ritual. Oppositional criticism often suggests that most marchers are poor and deceived rural people who, besides being taken to Budapest free of cost, even receive payment for their participation. However, seeing these marches merely as a strange mixture of manipulation and „mass tourism” (Gebauer and Rücker 2019, 176–181) once again runs the risk of eclipsing their crucial importance for plebiscitary representation.

Shortly before the “Peace march” would be launched on a previously announced route, the elements of visual unification similar to those used at rallies are already present. The act of jointly covering a route afoot exerts a unifying effect by itself. In addition to occupying the same places as the revolutionary crowds of 1848 and 1956 (e.g., Kossuth Square, Hungarian National Museum, Andrassy Avenue) surrounded by monumental historic buildings, the identity between past freedom fighters and the crowd of the march is reinforced by cockades often worn by marchers. On the auditory plane, the chanting and singing together of well-known patriotic songs is typical, similar to rallies. However, spontaneous initiation is more prevalent during “Peace marches,” developing better synchronization among participants.

The intention of excluding rivals was most evident in the 2021 October event, when many placards handed out by organizers said „Never again!” and „Stop Gyurcsány!” referring to a former socialist PM of Hungary leading one of the opposition parties. Orbán’s representative claim mirrored the same logic: „We count on all Hungarians who care about Hungary's future. For us, Hungary comes first, so even those who do not vote for us will be better off with our government” (Speech on 23 October 2021). Some cardboard sheets went even further by declaring that „Those who are Hungarians are with us,” both evoking one of the central slogans of the revolution of 1956 and leaving no place for heterogeneity within the people.

Spatial choreography is, of course, also crucial: the routes of the “Peace marches” typically include places (e.g., historical bridges, squares, and avenues of Budapest) which, besides their

symbolic significance, make the sheer size of the crowd, thus the physical force it conveys more perceptible for both marchers and external observers. Hence, it is no coincidence that Orbán frequently posts pictures on social media capturing these demonstrative moments. During the 21 January 2012 event, thousands of torches were handed out to participants after sunset, exerting similar effects. Since the numbers present at “Peace marches” are considered to mirror the strength of the popular support of Orbán by both political sides, after almost all events, a heated “war of numbers” takes place concerning the magnitude of the crowd, usually ranging from less than a hundred thousand participants on the side of the opposition to a million participants on the side of the governing party.

As the mobilization of opposition parties has never managed to outnumber Orbán’s followers on the street since 2010 and the direct encounter of rival crowds is intentionally avoided because of the risk of violence, the mass of the “Peace march” is stabilized by making political rivals visually present. Street-wide banners carried by the organizers and Fidesz politicians in front of the march often serve this purpose. For example, in the 23 October 2013 event, the banner said, “They ruined the country together!” following the names of former left-wing Hungarian PMs. In the same event, some flags premade by organizers accused opposition politicians of misrepresentation, saying, “The nation mourns! It suffers from traitors!” with the portraits of well-known opposition politicians on them. This also supports the eradication of heterogeneity: political rivals are defined as betrayers outside of the nation. In times characterized by weak political opposition and conflicts between the government and international actors, the main messages of the “Peace March” focused on the latter. For example, in the 21 January 2012 event, the central banner had „We will not be a colony!” written on it, referring to the austerity measures required by the EU and the IMF in the early 2010s. However, the most obvious attempt to make political rivals appear as if they were physically present was made at the 23 October 2021 event when the organizers previously

announced that the route of the „Peace march” would proceed along the „route of Gyurcsány’s terror” referring to escalated clashes between right-wing opposition protesters and riot police units under socialist government in 2006 (Hír TV 2021). The remembering function of spatial concurrences was reinforced with large screens along the route, on which video recordings reviving the most dramatic moments of the “police terror” of 2006 were played, and an armored police truck was exhibited, which was said to have been deployed at that time. On the discursive level, parallels between the revolution of 1956, the events of 2006, and the contemporary situation were explicitly drawn by the organizers and Orbán as well. The „Peace march” usually ends with the marchers joining the crowd at the state memorial.

Soccer matches

Although fixtures of the national soccer team are not events where all the features of plebiscitary representation come into play, some characteristics lend them political relevance. Because of its implicitly political nature, this form of presence ritual necessitates a somewhat different, more theoretical treatment than the other two.

Orbán’s infatuation with soccer and his view of his favorite sport as an eminently political issue throughout his career are well-documented in biographical sources (Janke 2015; Rényi 2021). One might argue that for him, there is more than an analogy between soccer, politics, and war: they share an ontology centered on conflict, struggle, the overcoming of obstacles, and defeating opponents (or enemies). For him, soccer, and sports in general, are important both as a community-building practice („The greatest thing about sport is that in the sport we always speak in the plural first person, there is ’we.’” – interview with Orbán, 24 June 2016) and a symbolic arena where political enmity can be played out, the „best way to measure the competitiveness and performance of nations” (Ballai and Szöllősi 2020).

But how can soccer matches be connected to presence and plebiscitary representation? Naturally, not all elements elaborated in the theoretical part are relevant here: the leader is not

on stage and, therefore, cannot be acclaimed by the crowd. However, at least five features render such occasions relevant for our purposes.

Firstly, soccer matches have a unique role in unification. The forms of the latter analyzed earlier are all present here, such as common chanting, holding up supporter's scarfs during the national anthem, or during „*Nélküled*,” a slow and melancholic song by a right-wing rock band about the unity of all Hungarians beyond borders.⁷ At the same time, such events are the closest to the archetype of presence rituals: here, there are no speeches to interpret (as at rallies), spectators watch a series of bodily movements instead, and the simplicity of chants testifies to the primacy of rhythm and synchronization over meaning. As a Hungarian philosopher critical of the government insightfully remarked, this „contentless feeling of national unity” connected to soccer matches is a perfect match for Orbán's politics (Tamás 2016). It is because the latter is based on plebiscitary representation that envisions a homogenous community. Because of this marginal role of political content and meaning, national team matches might tap into a unificatory potential unreachable even for rallies. According to Gumbrecht, such events bring about a „communal body” where „spectators who have never met before, [...] feel comfortable embracing each other and it is this communal body that likes to become the movement of »the wave.« Seeing itself perform such a movement and listening to the noise that it can produce at certain moments of the game provides a self-awareness that adds cohesion to the spectators' body.” (Gumbrecht 2014, Ch. 4; cf. Collins 2005, 55–57).

Secondly, the physical presence of the external „enemy” (in the form of fans of another national team) fosters this unification by contributing to the process of intensity, „trigger[ing] a paradoxical simultaneity of aggressive impulses along with the desire to withdraw into our

⁷ The song was originally used at the matches of Slovakian soccer club DAC, that is mainly supported by ethnic Hungarians living in Slovakia.

own collective body, both of which strengthen the impression of homogeneity within each group” (Gumbrecht 2021, 84). At this point, once again, Gumbrecht’s ideas may help us think further about a Schmittian point and thereby shed light on the connection between soccer games and plebiscitary representation. For Schmitt, the intensity criterion of friend and enemy is not tied to a particular social sphere, which means it can take up any content (Schmitt 2007, 26) – and Orbán’s politics makes use of this fact by flexibly switching enemies from whom his leadership needs to defend the country again and again (Körösényi, Illés, and Gyulai 2020, 55–61; Palonen 2018). Gumbrecht shows the material bases of intensity, connecting it to the „empty, physical elation” experienced at soccer matches, of which the mentioned aggressive impulses towards the opposing crowd are ineradicable features. At the same time, he argues that elation and intensity are „mostly devoid of content” (2021, 83). Therefore, soccer matches are relevant for our purposes because they make visible a central element of plebiscitary representation in Hungary: the logic of intensity, where unification against an enemy plays a crucial part, and the specific content is of secondary importance.

Thirdly, the interaction of presence- and meaning-effects needs to be considered. Although there are no political speeches at a game, claims are made in connection to them. Orbán goes to exceptionally great lengths in playing into each other the spectators’ homogenous „communal body” and the nation: „We, Hungarians,” he comments in a characteristic manner, in the first person plural, on a picture of the national stadium filled with spectators (Facebook post, 19 June 2021). This again shows that the stadium crowd embodies the ideal of plebiscitary representation envisioned by Orbán: a homogenous collective body united against an external opponent. The symbolic gestures of posing with a supporters’ scarf depicting historical greater Hungary (and causing great diplomatic outrage – Facebook post, 21 November 2022) or with a Hungarian banner that has „Felvidék” (a historical Hungarian region that is today’s Slovakia) written on it (Facebook post, 14 June 2016), are both efforts aiming at this goal.

Additionally, acts on the pitch might occasionally have explicit political meaning. A vivid example is the match of the Hungarian team against Ireland in June 2021, where the Irish players were kneeling before kick-off as a symbolic gesture against racism and exclusion – and were hissed and booed by Hungarian ultras (the Hungarian team did not kneel). The events provided a perfect opportunity for Orbán to formulate some claims about Hungarian identity afterward, stating that kneeling before a match is „culturally alien” to Hungary: „A Hungarian man kneels in three cases: before God, before his country and before his love” (Facebook post, 10 June 2021).

Fourthly, soccer matches reveal how plebiscitary representation takes advantage of presence rituals to eradicate political heterogeneity. Soccer matches go hand in hand with the visual and physical distinction between friend and enemy, not only on the soccer field but also on the tribunes. Although the appearance of opposition politicians among Hungarian fans may reinforce national unification, it undermines Orbán’s opportunity to utilize these events politically. Therefore, government-friendly media and social media influencers often question political rivals’ support for the national team or allege they are rooting against it. Further conclusions are often drawn that opposition politicians are generally disloyal to the nation, accusing them of misrepresentation (e.g., their alleged support for the Romanian national soccer team demonstrates that they represent Romanian interests).

Fifthly, we might also use the role of soccer matches to give more apparent contours to a distinction *within* plebiscitary representation. Soccer matches can not only complement the unificatory logic of rallies but can also function as supplements for political eventfulness. As we already saw, only the Weberian variant of plebiscitary politics embraces contingency and eventfulness in the form of political struggles with unpredictable outcomes. In the Schmittian one, popular demands for such eventfulness (the latter part of Juvenal’s „*panem et circenses*” – Green 2016) must be provided satisfaction elsewhere. Professional sports, in general, and

soccer, in particular, might fill this gap. In the Orbán regime, where the governing party has a hegemonic position, and the prime minister aims at minimizing political contingency by fending off demands for an electoral debate since 2006, by not giving interviews to critical Hungarian media outlets, and by answering the questions of critical media outlets only on rare occasions, this potential of soccer matches is especially useful to still popular demands for eventfulness. All this has profound consequences for representation if we look at it from the event perspective (Saward 2010, 39–43): the most important events in such a setting are not debates where politicians contest each other's representative claims face to face but rather presence rituals, collective epiphanies where a homogenous political community is celebrated.

Conclusion

The presented argument has a threefold relevance. The most specific is for understanding Hungarian politics. While referencing the Schmittian credentials of Orbán's politics has become commonplace both in academic and intellectual discourse, exploring the material-bodily dimension of the Schmittian variant of plebiscitary representation can expand our understanding of the Orbán regime in important respects. It can help us grasp how events that grant intense bodily experiences might aid the Schmittian political logic of intense friend-enemy relations that the regime employs on the level of discursive constructions (cf. Körösenyi, Illés and Gyulai 2020, 45–61). The „contentless feeling of unity” experienced on the sensory-bodily level against a physically present opponent at a soccer match of a national team is, in this sense, the paradigm of plebiscitary representation – an important qualification for those approaches that aim at unearthing the regime's ideology (cf. Enyedi 2023).

Secondly, these findings about the functioning of the Orbán regime might also have broader international applicability because he more recently became a poster boy of the alt-right on both sides of the Atlantic. Our focus on the role of crowd events fits well with the recent scholarly attention to the anatomy of Trump rallies (Haslam et al. 2023; Reicher and

Haslam 2017). Their social psychological focus on collective identity formation – an element towards which we have only gestured in this article – and the phenomenological approach centering on sensory-bodily elements might complement each other in analyzing crowd events of populist politicians. The same is true for those approaches that analyze presence rituals with an emphasis on emotional processes (Collins 2005; Wall 2021), another aspect treated only *en passant* in this text.

Thirdly, we believe that the analysis also has a broader theoretical relevance for the constructivist approach to political representation. By describing some sensorial-bodily processes of crowd-formation that ground a certain form of representation, it contributed to theory-building regarding a problem that, up to date, has got relatively scarce attention: a logic that parallels and complements those of representative claim-making and the meaning-making aspect of performances. This does not mean that we have to take the populist-plebiscitary concept of the people as more than a *fictio iuris* at face value – only that to get a fuller understanding of the constitutive nature of the representative process in at least some settings, we should take into account the dimension of re-presentation described by Gumbrecht. Therefore, Saward’s eloquent claim that materiality implies „existence, not essential character” (2020, 13) seems only partially accurate to us, as some material (bodily, sensorial) processes might play a crucial role in constituting a constituency.

Put differently: the way to take, we believe, is not the (supposedly) Derridean one of making material realities vanish from the theory of constructivist representation, claiming that „the distinction between discursive and extra-discursive is superfluous” (Decreus 2013, 39; cf. Thomassen 2019, 165–170), or that „materiality is discursively constituted” (Disch in Schaap et al. 2012, 27; see also Thompson in Schaap et al. 2012); but instead the Gumbrechtian one granting them a more thoroughly circumscribed place in the theory. While we only analyzed

plebiscitary representation in this article, we hope our findings might direct further attention by constructivist authors to such processes operating in other forms of representation.

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