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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Deep culture, deep Kurultáj: Turanism, muscular nationalism, and heritage nostalgia in Hungary

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ABSTRACT

The Kurultáj is a biannual Central Asian cultural festival that takes place in central Hungary. Rooted in the Turanism movement, which ethnically and historically links Hungarian culture to the ancient nomadic warriors of the Central Asian steppe, the Kurultáj is part cultural festival, part countercultural movement, and part populist political performance. This festival, along with Turanist ideology, was co-opted within Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's anti-European rhetoric, Eastern Opening policy, and broader heritage populism. Turanism relies on heritage nostalgia, which is also crucial to revisionist populist discourse, making it ideal fodder for a Hungary in the midst of an identity crisis. With myriad traditional games and physical practices – including horse wrestling, bull-whipping demonstrations, and invented martial arts, among other eccentricities – the Kurultáj, hailed as the pinnacle exhibition of Turanism, is both ethnonationalism and heritage nostalgia on display. Using Clifford Geertz's (1972) interpretation of 'deep play' as a framework for understanding cultures, we examine how Turanist physical culture and heritage nostalgia is used within Orbán's strongman politics to influence the Turul generation, a disaffected cohort of 'deep Hungarians' grasping for a sense of identity and national pride within the disorder of globalisation, modernisation, and European integration.

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In the first days of August 2024, we - two Hungarian émigré sport scholars – arrived in Bugac, a *puszta* (grassland/desert) town of some 3,000 inhabitants, under a sky heavy with heat and dust.¹ For Tom Fabian, whose Hungarian parents had emigrated to Canada before his birth, this was an ancestral homeland seen at arm's length. For Győző Molnár, who left Hungary decades earlier for doctoral studies in the United Kingdom, it was a return of sorts – though not a homecoming. Our purpose was to observe a festival that promised a spectacle of Central Asian-inflected traditions, part of a broader ethno-nationalist project of cultural celebration. Bugac felt self-contained, almost sealed off. Upon arrival, we became aware of our own presence as a disruption – professionally sanctioned intruders, tolerated at best. As Clifford Geertz (1972, p. 1) might have recognised, we were 'invisible men', acknowledged by almost no one except a beleaguered

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media relations coordinator, who hesitated to believe we were even on the invitation list. Our official welcome had been extended by the president of the festival's parent organisation himself, yet on the ground we found no such recognition. The cool distance of the festival-goers was telling. This event was not for people like us – Western-educated, liberal, critical academics, and above all, Hungarian émigrés whose life trajectories had taken them far from the ideological currents animating this gathering. The 'tribal assembly', as organisers described it, was intended for 'pure' or 'deep' Hungarians, those whom we describe, for the purposes of this article, as the Turul generation: not a cohesive social movement, but a diffuse cultural constituency united by devotion to a deeply nationalist vision of identity and the symbolic kinship between the Magyar people and the nomadic cultures of Central Asia. We were there to watch, listen, and interpret, but never to belong.

The biannual Kurultáj is a traditional Central Asian tribal gathering that has been reinvented in Hungary and symbolises leadership and unity among formerly nomadic cultures. Taking place in the heartland of Viktor Orbán's Hungarian populism, the Kurultáj brings together a heavy mix of masculine and nationalist tropes: Strongman speeches, LARP (live-action role play) reenactments of the Hungarian conquest (Early Medieval period), neo-nationalist biker gangs, male-only traditional equine sports (e.g. horse wrestling, belt wrestling, kok boru), bull whip demonstrations, and a plethora of other 'deep play' activities (Geertz 1972). Born out of the Turanism movement, which attempts to geopolitically link Hungary to Central Asia, the Kurultáj is ethnonationalism and heritage nostalgia on display.

By critically examining the Kurultáj – a cultural event that combines public displays of physicality with cultural rituals and political assemblies – we explore how traditional gatherings that celebrate strength and unity contribute to constructing masculinity and leadership. This cultural framework reinforces the notion of a leader as a strong, capable figure, both in terms of governance and physical power. Drawing parallels between these historical practices and contemporary politics, we centre our argument on Hungary's (former) Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, who adopts a 'strongman' persona through his political attitudes and narratives. We unfold how physical culture, connected to national identity, influences Orbán's leadership narratives and the construction of masculine ideals. This is apparent through the reinvention and co-optation of the UNESCO-sanctioned *táncász* (folk dance) movement and the annual National Gallop hussar horse race, as well as through the growing popularity of the Kurultáj. Our deep cultural analysis highlights how traditional events, like the Kurultáj, aim to preserve and celebrate this cultural connection between strength, masculinity, and leadership, while also pointing to the broader societal implications of traditional gender roles and cultural power. By synthesising these concepts, this article provides a comprehensive view of how traditional physical culture – from historical assemblies to modern strongman competitions – informs deep culture, heritage nostalgia, and muscular nationalism.

Physical culture as deep play

British utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) first theorised the notion of deep play as a set of activities where the stakes are so high that it is irrational for a person to engage in them because the potential for loss vastly outweighs the possibility of gain (Bentham 1802). Using gambling as an example, Bentham – whose philosophy was

grounded in maximising pleasure and minimising pain – notes that a deep play defies this logic, as the individual's actions are far more likely to cause pain than pleasure. This idea was later taken up and reinterpreted by anthropologist Clifford Geertz in his famous 1972 essay *Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight*. Geertz flipped Bentham's rationalist view on its head, arguing that such high-stakes, seemingly irrational activities (like cockfighting) are socially and symbolically meaningful. For Geertz (1972), deep play denotes culturally rich activities that provide a 'metasocial commentary ... [by] examining culture as an assemblage of texts' (p. 26). These texts are interpretive in function and – as the key take-away from Geertz's (1972) article – 'it is a Balinese reading of Balinese experience; a story they tell themselves about themselves' (p. 26). Indeed, a deep play framework allows the ethnographic researcher to better understand their participants by interpreting cultural activities as social stories, as intergenerational tradition, and as somatic heritage. For our purposes, there is no better framework through which to study traditional physical culture.

Physical culture encompasses a wide array of physical activities, including modern sports, traditional games, exercises (gymnastics, fitness, jogging, etc.), and expressive performances (e.g. circus acts, swinging, dance, etc.) (Renson 2013). For Geertz (1972), attending and participating in cockfighting (a traditional game) is 'as important a revelation of what being a Balinese "is really like" as ... more celebrated phenomena' (p. 5), like politics, religion, or economics. It is as relevant to the Balinese as gridiron football is to Americans, sumo is to the Japanese, kok boru is to the Kyrgyz, ice hockey is to Canadians, and hurling is to the Irish. Indeed, one of the most regular employments of deep play in the everyday is the sports media's definitive opinion 'that distinctive playing styles represent "national character"' (Besnier and Brownell 2012, p. 445), or even the close connection between national sport and national identity (Bairner 2009). Notions of national (or local) pride, cultural heritage, and ethnic identity are, in fact, key characteristics of traditional physical cultures, making them appropriate foci of deep play study.

Traditional games are understudied aspects of broader physical culture, 'yet they are worth exploring because of their cultural diversity, non-mainstream profile, and close connection to locality, ethnicity, and heritage' (Fabian 2023a, p. 271). Also termed folk, Indigenous, or popular games (depending on the context), traditional games offer myriad forms, are considered, in many cases, the precursors to modern sports, and exhibit an 'exuberant ludodiversity' (Parlebas 2016, p. 34). This ludodiversity encompasses games as diverse as coconut-tree climbing in Micronesia, horse sports in Central Asia, head-pulling contests in the Canadian Arctic, and oil wrestling in Turkey. All peoples have their games, each representative of a unique physical culture; a culture in which local body techniques (Mauss 1966) are passed down from generation to generation. As explained by Geertz (1972), 'attending cockfights and participating in them is, for the Balinese, a kind of sentimental education. What he learns there is what his culture's ethos and his private sensibility ... look like when spelled out externally in a collective text' (p. 27). This is applicable to all traditional games: they are somatic heritage, passed down through intergenerational transfer, and tied to ethnic identity creation. There are myriad examples: annual competitions like the Mongolian Naadam national games, Gotlandic Stångaspelen (local games), and Palio di Siena horse race are central to bodily identities of their respective localities; Catalan castells human pyramids, Azeri chovqan (polo variant), and the Māori ki-o-rahi ball game are integral to ethnic political resistance; while North

American Indigenous snowsnake (spear throwing), Tongan kasivaki (water rugby), and guanniu bull-wrestling of the Hui people (China) are all unique elements of Indigenous cultural heritage. These examples of traditional games are all forms of deep play: they are stories told by the participants about themselves, about their culture. They tell us more about physical culture than our standardised, globalised, modern sport forms do. In a similar vein, the Kurultáj, thus, tells us something about deep Hungarian culture within the contemporary populist political milieu.

In 1939, Hungarian populist writer László Németh (1901–1975) wrote an essay entitled *Kisebbségben* (*In Minority*), in which he lamented the loss of Hungarianness due to the struggle between, what he termed, ‘deep Hungarians’ and ‘shallow Hungarians’, or authentic and assimilated (i.e. alien) Hungarians (Németh 1939). Although Németh and Geertz employ the term ‘deep’ with differing connotations, the onus on rich cultural meaning and metasocial commentary is relevant to both. Regardless of the subject of deep play analysis, the outcome is ‘a story they tell themselves about themselves’. Németh, a popular literary figure, ‘formulated a historical vision ... a sort of counter-history, rejecting the common narrative of the emergence of modern national culture and state and constructing an “alternative tradition of national authenticity” (Antohi and Trencsényi 2014, p. 33). Indeed, populists often co-opt alternative traditions to re-imagine national histories. As described by Fabian (2023a), there is a clear link between the adoption, revival, or invention of local traditional games by populist regimes to counter the global symbolism of modern sports. In Hungary, too, this is the case. Recent years have seen the revival of Hungarian folk games, such as local variants of rounders (*méta*) and skittles (*teke*), in school yards and community tournaments (Árpád 1940, Hajdu 1971, Siklódi 1996). In another realm of Hungarian physical culture, Kürti (2019) notes that the increasingly popular and UNESCO-sanctioned *táncház* (dance-house) movement – which brings together “trad-clad” youth for folk dance sessions – is where the political elite “find the most crystallized form of definition for national heritage” (p. 176). The term “crystallized”, here, can also be interpreted as “pure”, reflecting Németh’s earlier reference to “deep Hungarians”. Even the 2008 creation of the annual National Gallop horse race, which pits hussar-uniformed jockeys against one another in Budapest’s Heroes’ Square is ‘deeply influenced by Hungarian folk and high cultures ... the hussars, in several ways, have been embedded in the formation of Hungarian cultural heritage and have contributed to the imaginative construction of national identity’ (Rátz and Irimiás 2017, p. 199).² In all these physical cultural forms, Hungarians are (re)constructing (hi)stories they tell themselves about themselves. But which Hungarians get to tell the stories: deep or shallow? As we will see in the following sections, the Kurultáj is the formative cultural text in deep Hungarian revisionist history and ethnic nationalism.

A deep play analysis of the Hungarian tribal gathering

The Kurultáj tribal gathering is a cultural festival that unfolds on the Hungarian *puszta*, where the open grassland is transformed into a portrait of a steppe encampment. Dust hung in the summer air as we approached the sprawling grounds, the heat pressing down on us. Yurts dotted the landscape, banners rippled in the wind, and participants moved through the space in traditional or pseudo-traditional attire, leather boots, fur-trimmed hats, embroidered tunics, visually collapsing centuries of history into a single staged

present. There was a seriousness in this exhibition. The setting deliberately evoked Central Asian nomadic life, conjuring a mythic homeland for Magyars and positioning contemporary Hungarians within that lineage. This was not merely a festival space, but a symbolic geography (Esbenshade 2014), a performative reconstruction of an ancestral world that asserts kinship between Hungarians and the Turkic peoples of Central Asia. Visitors were not simply attending an event; they were stepping into a narrative environment where history, myth, and political ideology were rendered tangible through physical performance and sensory immersion.

The central arena was dominated by traditional games and martial displays. We witnessed horse wrestling, belt wrestling, kok boru (buzkashi), bareback horse racing, and archery contests, each scheduled on the itinerary but informal in their execution. Long-distance archery was the most ad-hoc event, with the traditionally clad archers dawdling over to their positions at seemingly random intervals, more interested in catching up with fellow archers from parts unknown than in focusing on the targets. The kok boru exhibition similarly left us wanting. Traditionally, this national sport of most Central Asian states is a high-octane equestrian melee (Fabian 2023b), but on the Bugac *puszta*, the performance was belaboured. We doubt the audience knew exactly what they were watching, and it seemed as though the participants (local ranch hands) were getting in a practice session. The horse wrestling, on the other hand, needed little embellishment to entertain: riders sought to drag their opponents from the saddle in a contest of endurance, discipline, and brawn, and the audience reacted with zeal. These activities function as more than entertainment. They dramatise a mythologised warrior past and present bodily strength as a core component of national identity. The participants' bodies become living texts, narrating the origin story of Hungary through exertion and spectacle. In this sense, the festival operates as a site of corporeal politics, where the labouring, competing, adorned body is mobilised in the service of ethno-national narrative (Fabian and Molnár 2026). Strength, agility, and martial skill are not merely demonstrated but performed as inherited capacities; somatic proof of an unbroken lineage stretching back to the steppe.

Throughout the grounds, re-enactment camps and exhibitions extended this logic, creating a living museum of Turanist heritage. Live-action role-play scenes depicted early medieval Magyar conquests; archers demonstrated horseback shooting; costumed performers enacted ritualised greetings between 'tribal' delegations. Each performance contributed to an overarching narrative of unity among steppe-descended peoples, reinforcing the festival's framing as a 'tribal assembly'. These reenactments are not neutral historical representations. They selectively emphasise martial prowess, masculine solidarity, and nomadic mobility, while downplaying the multicultural and hybrid influences that shaped Hungarian history. The result is an idealised vision of a unified, warrior-based past, one that resonates powerfully with contemporary nationalist narratives. The spectacle becomes a form of embodied historiography, presenting an alternative account of Hungarian origins and destiny through the performing body rather than the written word.

Adjacent to the performance arenas lay an expansive bazaar where vendors sold traditional crafts, weapon replicas, clothing, and food: roasted meats, flatbreads, and regional dishes that evoked rustic or nomadic culinary traditions. The smell of grilling meat mingled with dust and horse sweat creating a sensory environment that reinforced the illusion of stepping into an ancestral world. Merchants displayed leatherwork, archery

equipment, fur hats, jewellery, and other crafts designed to evoke steppe aesthetics. But there were also stalls peddling populist rhetoric, such as homophobic t-shirts, Greater Hungary maps, and wooden AK-47s for children who had grown tired of wooden swords. It was unnerving, to say the least, to walk head-on into a crowd of braid-bearded Hungarian men sporting anti-gay slogans, real metal swords, and horns of mead. But this was their occasion to let their hair down, both figuratively and literally. The bodies on display in the bazaar were not simply consuming but performing: adorning themselves in the material culture of an imagined past, ingesting its flavours, embodying its masculinities, arming themselves, however playfully, with its weaponry. The bazaar thus functions as both marketplace and symbolic exchange. By buying, wearing, eating, and drinking, visitors enact a form of identity performance that extends well beyond the festival grounds, carrying the festival's embodied politics into everyday life.

At the centre of it all stood the stage. Music permeated the festival space, ranging from folk ensembles performing traditional melodies to nationalist rock bands energising the evening crowds. Drums, string instruments, and chanting created a sonic landscape that oscillated between solemn ritual and celebratory spectacle. The music operates as emotional glue, binding participants into a temporary community unified by shared rhythms and narratives. These concerts drew large crowds who sang along to songs referencing national pride, historical struggles, and mythic ancestors. In these moments, the festival's political undercurrents surfaced most clearly. Collective singing transformed individual spectators into a chorus of national affirmation, and the festive body became a resonating body, vibrating in unison, swaying together, voice merged with voice. The boundary between performer and audience dissolved, and with it any pretence of critical distance from the Turanist narrative.

Viewed through Geertz's concept of deep play, the stakes of the Kurultáj extend far beyond the immediate pleasures of games and performances. Participation in these activities is symbolically charged, offering attendees a means of asserting belonging within a narrative of Hungarian authenticity and resilience. The risks are not financial, as in gambling, but symbolic: to reject or critique the festival's narrative is to position oneself outside the imagined community it constructs. The festival thus functions as a metasocial commentary (Akçalı and Korkut 2012), a staged reflection on what it means to be Hungarian in a globalised and Europeanised world. By foregrounding physical strength, martial heritage, and Central Asian kinship, the Kurultáj presents an alternative identity framework, one rooted in the festive body and its performances, which stands in deliberate contrast to liberal, Western-oriented conceptions of nationhood.

Magyar heritage nostalgia, the adoption of Turanism, and the Turul generation

*Come, come, Turul bird, Hungary has lost its way,
Sweet Turul bird, the Fatherland awaits your return.*³

Heritage and nostalgia go hand in hand. Heritage is the use of the past (history) for present purposes; and nostalgia is an idealised vision of the past. Nostalgia is the motivation behind heritage: We seek to revive because we wish to relive. Herzfeld (1997) argues that a structured use of nostalgia can become a shared reference point

and powerful tool in addressing contemporary conflicts. While Boym (2001) distinguishes between 'restorative' and 'reflective' nostalgia, where the former hopes to restore the 'good old days' (e.g. the Make America Great Again movement (Price 2018)), the latter seeks a more critical re-evaluation (e.g. the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (Sucharov 2013)). In terms of Hungarian heritage nostalgia, we can consider it as both structural and restorative (i.e. employed strategically to revive an idealised past). As noted by Kaya (2023), 'nostalgia as a mythic vision of the nation's golden past has become an essential element of heritage populism ... right-wing populist parties capitalise on the nostalgic deprivation of individuals who tend to find refuge in the past, heritage, authenticity, and nativity'. Since the rise of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in the early 2000s, the Hungarian state has financed a veritable 'post-socialist "nostalgia industry"' (Kürti 2016, p. 218). The nostalgia fed to the Hungarian populace is laced with Central Asian mythic imagery, harkening back to the ancient nomadic warriors that braved the journey to the Carpathian Basin, and the ethno-national space of the historical Kingdom of Hungary (Kremmler 2023). Examples of this Magyar heritage nostalgia include the new Museum of Ethnography, part of the multi-billion-euro Liget cultural project; the popular *István, a király* ('Stephen, the King') rock opera about the Christianisation of the pagan Magyars in the late 10th century; the Hungarian National Bank erecting a statue of the mythic Miracle Deer which led the Magyars to their eventual settlement in the Carpathian Basin (i.e. Honfoglalás); and, most notably, the Kurultáj, which brings all of the above imagery together in a comprehensive, consumable, and nostalgic politico-cultural festival.

The key audience of this nostalgic deprivation is, what we term, the Turul generation.⁴ Going with the Central Asian mythic imagery, the Turul is a mythological bird of prey, most often depicted as a large falcon, in both Hungarian and Turkic traditions, the clan symbol of the Árpád dynasty (which ruled Hungary from 1000–1301), and is one of the national symbols of Hungary today. This generation of (primarily) young men have become dislocated in the broader European Union, which was thrust upon a post-socialist society in the wake of the communist regime in the 1990s. A more integrated, globalised, and competitive job market left many Hungarians disenchanted with the promises of the European project. And, as noted by Akçali and Korkut (2012), 'disoriented, disaffected people, in turn, are less critical in their perception of history and are more prone to mythologize the past' (p. 596). In the Hungarian case, the Turul generation has become disillusioned with established Hungarian history and contemporary Western cultural ideology, and has, therefore, embraced a resurfaced geopolitical movement, known as Turanism, that disavows the West and turns, instead, to the East (Ablonczy 2022). This 'ethno-nationalist turn in Hungarian politics' (Kremmler 2023, p. 12) is grounded in, what is known as, the Trianon trauma (Feischmidt 2020).

The Treaty of Trianon (1920), signed during the Paris Peace Conference following the First World War, resulted in the secession of over two-thirds of Hungary's pre-war territory to its neighbours (Czechoslovakia, Romania, Yugoslavia, Austria, Poland, and Italy), along with 60% of its pre-war population (Waters 2020). Amidst a history of oppression – Ottoman occupation (1541–1699), Hapsburg imperialism (1699–1918), Nazi occupation (1944), Soviet era (1949–1989) – the Treaty of Trianon marked 'a turning point in anti-West resentment, territorial nostalgia, and Hungarian revisionism' (Fabian 2023a, p. 280). During the interwar period, the short-lived Kingdom of Hungary (1920–1946) was re-established with the right-wing nationalist Miklós Horthy as regent. This period was

characterised by strong national resentment and Trianon irridentism, leading to an alliance with Nazi Germany and ultimately resulting with Hungary regaining roughly half of its lost territories between 1938 and 1941 (only for these gains to be reversed by the Treaty of Paris following the Second World War). As described by political theorist István Bibó (1982), there was an ‘existential fear for the survival of the national community’ (p. 255) that percolated in national politics. It was during this time that Németh coined the politically charged ‘deep Hungarians’ and, his contemporary, Dezső Szabó (1879–1945) ‘advocated the idea of an ethnically homogeneous Hungarian nation-state’ (Trencsényi 2014, p. 109). There is a wounded collective identity (Máté-Tóth 2019) present throughout Hungarian history, a consequence of its politically tumultuous history and formalised in the words of the *Nemzeti dal* [National Song]:

*Magyars, once more our name and story
Shall match our ancestors’ in glory.
The centuries of shame and hurt
Can now be washed away like dirt.*⁵

Today, nationalist writers of the past – including Németh, Szabó, and Petőfi – are oft referenced in the re-emerging cultural politics of the state, specifically in the rural heartland where the nostalgia for peasant culture is alive and well. The mystification of the peasant (Shanin 1990) was revived during the Horthy era, promoted by the likes of Szabó, who idealised the ‘purity’ of folk culture in Eastern Europe and the Balkans (Hofer 1995). Rural nostalgia and a ‘peasant mentality’ (Geertz 1972, p. 4) are crucial ingredients in the populist playbook. As hypothesised by Bourdieu (1984), the ‘spectacle of the “people” making a spectacle of itself, as in folk dancing, is an opportunity to experience the relationship of distant proximity, in the form of the idealised vision purveyed by aesthetic realism and populist nostalgia, which is a basic element in the relationship of the petite bourgeoisie to the working or peasant classes and their traditions’ (p. 58). Indeed, the turn to the East is specifically relevant to the rural masses – disillusioned by the EU, the West, liberalism, and modernity – who see Turanism as the obvious next foothold in an increasingly turbulent world.

Coined by German linguist Max Müller in the 1860s, the term Turanism is derived from the word *Turán*, which are the lands of the Central Asian nomadic tribes, including the Huns, Cumans, Magyars, Tatars, Turks, Kyrgyz, and so forth (Ablonczy 2022). As explained by Moreh (2016), ‘the best way to conceive of Turanism old and new is as a ‘search’ for the ‘ancestral homeland’ (*őshaza*) ... it represents a mythopoeic process unifying the ontological and historical dimensions of ‘home’” (p. 343). The concept actually stems from a debate within the 19th-century linguistics community. One hundred years after Johann Eberhard Fischer theorised that Hungarian was a Finno-Ugrian language, sharing its linguistic roots with Finnish and Estonian, nascent Turanism flipped the narrative. The orientalist Ármin Vámbéry (1869) published an article that suggested that Hungarian was, instead, closer to Turkish through the Ural-Altaic language family. Akçalı and Korkut (2012) argue that after the death of the great reformer Count István Széchenyi (1791–1860) – himself an intermittent proponent of both ethno-centrism and national self-assertion – the notion of *Turán*, understood both as a geographical region and an ethnocultural ideal, began to permeate Hungarian political and intellectual discourse under the auspices of the upper classes as a counter-ideology to Western-oriented

historiography. Although the Finno-Ugric camp won the political-scientific debate (and is widely accepted today), the Ural-Altaic thesis survived in mainstream academia. The Turán Society was established in 1910 by Count Pál Teleki, a geographer and eventual Prime Minister of Hungary (1939–1941) during the late irredentist era. In this light, it is, then, not surprising that ‘the organisation was not focused solely on the Turanian issue, but was also strongly anti-aristocratic, anti-capitalist, anti-clerical, anti-modernist, anti-Western, anti-German and anti-Slavic’ (Kowalczyk 2017, p. 54). The movement, however, fizzled during the interwar period. In the early 2000s, coinciding with the re-emergence of the Hungarian far-right, neo-Turanism was revitalised in the margins of Hungarian academia, adopting both the mystification of the peasant and the Ural-Altaic thesis in its attempt to unify the Turkic and Hungarian peoples (as well as Tatars, Mongols, and Indigenous Siberians, Koreans, and Japanese) under one ethnic group.

The modern Turanism movement, which was heralded in the establishment of the Magyar Turan Foundation (MTF; est. 2007) and its flagship Kurultáj cultural festival (est. 2008), is indebted to the relentless work and research of physical anthropologist András Zsolt Bíró. As the story goes, Bíró, who is affiliated with the Hungarian Museum of Natural History (HMNH), was invited by a Kazakh delegation to take part in a local kurultáj (tribal assembly). During his research trip, he uncovered a genetic relation between Magyars and Madjars (a very small Turkic ethnic group in Kazakhstan) and swiftly published his findings in the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* (Bíró *et al.* 2009), a controversial journal founded within a milieu of scientific racism and eugenics.⁶ The ambiguity of the findings could not be laid out more clearly when Bíró *et al.* (2009) wrote that

Although this finding *could result from chance*, it is striking and suggests that there *could have been* genetic contact between the ancestors of the Madjars and Magyars, and thus that modern Hungarians *may* trace their ancestry to Central Asia (p. 305) [emphasis added].

Despite these vague conclusions, the article’s findings have been trumpeted as hard proof of a link between Hungarians and Central Asians, effectively championing the Ural-Altaic thesis. As critiqued by Kremmler (2023), Bíró’s research, which underpins the entire Turanism movement,

draws on a wide spectrum of alternative prehistory narratives that have existed in the popular culture of the nationalist camp since the nineteenth century. These narratives have been modernized and streamlined for the twenty-first century thanks to the advent and rapid development of archaeogenetics, in a pattern fairly similar to what have been described as “archaeological patriotism” in Central Asia (Laruelle 2021) and “genetic ethnology” (Molnár and Dóczi 2020). Indeed, there are shared genealogies with Central Asian physical anthropology dating back to the 1960s ... [at the same time that] physical anthropologist Tibor Tóth, then director of the HMNH’s anthropology department, deployed Soviet craniometric methods. (p. 3)

Today, many of Bíró’s HMNH colleagues are amongst the scientific committee of the Kurultáj and, along with other Hungarian academics, are now affiliated with the government’s new Research Institute of Hungarian Studies (MKI; est. 2019). The MKI is well-funded, employs over one hundred academics, provides exclusive scientific content to pro-government media, and promotes the interwar Turanist imperative by interweaving ‘medieval Hungarian chronicles with cutting edge archaeogenetics’ (Kremmler 2023, p. 4); or, in other words, mixing (pseudo-)facts with fiction. Led by the MKI, the ethnocultural

turn in academic circles has bled into political circles and, today, ‘it is beyond any doubt that Turanism became a part of Hungarian mass culture’ (Kowalczyk 2017, p. 56). The Turul generation is being fed a steady stream of this Eurasian civilisational narrative from mainstream academia, government propaganda, and the national media, which is majorly owned by Orbán affiliates (Schnyder *et al.* 2024).

The ‘performance of Turanism’ (Akçalı and Korkut 2012, p. 597) is not new to the Hungarian government. Orbán’s Christian-national-illiberal party, Fidesz, has promoted the idea of Turanism since about 2010, once their then-rival party Jobbik (radical right) formally adopted the movement. It was Jobbik, however, that played the decisive role in reviving Turanism as a political force in post-socialist Hungary, serving as the principal political sponsor of the early Kurultáj festivals and embedding Turanist symbolism within its broader ethno-nationalist platform before Fidesz appropriated the movement’s cultural capital. In 2012, for instance, Orbán (2012) referred to Hungarians as a ‘half-Asian nation’ and 24 tribal delegates to that year’s Kurultáj were received during a parliamentary session. This public acceptance of the Turanism movement is further disseminated through sweeping educational reforms in both biology and history textbooks that ensure a standardised version of Hungarian history is taught in all schools (Neumann 2022). The official policy is known as the Eastern Opening Policy, which employs the MTF and the Kurultáj as cultural power within a broader national rebranding strategy to align Hungary with Turkish and Central Asian economies. This narrative has far-reaching consequences to Hungary’s place in Europe, its nostalgia industry, and its contemporary and future national identity.

As a large-scale cultural event, funded to the tune of about one million Euros a year by the government, the Kurultáj is a tool in Orbán’s heritage populism, in which culture and ethnicity are essentialised in order to provide the disillusioned Turul generation with a sense of agency. As explained by Akçalı and Korkut (2012), ‘the far right offers masculine and patriarchal reassurance against socio-economic challenges ... often instrumentaliz[ing] history in a defensive manner against those alleged enemies of the “nation”, plays the victimization card when necessary, and regenerates or mythologizes a “glorious past”’ (p. 598). The Kurultáj provides the Turul generation an outlet for their myriad anxieties – identity-preservation, national survival, community cohesion, and cultural heritage – with a sprinkling of national rock performances, bull-whipping exhibitions, and horse wrestling tournaments. It is heritage, nostalgia, and populism all wrapped up in a consumable narrative: pride in myth, pride in nation, pride in self.

Turanist physical culture in Orbán’s heritage populism

A distinctive feature of Orbán’s populist strategy has been his systematic appropriation of sports, like modern football (Molnár and Whigham 2019), Hungarian folk traditions, and physical cultures (e.g. traditional games) into a coherent narrative of national heritage. This approach falls within a broader heritage populism, which involves selectively mobilising cultural traditions to authenticate contemporary political projects (Kaya 2020, Fabian 2023a). For Orbán, traditional physical cultures within the Turanism movement provide powerful symbols of Hungarian uniqueness, historical continuity, and masculine strength. Thus, traditional Hungarian physical activities have received government support and visibility under Orbán. For instance, traditional

combat sports are presented not merely as athletic competitions, but as living connections to Turanism's mythologised warrior past and Hungary's historical connections to the East, such as Mongolian and Turkish cultural traditions, both of which feature wrestling forms as national folk practices. Baranta, an invented martial art, developed by former military officer Ferenc Vukics in the 1990s, is one such example (Falatovics and Szikora 2023). It is 'presented as an authentically Magyar cultural form with links to a romanticized warrior ancestry' (Fabian 2023a, p. 284). Baranta philosophy considers it necessary that practitioners, in addition to safely practicing combat elements, also learn and maintain Hungarian customs and culture. Whilst it is claimed that baranta organisations are independent of government and other influence, the 'ancient' tradition is performed at the Kurultáj and is 'the result of the fight for independent Hungarian body culture' (Traditional Sports no date).

Similarly, traditional horseback riding and archery, activities with deep roots in Hungarian nomadic mythology, have been elevated to positions of cultural prominence. The National Gallop (*Nemzeti Vágta*) has been transformed into a major patriotic event under Orbán's leadership (Rátz and Irimías 2017). Formerly taking place in Budapest's Heroes' Square – dedicated to the seven tribes of Magyars who arrived in the Carpathian Basin in 895 – the event explicitly connects contemporary Hungarians to their nomadic, warrior ancestors through physical performance. These revival efforts extend to a wide range of traditional physical practices, including *botvívás* (stick fighting) and *táncáz* (Kürti 2019) that showcase physical prowess associated with the fundamental requirements of daily life for the peasantry. What unites these diverse activities in Orbán's cultural propaganda is their presentation as uniquely Hungarian expressions of physical culture that predate and, thus, separate from Western European influences. Orbán deploys these activities to help position Hungary's traditional physical culture as both authentic and resistant to Westernising tendencies in the contemporary era. In fact, Turanism represents a way of combating the powerful forces of globalisation and offering effective resistance to the perceived overbearingness of European modernisation. Therefore, 'authentic' physical culture and associated events, such as the Kurultáj, has been used by the government to reconstruct the 'cultural essence' of Hungarianness, whereby national identity is anchored in traditional practices.

Annual festivals and traditional fairs, heavily promoted by state media, present idealised visions of Hungarian physicality (Povedák 2022). These events – the Kurultáj and the National Assembly of Hungarians (MOGY) chief among them – typically feature performers in traditional attire demonstrating combat techniques allegedly passed down from medieval and nomadic Hungarian warriors. The visual aesthetics emphasise continuity between ancient Magyar warriors and contemporary Hungarians, suggesting an unbroken lineage of martial prowess tied to the national land. The interconnection of 'blood and soil' supports the idea of ethno-nationalism (Lennard 2019) and Orbán's conception of national identity (Enyedi 2024). Therefore, it can be argued that the revival and (re) invention of traditional physical cultural practices is never a historically neutral act and involves extensive political reinterpretation. For example, the complex multicultural influences on Hungarian wrestling forms, which include Ottoman Turkish, Slavic, and Germanic elements, may be downplayed in favour of emphasising 'pure' Magyar origins, like in the case of baranta. This selective approach to history allows Orbán's regime to present contemporary Hungarians as the direct heirs and guardians of an ancient physical

heritage, which is used to cement Hungary's current role in the regional landscape and its connection to the East.

Orbán's muscular nationalism

Orbán's approach represents a distinctive form of muscular nationalism, a political ideology that, arguably, is idiosyncratic to his regime and foregrounds physical strength, masculine virtues, and bodily performance as central to national identity and political legitimacy (Cronin 2023). We argue that Hungarian muscular nationalism under Orbán exhibits several defining characteristics that distinguish it from other Western nationalist movements. First, it emphasises embodied authenticity, which is the notion that Hungarian national essence is physically expressed through distinctive bodily practices and performances (Mauss 1966). This approach treats the body as a site where national culture is preserved and transmitted, positioning physical culture as a form of corporeal resistance to the supposedly abstract nature of liberal ideals. By celebrating Hungarian forms of physical expressions, such as bull-whipping or *táncház*, Orbán's nationalism offers citizens concrete sensory experiences of national belonging. Second, Hungarian muscular nationalism operates through invented traditions (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983); public 'performances of Turanism' (Akçali and Korkut 2012) with the view to inculcate specific values and norms and to solidify a continuity of nation through a (re) imagined historic past. The Kurultáj and National Gallop, for instance, are highly visible public demonstrations of invented physical practices that authenticate political leadership. These types of performances allow political leaders to physically embody the values they verbally espouse, creating a powerful form of political communication that transcends rational argument (Kaya 2020). When Orbán participates in traditional games events, appears at folk festivals, or visits seasonal village-based celebrations, he physically performs his connection to Hungarian traditions (Sonnevend 2024). Third, muscular nationalism involves strategic masculinisation of the political sphere (Banerjee 2012). Political leadership is framed through metaphors of masculine physical prowess, with effective governance equated with stereotypically masculine qualities like strength, decisiveness, and protective capacity. Historically, leaders in Turkic and Mongol nomadic societies were often chosen for their physical abilities as well as their strategic acumen, with displays of strength and combat prowess playing a role in asserting dominance and earning respect. This gendered framing of Turanism within Hungarian political folklore positions Orbán as the embodiment of masculine authority as well as the head of his own family and the larger Hungarian nation, working to protect both from external threats (Enyedi 2024). Fourth, Hungarian muscular nationalism employs 'organic sovereignty' (Paris 2022), using the integrity and strength of Hungarian bodies as metaphors for national strength and unity. Just as the disciplined body resists corruption and weakness, the nationalist state under strong leadership resists the corrupting influences of globalisation, immigration, and liberal Western values. This approach to nation building and nationhood has the potential to transform abstract geopolitical concepts (i.e. Turanism) into visceral bodily experiences.

Orbán himself serves as the primary physical exemplar of Hungarian muscular nationalism. He cultivates an image as a rural strongman with authentic connections to traditional physical practices. Photo and video opportunities regularly feature him performing

physical work in rural settings, harvesting crops, chopping wood, drinking *pálinka* (traditional, often home-made, Hungarian fruit brandy with high alcohol content), or physically engaging in various village activities (Zalan 2018). These carefully staged performances connect him to idealised notions of Hungarian peasant masculinity (Shanin 1990), positioning him as a leader who understands physical labour, rural life, and the deep Hungarian people. Public imagery often captures various aspects of his traditional masculinity and features him with his family (e.g. wife and grandchildren) and in protective stances, physically placing himself between symbolic threats (e.g. EU bureaucrats) and Hungarian families. Such imagery symbolises his role as both defender of his own family and his extended family: the Magyars. Orbán's strong advocacy for traditional, binary gender roles and the protection of women (and their traditional role in society) and children jointly reinforce his central political message: strong, physical leadership is necessary for protecting the nation, its citizens, and core Hungarian cultural values. Sports and traditional masculine physical cultures that are part and parcel to the Turanism movement are integral to this political strongman image and nostalgic narrative.

Conclusions

The Kurultáj represents a paradigmatic example of how contemporary populist movements can strategically mobilise traditional physical culture to construct alternative national narratives and help consolidate political power. Through Geertz's framework of 'deep play', this analysis reveals how festivals can function as more than cultural entertainment and are a significant contributor to deep culture. Here, the Kurultáj serves as a comprehensive story Hungarians tell themselves about themselves, a story carefully curated by the political elite to serve specific ideological purposes. The transformation of a traditional Central Asian tribal gathering into Hungary's flagship heritage festival illustrates the sophisticated mechanisms through which populist regimes can appropriate and reinvent cultural practices. By selectively drawing upon Turanist ideology, mythologised Magyar heritage, and masculine physical displays, the Kurultáj creates a compelling alternative to Western European cultural practices while appealing to, what we have termed here, the Turul generation (i.e. young Hungarians disillusioned with liberal democracy and European integration). This cultural appropriation extends beyond mere symbolism to encompass institutional structures, academic research, and educational curricula. The establishment of government-funded institutions, like the Research Institute of Hungarian Studies, demonstrates how Orbán's regime can legitimate alternative historical narratives through promoting pseudo-scientific discourse, thereby transforming fringe academic theories into mainstream cultural knowledge. The integration of Turanist perspectives into educational systems ensures that these (re)imagined cultural connections become naturalised and mainstreamed for future generations.

The Kurultáj's emphasis on masculine physical culture (from horse wrestling to bull-whipping demonstrations) reveals the deeply gendered dimensions of heritage populism. These embodied performances provide concrete, visceral experiences of national belonging that transcend rational political discourse, creating what Bourdieu (1984) described as opportunities for the 'spectacle of the "people" making a spectacle of itself'. The festival's masculine archetypes offer participants a sense of agency and identity that contrasts

sharply with the perceived feminisation and weakness associated with liberal European values. Kurultáj-based masculinist propaganda derives from Orbán's transformation of Hungary through muscular nationalism. This represents a paradigmatic case of how contemporary populist leaders strategically deploy physical culture to consolidate political power and reshape national identity. Orbán's approach extends far beyond conventional political symbolism, constituting instead a comprehensive governance strategy that integrates embodied performances, institutional control, and cultural appropriation into a coherent authoritarian project. In fact, the systematic co-optation of traditional Hungarian physical practices, from folk wrestling to horseback riding, reveals the sophisticated mechanisms through which populist movements construct authenticity claims while obscuring their selective interpretation of historical traditions. Orbán's regime has successfully transformed diverse cultural practices into vehicles for ethnic nationalism, presenting contemporary Hungarians as inheritors of an unbroken martial heritage that predates and resists EU influence. This cultural reconstruction serves multiple political functions: it provides concrete, sensory experiences of national belonging; authenticates political leadership through embodied performance; and creates visceral connections between abstract geopolitical concepts and bodily experiences.

Orbán's personal embodiment of muscular nationalism, as football enthusiast, rural strongman, and protective patriarch, illustrates how populist leaders can transcend conventional political categories by positioning themselves as physical exemplars of national virtues and traditions. His carefully curated public persona combines multiple masculine archetypes that resonate across different constituencies while reinforcing the central narrative that strong, physical leadership is essential for protecting Hungarian sovereignty and cultural values against external threats. The institutional architecture supporting Hungarian muscular nationalism demonstrates its systematic nature. Through educational reforms mandating traditional physical activities, military youth programmes emphasising patriotic discipline, and the transformation of sports governance bodies into vehicles for nationalist ideology, Orbán has embedded his political vision within the fundamental structures of Hungarian society. This institutional political capture ensures that muscular nationalism operates not merely as political rhetoric, but as lived experience for Hungarian citizens, particularly younger generations who encounter these nationalist framings through compulsory education and youth organisations.

The broader implications of Orbán's muscular nationalism extend beyond Hungary's borders, offering insights into contemporary populist strategies across Europe and globally. His success in mobilising physical culture for political purposes reveals how populist movements can exploit contemporary disillusionment with Western liberal ideas by providing embodied alternatives. The combination of heritage populism, masculine performance, and institutional control creates a powerful political constellation that has proven resistant to conventional democratic opposition strategies in politics. In this context, the Kurultáj's success reveals the limitations of conventional approaches to countering populist narratives. The festival's appeal lies not simply in its political messaging, but in its ability to provide meaningful cultural (i.e. deep play) experiences and community belonging to participants feeling alienated by rapid social change driven by globalisation and Europeanisation. This suggests that effective responses to populist movements must address not only their political claims, but also the underlying cultural and emotional needs they purport to fulfil. Ultimately, the Kurultáj and the Turanism

movement serves as a cautionary tale about the power of physical culture to shape national identity and political allegiance. Its transformation from marginal academic theory to mainstream cultural phenomenon demonstrates how quickly alternative historical narratives can gain traction when supported by institutional power and popular anxiety. As populist movements continue to challenge liberal democratic norms globally, understanding the cultural mechanics of events like the Kurultáj becomes essential for comprehending how traditional practices can be mobilised to construct new forms of political belonging and legitimacy.

Notes

1. As this article aims to use Clifford Geertz' interpretation of 'deep play' as a theoretical framework, this opening paragraph pays homage to Geertz' famous 1972 article.
2. The National Gallop has been held in Szilvásvár since 2023.
3. Lyrics from the song *Turul* by famous Hungarian national rock (*Nemzeti rock*; a musical genre) band *Kárpátia*, named after the Carpathian Basin, the geographic region in which the ancient Magyar tribes settled in 895–96. The song summons a mythological bird to come and save the Hungarian nation.
4. Not to be confused with members of the interwar Turul Association, a radical right-wing student group (Kerepeszki 2014).
5. The National Song was written by national poet Sándor Petőfi (1823–1849), who read it during a public rally on March 15, 1848, and (as romantically credited) inspired the Hungarian Revolution against the Hapsburg Empire.
6. The AJPA was established in 1918 by Aleš Hrdlička who, according to the science news website phys.org (no date), defined physical anthropology as 'the study of racial anatomy, physiology and pathology' and 'put prominent eugenicist Charles Davenport on the AJPA editorial board, and used his connection to the racist and anti-immigrant Madison Grant to obtain funding for his new journal'.

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