



Crowds and plebiscitary representation: Rituals of presence in the Orbán regime

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Abstract

The article aims to characterise the role of crowd events in plebiscitary representation, complementing the original Weberian–Schmittian characterisation with Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht's notions of crowd and presence ritual. In addition, it shows the relevance of the theoretical argument by analysing 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. First, it contributes to understanding Orbán's domestic successes by emphasising a hitherto underappreciated aspect of his politics. Second, focusing on presence rituals' bodily and sensory elements complements existing research on populist rallies. Third, it contributes to constructivist approaches to representation and the evolving interdisciplinary field of performative representation by highlighting, following Gumbrecht, the role oscillations between 'presence-effects' (sensorial-bodily processes) and 'meaning-effects' (claim-making and the use of symbols) play in the process of making constituencies.

Keywords

constructivism, Hungarian politics, interdisciplinary, performance, plebiscitarianism, populism, representation, Viktor Orbán

Introduction

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Facebook cover photo condenses some of the most significant changes in political representation in recent decades. The image shows the Prime Minister 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 mediated and

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personalised 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. In addition, pluralistic interests in society are mediated by 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 Kőrösenyi, 2022, 2023; Urbinati, 2014). In this representative setting, electoral competition and authorisation 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-a-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. In addition, 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 (compare 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 marginalisation of the concepts of ‘crowd’ and ‘mass’ within the social sciences in the last decades (Borch, 2012) and might have various reasons. First, 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 twentieth-century totalitarian mass events might add to this aversion. Second, 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 marginalisation of the concept of crowds. Third – and this points towards the broader theoretical relevance of the article for contemporary theorising about representation – the ‘discursive bias’ (Brito Vieira, 2020) of contemporary constructivist theories should be mentioned. While focusing on ‘representative claims’ (Saward, 2010; Severs, 2012) opened up new theoretical avenues for theorising representation, it risks eclipsing the role of physical presence in the representative process. Recent theorising about non-linguistic performativity (Ostiguy et al., 2021; Saward, 2017, 2020) and interdisciplinary approaches

that connect political science to performance studies (Peetz, 2023; Petrović-Lotina, 2021a; Petrović-Lotina and Aiolfi, 2023; Rai et al., 2021; Rai and Reinelt, 2015) have done much to resolve this bias. Our aim is to contribute to this evolving interdisciplinary field by using Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht's thoughts as an analytical lens through which we can understand hitherto underappreciated features of plebiscitary representation.

More specifically, we want to clarify how populist politicians might use sensorial-bodily processes at crowd events 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 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. Such an explicit focus on oscillation is an analytical contribution to the Austinian and Butlerian views of performance usually endorsed in the literature (Fischer-Lichte, 2008: 36).

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 et al., 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

The notion of plebiscitary representation (Illés and Körösényi, 2022, 2023; Körösényi, 2005; Pakulski and Körösényi, 2012)³ is conceptually related to those of 'plebeianism' (Green, 2016) or 'plebeian politics' (Vergara, 2020), and shares with them the idea that a fundamental distinction of democratic politics is between the ruling few and the ruled many. However, its primary focus is not on the plebs itself but the institution of the plebiscite, which it sees – following Weber – as a useful analogy in characterising a modern, leader-centred representative setting. While we, similarly to the theorists of plebeian politics, think that such a setting is not *necessarily* anti-pluralist and totalising (Vergara, 2020), our focus here is on the anti-pluralist Schmittian variant, as it seems most promising in understanding the politics of the Orbán regime. We shall confine our discussion to the essential elements, proceeding from Weber to Schmitt and then from Schmitt to Gumbrecht.

When Weber (2019: 406–407) speaks about 'leader democracy', an amalgam of rational-legal and charismatic rule, he emphasises that 'the leader feels legitimated as a representative of the masses, and is recognised 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'. Two points need mentioning here: first, the relationship between the masses and the 'sovereign people' remains unexplained. Second, the plebiscite, as a

means, serves the aim of directly authorising the leader-representative to act in the name of the people, and the latter 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 (1994: 305) emphasised the formative role of leadership (the 'dictatorship' of the masses demands a 'dictator'), 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 authorisation, 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 authorisation 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' (Weber, 1994: 125) and saw parliament as an important constraint on mass politics (Selinger, 2019: 196–203). Contrary to him, Schmitt replaced individual judgement 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 (2008: 275) 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 'Public opinion is the modern type of acclamation'. 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 in this way (Davies, 2020).

However, one might argue that something is lost in such mediated and virtualised acclamations, namely, how intensely we are affected on the bodily level (compare Collins, 2005: 53–66). Nadia Urbinati (2014: 289, 225) 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'. 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 radicalised 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' (Gumbrecht, 2012a: 297). He refers to such things as the 'exteriority of language' (Gumbrecht, 2012a: 178) or the 'non-hermeneutical' (Gumbrecht, 2012a: 191), which 'contribute something to meaning without being meaning themselves' (Gumbrecht, 2012a: 183). Interest in these things is intimately connected with the focus on sense-perception, ways in which we relate to things of the world that involve no conceptual mediation. He analyses various phenomena under the rubric of presence, for example, how rhythms at a football or soccer match can stimulate our imagination without being filtered through interpretation (Gumbrecht, 2012a: 261–290, 2021: 87–92), how the prosody of texts can trigger specific moods (*Stimmungen*) that affect our bodies (Gumbrecht, 2012b); or how individual concentration on bodily movements can create an intense experience of the self (Gumbrecht, 2021: 79).

Gumbrecht's emphasis on presence and crowds can help us contribute to the literature in at least three respects. First, it can give us a vantage point to reinterpret key concepts connected to plebiscitary representation. The Schmittian notion of acclamation is a case in point: it is possible to argue for the distinctiveness of its original form following Gumbrecht. The presence perspective can also shed light on the role sensorial processes play in bringing about the allegedly homogeneous entity of 'the people'. Similarly, the Schmittian (2007: 26) claim that the friend-enemy distinction, constitutive of this alleged homogeneity, is a criterion that 'denotes the utmost degree of intensity of a union or separation, of an association or dissociation', 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.

Second, Gumbrecht's thoughts also resonate with the discursive-performative approach to populism, which is centred around the question of 'how are the people constructed?' (Moffitt, 2020; Ostiguy et al., 2021). For the originator of the approach, Ernesto Laclau (2005), this happens by way of a discursive articulation, by unifying diverse popular demands around an empty signifier and the *plebs* hegemonically claiming to be the *populus*. More recently, the stylistic-performative approach (Casullo, 2019, 2021; Moffitt, 2016; Ostiguy, 2017; Petrović-Lotina and Aiolfi, 2023) did much to correct Laclau's discursive monism and theorise embodiment, for example by emphasising the 'fleshiness' of the leader-representative, that there is a part of the 'materiality of the signifier that resists conceptual absorption' (Ostiguy and Moffitt, 2021: 56–59); by uncovering the role of the leader's body (their clothing, manners, and stagecraft) in populist performances (Casullo, 2021; Diehl, 2017; compare also Peetz, 2021, 2023); or by resolutely distinguishing between form (style) and content while also highlighting their interdependence (Aiolfi, 2022, 2023). This analytical focus on duality and interaction (compare Stavrakakis, 2007: 87–104) can be further enriched by the Gumbrechtian idea of oscillation between presence and meaning. At the same time, the latter can complement the focus on the populist leader's body with a conceptualisation of the sensory-bodily processes of crowd-formation and thereby contribute to realising the full potential of this approach.

Third, 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). 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. However, the approach might be criticised for suffering from a 'discursive bias' (Brito Vieira, 2020). Saward's (2010: 36–38) concept of the 'referent' of

representative claims seemed to gesture towards bodily reality and physical presence, shielding his account from idealism – but it also earned charges – inspired by Derrida's philosophy – that the concept would introduce into his theory an essence outside the representative process, thereby undermining his constructivist credentials (Decreus, 2013; Thomassen, 2019: 165–170). This resulted in him introducing the concept of 'referent-effect', which moves the emphasis from the physical-material nature of the referent towards it being the result of prior representations (Saward, 2020: 13). However, from a Gumbrechtian perspective, the appropriate move is not to tone down the role attributed to physical presence and materiality (the 'exteriority of language') but to see them instead as dynamic elements that contribute to the constitutive process of making constituencies, to acknowledge the role bodily processes play at crowd events (Wall, 2021a: 665). This might enable us to see the materiality of the political theatre (compare Fischer-Lichte, 2005: 24) from a different angle than existing performative approaches provide us with (see, e.g., Petrović-Lotina, 2021a: 69–70; Rai, 2015a: 153–154; 2015b: 1181–1182). As our references indicate, this should be done in an interdisciplinary manner, a move Saward (2017) has already initiated by his notion of 'performative representation'.

We claim that Gumbrecht's notions of presence and crowds can contribute to theorising in the three ways delineated above: 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 (2012a: 218) 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'). In his example, the ritual of medieval Eucharist, Christ's body and blood became materially present and perceptible through the wine and blood. Translated to our case: in plebiscitary politics, besides representing the people in a symbolic (Pitkin, 1967) or synecdochal (Casullo, 2021) way and making representative claims that constitute a popular identity, re-presenting it by organising 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).

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; oscillation can mean *resonance*: 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 discursive or symbolic meaning. The result would be a modified constructivism, where there *is* something outside meaning-making that constitutes constituencies (*pace* Decreus, 2013; Thomassen, 2019), but this something is not static 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 analyse plebiscitary representation.

Making the sovereign perceptible

One crucial problem plebiscitary representation faces is that while sovereignty has an inescapable aesthetic component (i.e., it is tied to certain appearances and modes of perception – Wall and Matthews, 2024), the abstraction of ‘the people’ presents us with an imperceptible sovereign. Lefort’s (1988) well-known argument 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. While it is plausible to argue that many populist leaders aim to fill this void through symbolic means, plebiscitary representation is also about making present the people 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). As Nadia Urbinati (2019: 104) perceptively argues, 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’. It is at this point where Gumbrecht’s (2012a: 218–219) argument can bring us a step further: the people in plebiscitary representation is not a fictional entity but something substantive, not primarily in the sense that it would be glued together by religious, national, or moral similarities, but in the sense that substances cannot exist without re-presentation, they need a form to be perceptible. Therefore, organising 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, where ‘the 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). Such crowds function as ‘political technology for staging the people’ (Wall, 2021b: 135) or as ‘cyphers for popular sovereignty’ (Wall and Matthews, 2024). That every popular gathering can only be partial, that is, an approximation of the whole population, 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 (2008: 303–307), 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.

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 (compare Casullo, 2021; Saward, 2017); creating the conditions of re-presenting the people also requires careful orchestration, from organising an event to building appropriate architecture to support it (Sloterdijk, 2008). Urbinati’s (2014: 180) claim that in plebiscitary politics, masses are the ‘unshaped matter the leader put [their] mark [on]’ is not only valid in a figurative way (popular will formed by demagogy) but also in a literal sense.

Unification through sensorial means

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 about unity and homogeneity, sensory manipulation can also play a crucial role in rituals of presence

(compare Borch, 2015). Undoubtedly, one can detect here the metaphysical component underlying the Schmittian variant of plebiscitarianism because complete homogeneity is never an empirical reality but rather a non-attainable political horizon. In Laclauian terms, the effect of ‘chains of equivalence’ is always limited by the ‘logic of difference’, carrying the potential for disruption; discursive articulations of a popular identity always remain in tension with ‘social heterogeneity’ (Laclau, 2005: Ch. 5). The same is true for presence events: contrary to Le Bon’s classical view, a crowd is never homogeneous affectively, but rather an assemblage that is affectively ‘patterned’, enabling the existence of ‘micro-atmospheres’ within itself (Wall, 2021b: 119–124, 144).⁴ Individuals may also feel different levels of unity and empowerment, as social psychological accounts of crowds have shown (Drury and Reicher, 1999). The Schmittian view is helpful here as an ideal type, which, on the one hand, makes it possible to differentiate between degrees of homogenisation in empirical cases: the acclaiming crowd of a plebiscitary rally obviously presents us with a greater degree of homogenisation than a cacophony of diverse groups protesting together (compare Young, 2023: 148–149), or members of a plural popular assembly speaking at cross-purposes (Butler, 2015: 156–157). On the other hand, it also shows that the political horizon of plebiscitary politics (the unity and homogeneity of the sovereign people) is entirely different from the latter two examples.

Sensorial techniques are arguably among the most potent ways of producing the feeling of unity and homogeneity. While it is surely right to emphasise 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 (Wall and Matthews, 2024: 8) that brings into being a ‘sensory assemblage’ (Young and Popovski, 2024). Peter Sloterdijk’s (2008: 55) analysis highlights the acoustic moment of (self-)unification that complements the visual spectacle very well, calling it ‘sonospheric melding’:

[B]y 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*.

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 (1927: 34) claim that ‘[there is] no people without acclamations’. 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; compare Collins, 2005; Green, 2010) also play a part in this melding. In plebiscitary representation, unifying crowds with sensorial means is just as indispensable in ‘making constituencies’ (Disch, 2021) as representative claim-making.

The acclamation of the leader

The leader is an indispensable part of plebiscitary presence rituals because, in this 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). A plebiscitary presence ritual might be seen as a ‘vertical choreography’ (Petrović-Lotina, 2021a, 2021b),

but of a peculiar kind: one not growing out of the horizontality of different demands but coming into being in a top-down manner and aiming to veil social heterogeneity.

Acclamation of the leader at a crowd ritual is surely not formal authorisation in a contemporary electoral regime, but this fact does not at all cancel out its importance. As Schmitt (1927: 34) emphasises, acclamation is independent of any voting process: when the people 'is really gathered somewhere, even as a crowd of spectators at the racecourse, and it expresses signs of political life, it expresses its will by acclamation'. 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 seek to combine acclamation with the secret ballot (Schmitt, 1927: 36). When Schmitt (2000: 16) characterises acclamations as an 'obvious and unchallenged presence', 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, that is, 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-authorisation after successfully mobilising 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). However, the sensorial elements are indispensable parts of the picture that are intertwined with the discursive ones.

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). In our case, the 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, that is, 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).

Our point is that presence (a sensorial-spatial relationship with other participants and material surroundings) plays a crucial part in this stimulation, in bringing about the feeling of historical connection. This can happen in various ways. First, the overwhelming architectural setting (compare Sloterdijk, 2008) can have a stimulative effect in itself. Second, as Gumbrecht (2021: 90–92) 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. Applying his argument to the political realm, the singing of well-known patriotic songs (where the rhythm becomes at least as important as the text) might make present national heroes and events of the past. Third, atmospheres and moods (the German original, *Stimmung*, stems from *Stimme*, 'voice') might 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).

Understood as a spatial-affective dynamic, an ‘affective tone of space’ (Wall, 2021a: 665), generated by places and bodies acting on each other, atmospheres can be seen as a field where the oscillation between presence and sense-perception on the one hand, and discursive meaning-making on the other, plays out (compare Fischer-Lichte, 2008: 98–100, 153). Atmospheres are grounded in presence (sense-perception, the materiality of the setting) and can only resonate with specific sorts of discursive meaning: they do not compel us to act or interpret events in a certain way but still shape the range of possible interpretations and actions (Solomon, 2023: 583, 587).

Gathering at the same place in a similar fashion and being exposed to similar sensorial stimuli might make the participants feel that they are recreating historical atmospheres. These ways of stimulating the imagination might conjure up memories of national history, analogously to Ankersmit’s (2005: 156) ‘historical experience’: a superficial but intense ‘mutual embrace of past and present’ 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 as a form of the transhistorical substance of the nation, the ‘people-as-ethnos’ (Vergara, 2020). Put differently, rituals of presence materialise a political community and produce affectively charged abstractions at the same time (Solomon, 2023: 578).

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. Adam Przeworski’s (1999: 48) well-known argument that elections are ‘flexing muscles’, a kind of simulated civil war, 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 (1994: 125, 231) fearfully calls ‘the democracy of the street’ or ‘the rule of the street’. However, Posner and Vermeule (2017: 617) are right to emphasise 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’. Violence does not have to be actualised 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 (2000: 9), where manufacturing the (alleged) 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. One dimension to act out factionalism is the spatial, as a struggle in physical presence. Occupying symbolic spaces and organising marches with numbers superior to political rivals might all play a role in this 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 from the 1990 democratic transition 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 organised a vast 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. First, because of the public debate, whether party-organised 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 Prime Minister Gyula Horn (2002) 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!'. 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. Second, the event featured elements that later became more pronounced in such rituals, like singing the Kossuth song, a tight-paced recruitment song from the 1848/1849 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. Third, 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 (Körösényi et al., 2020). In the following, we will analyse three forms of presence rituals. First, political rallies on national holidays (15 March and 23 October) that were transformed into large crowd events and rituals of presence after 2006 (compare Kiss and Szabó, 2015). Second, the so-called 'Peace marches', organised by the Civil Union Forum (*Civil Összefogás Fórum*), a Hungarian GONGO, 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.⁵

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 homogeneous mass. In addition, the often present cardboards with settlement names on them (both from present-day Hungary 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 organisers 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-presenting the people by the attending crowd and representing 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 synchronisation: 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 (e.g., 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 synchronising function. In addition, 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 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 (compare 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 theatre (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 synchronisation 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, acting reactively 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 they *make* him say the words (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 organising 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 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 a demonstration of the physical force presented by the crowd.

Orbán's speeches make clear that he understands not only the logic of elections as a '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 mobilise crowds physically. These events are officially organised by a Hungarian GONGO (Civil Union Forum) with a systematic attempt to characterise them as the activism of the patriotic pro-government civil society. Emphasising this intention, Orbán did not hold a speech on two of the early 'Peace marches', explaining that they were mere civil society demonstrations. However, these events have become more and more openly connected to and controlled by Fidesz and financially supported by the Hungarian government. Most 'Peace marches' were scheduled for national holidays right before Fidesz rallies, taking marchers to Orbán's speeches.

The marches usually take place in Budapest, an electoral stronghold of opposition parties. Therefore, the transportation of participants from territories where Fidesz maintains an unquestionable hegemonic position, such as rural areas and parts of neighbouring countries with significant Hungarian minorities, can be interpreted as a demonstration of power. This tactic has become particularly salient since 2019, when the opposition regained the mayoral position of Budapest. By its sheer spatial presence, the government-friendly crowd symbolically 'occupies' the capital by marching through it, dissolving the boundaries of electoral geography, and – in unison with the logic of plebiscitary representation – 'inserting' the capital into a spatially unified, homogeneous country.

This effort demands careful orchestration on the material plane: the transportation of participants' bodies that will constitute the crowd needs to be organised. The unifying effect of these events begins long before the actual march unfolds. The collective experience of often long, coordinated bus journeys contributes to the shared sense of identity and prepares participants for the unifying elements of the ritual. Oppositional criticism frequently argues that most marchers are poor and misled rural people who, besides being taken to Budapest at no cost, are even paid to participate. However, downplaying these marches merely as a strange mixture of manipulation and 'mass tourism' (compare Gebauer and Rücker, 2019: 176–181) once again risks overlooking their critical role in plebiscitary representation.

Shortly before the 'Peace march' is launched on its pre-announced route, the elements of visual unification, similar to those used at rallies, are already present. The collective act of walking the route exerts a unifying effect by itself. By 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 crowd evokes a sense of continuity with past freedom fighters. This connection is further reinforced by cockades often worn by marchers. On the auditory plane, chanting and the singing of patriotic songs are typical, similar to rallies. However, spontaneous initiation is more prevalent during 'Peace marches', developing greater synchronisation among participants.

The intention of excluding rivals was most evident during the 2021 October event, when placards handed out by organisers said 'Never again!' and 'Stop Gyurcsány!', referring to a former socialist prime minister and opposition figure. The representative claims in Orbán's speech mirrored this 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', echoing a key slogan of the 1956 revolution and leaving no place for heterogeneity within the people.

Spatial choreography is 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 clearly perceptible for both marchers and external observers. During the 21 January 2012 event, thousands of torches were handed out to participants after sunset, exerting similar effects. Hence, it is no coincidence that Orbán frequently posts pictures on social media capturing these moments. Since the crowd size is widely interpreted as a measure of Orbán's popular support, a heated 'war of numbers' takes place after these events, with opposition estimates typically falling below a hundred thousand participants, while Fidesz claims figures reaching up to a million.

As the mobilisation of opposition parties never managed to outnumber Orbán's followers on the street until 2024, and the direct encounter of rival crowds is intentionally avoided because of the risk of violence, the mass of the 'Peace march' is stabilised by making political rivals visually present. Street-wide banners carried by the organisers 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 prime ministers. In the same event, flags premade by organisers 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 reinforces the eradication of heterogeneity: political rivals are defined as betrayers outside of the nation. In times characterised by weak political opposition and conflicts between the government and international actors, messages focused on the latter. For example, in the 21 January 2012 event, the central banner proclaimed, 'We will not be a colony!', referring to 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 organisers previously announced that the route of the march would proceed along the 'route of Gyurcsány's terror' referring to escalated clashes between right-wing opposition protesters and riot police units under the socialist-liberal government in 2006 (Hír, 2021). The remembering function of spatial concurrences was reinforced with large screens along the route, on which video recordings were played, reviving dramatic moments of the police brutalities of 2006, and an armoured police truck was exhibited, which was said to have been deployed at the time. On the discursive level, Orbán drew parallels between the revolution of 1956, the events of 2006, and the contemporary climate.

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 favourite 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 centred 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 Szöllösi, 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.

First, soccer matches have a unique role in unification. The forms of the latter analysed 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. 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 synchronisation over meaning. As a Hungarian philosopher who was 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 homogeneous community. Because of this marginal role of party political content, national team matches might tap into an unificatory potential that is unreachable even for rallies. According to Gumbrecht (2014: Ch. 4), such events bring about a ‘communal body’ where

spectators who have never met before, [. . .] feel comfortable embracing each other [. . .] 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 (compare Collins, 2005: 55–57).

Second, 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 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 (2007: 26), the intensity criterion of friend and enemy is not tied to a particular social sphere, which means it can take up any content – 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 et al., 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’ (Gumbrecht, 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.

Third, 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’ homogeneous ‘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 seemingly homogeneous 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.

In addition, 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 afterwards, 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).

Fourth, soccer matches reveal how plebiscitary representation takes advantage of presence rituals to eradicate political heterogeneity. Although the appearance of opposition politicians among Hungarian fans may reinforce national unification, it undermines Orbán's opportunity to utilise 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: 26) 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 minimising 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: 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 or collective epiphanies, where a homogeneous political community is celebrated.

Conclusion

The presented argument has a threefold relevance. The most specific is connected to 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 (compare Körösenyi et al., 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 (compare Enyedi, 2024). In addition, if our argument about the importance of presence rituals in plebiscitary representation is sound, then the successful 2024 mobilisations of Hungary’s new opposition leader, Péter Magyar, leading to crowd events with attendance comparable to Fidesz-rituals at the least, might present a crucial challenge to the Orbán regime.

Second, 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). At the same time, the latter’s social psychological focus points to the limitations of our findings and possible interdisciplinary synergies. While the ‘elaborated social identity model’ (Drury and Reicher, 2000, 2009; Reicher, 1996) and connected methodological choices could complement our argument in clarifying the role changing self-categorisations and intergroup interactions play in enhancing crowd homogeneity, the rather phenomenological approach we used might bring a more fine-grained analysis of sensory-bodily processes to the table.

Third, although our analysis was limited to a specific representative setting, it might have broader theoretical relevance for constructivist approaches to political representation. By highlighting how sensorial-bodily processes of crowd-formation interact with discursive and symbolic meaning-making in an oscillating manner, our article provided a perspective on constituency-making that sees the process as an interaction between two factors (as per Gumbrecht: between presence effects and meaning effects). Such a view can be contrasted with 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; compare 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), and contrary to them, proposes to grant them a more thoroughly circumscribed place in the theory. Naturally, the nature of this oscillating relationship and the role of affects (Knops, 2022) and atmospheres in the process would need further theoretical reflection, to which Fischer-Lichte’s (2008) work on the materiality of theatre could provide an appropriate starting point. Such a reflection should also take stock of the criticism directed against her theory because of its subjectivistic tendencies (Petrović-Lotina, 2021a: 110–115), thereby contributing to the evolving interdisciplinary dialogue between performance studies and political science.

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Notes

1. An important exception is Urbinati (2014: 171–241).
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, e.g., Butler, 2015; Solomon, 2023).
3. While Jeffrey Green's (2010) monograph is arguably the most important recent reconceptualisation of plebiscitarianism, unfortunately, it completely discards the notion of representation.
4. At his point, it is also worth noting that uncovering these aspects of the crowd events in the Orbán regime would require a different, ethnographic methodology (see, e.g., Young and Popovski, 2024).
5. 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 footage about the events, available in the National Audiovisual Archive.

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