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Clemens Pfeffer,
Eric Burton

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JULIA GLATHE, MIHAI VARGA

Far-Right Fan Culture in Russia:

The Politicisation of Football Hooligans on Russian Social Media

ABSTRACT This article investigates the relationship between hooligan groups and the far-right movement in the wake of Russia being awarded the 2018 World Cup. We research selected Twitter accounts and related fan blogs as well as social media channels of hooligan groups, and study three dominant frames circulating in the online hooligan scene in terms of their connection to the far-right movement: a) praise of violence, b) opposition to ‘modern football’ and c) racism. We show that the far-right influences the Russian hooligan scene, not only by tapping into existing racism and xenophobia, but also by shaping the forms and context of violence perpetrated by hooligans. Moreover, we demonstrate that the critique of ‘modern football’ – which has become particularly relevant in reference to the World Cup 2018 – is framed in an illiberal way and used to justify right-wing positions and violence by interpreting it as a form of ‘true’ and ‘un-corrupt’ fandom’.

KEYWORDS football hooliganism, Russia, far-right, social media, World Cup 2018

I. Introduction

The riots during the Euro 2016 Men’s Football Championship in France and investigations such as the BBC’s “Russia’s Hooligan Army” documentary have illustrated the radical and organised nature of the Russian hooligan subculture. These also conveyed the impression that Russian hooligans are preparing for a “festival of violence” on home soil in 2018, under the coordination of far-right actors with established polit-

ical connections. Although the FIFA Confederations Cup in Russia one year ahead of the World Cup was a peaceful and well-ordered event, only two weeks later thousands of Spartak Moscow fans caused new reason for concern with racist chanting, by singing “Banana, banana mama, why the f*** [does] the Russian national team need a monkey”.¹

Violent and racist activities of Russian fans are not a new phenomenon; although unique in terms of scale, an example is the Manezhnaya Square riot on 11 December 2010, when thousands of football fans joined neo-Nazi groups to attack migrants and police forces in central Moscow. Numerous further cases of xenophobic and racist incidents have occurred in Russia, as portrayed in hate-crime monitoring reports (see table 1).

Football fandom in Russia embraces diverse groups of individuals. It can be categorised by Deniz Davydov’s (2017) classification into *kuz’michi* (unorganized fans), *skafery* (active but nonviolent fans), *ultras* (an organised fan movement, actively and aggressively supporting their team and, in some instances, also participating in fights and mass brawls) and *hooligans* (the most aggressive part of the fan scene; groups of 40 or 50 people who prepare for fights and are well organised, with strict discipline). The violent part of the fan scene that has developed since the breakup of the Soviet Union has been substantially shaped by European hooliganism, in particular by its British version. In the 1990s, supporters in Russia adopted its clothes and terminology and started to structure the movement into small units, so called ‘firms’, which became involved in instances of disturbances at league matches, and street fights against each other (Reevell 2017). Especially in Russia’s largest cities, Moscow and St. Petersburg, a strong hooligan scene developed around ‘firms’ linked to the big football clubs Spartak Moscow, CSKA Moscow, Lokomotiv Moscow, Dinamo Moscow, and Zenit St. Petersburg (see table 2). During recent years the hooligan scene has in parts undergone a transformation from traditional European hooliganism to a subculture that engages in physical fitness, mixed martial arts training, and rejects the consumption of drugs and alcohol.

June 2015 – May 2016		June 2016 – May 2017	
Type of action	Count	Type of action	Count
Banners, other visual displays in the stands, graffiti	86	Banner, other visual displays in the stands, graffiti	84
Discriminatory Chanting	10	Discriminatory Chanting	2
Attacks	5	Incidents on the pitch	1
		Attacks	2
Total	101	Total	89
Type of discrimination	Count	Type of discrimination	Count
Far right and neo-Nazi symbols and slogans	79	Far right and neo-Nazi symbols and slogans	79
Against people from the North Caucasus	9	Against people from the North Caucasus	3
Against people from Central Asia	1	Anti-black racism	1
Against Albanians	1	Against Asians	1
Against Turks (Turkey)	1	Anti-Semitism	4
Anti-black racism	5	Homophobia	1
Anti-Semitism	1		
Islamophobia	1		
Russophobia	1		
Sexism	2		
Total	101	Total	89

Table 1: Cases of discrimination and far-right propaganda in Russian football, June 2015 – May 2017

Source: SOVA/Fare network 2017: 10f.

Football Club	Hooligan firms (some examples)
Spartak Moscow	Flint's crew, Gladiators Firm'96, Aliens, Shkola, Advance Guard, Independent Crowd, Kindergarten, Mad Butchers, Clock Work Oranges, Banda Boksera, Banda Tuka, Kabany, Industrials Firm, Clown's Band, Sindikat, Opposiciya, Slavyanki, Kindergarten, Mol Kraft, Kuklovody, BDD, Violation, B6 United, Shturm, White Position, TBF, Zapad, Hellish Legion, Vol'ksshturm, Druzhina
CSKA Moscow	e.g. Yaroslavka, Red-Blue Warriors, Einfach Jugend, Gallant Steeds, Zarya, Provincial'naya Sem'ya, Shady Horse, Jungvolk, K.I.D.S., Alfavit, Prodlenka, Butovo Horses, Khirurgi, VMF, Bastion
Lokomotiv Moscow	Funny Friends, Vikingy, Trains Team
Dinamo Moscow	Instrumenty, Rimskaya Devyatka, Korsary, Out Terraces Firm,
Zenit St. Petersburg	Banda Shveda, Nevsky Sindikat, Jolly Nevsky, Mobile Group, Snake Firm

Table 2: Hooligan 'firms' associated with football clubs in Moscow and St. Petersburg
Source: own elaboration based on Davydov (2017) and Opachin (2013)

The Russian authorities are aware of the threat of racist and violent fan groups and have tightened the regulation of fandom over the last couple of years (see Glathe 2017). State attempts to tackle the hooligan problem include high fines and stadium bans, together with the surveillance and intimidation of selected fan groups and their leaders. Moreover, officials have tried to co-opt leaders of hooligan firms as a strategy to control them.

According to experts, however, the strategy to appoint leaders of hooligan firms to work with fans in order to control them did not work, and might have, in contrast, even strengthened the dominance of far-right groups in the terraces (Sova/Fare 2017: 8). This becomes particularly visible when looking at the championships hosted by the Amateur Football League (LFL), where many fans still display neo-Nazi symbols and other racist banners (Sova/Fare 2017: 4). Among the most dominant far-right symbols identified by SOVA and Fare, are the Celtic cross or the 'SS Totenkopf' (skull) together with banners and clothing showing slogans

such as “Meine Ehre heißt Treue” (engl. “my honour is loyalty”, the motto of the SS) and “Jedem das Seine” (“To each his own”, the motto at the entrance gates of the Buchenwald concentration camp) (Sova/Fare 2017: 5). Moreover, the monitoring report by SOVA and the Fare network point to banners and graffiti containing anti-terrorist slogans, which are mixed with Islamophobic rhetoric, while xenophobic attacks on people of Central Asian origin or fans from the Caucasus inside stadiums are described as an alarming reality (Sova/Fare 2017: 5).

Against this background, this article researches the relationship between the far-right and the hooligan scene. It examines how far-right organisations approach the hooligan scene, and the content that they distribute. This is important, since even though the display of neo-Nazi and white supremacist convictions and symbolism is often documented in the case of Russia’s largest hooligan groups, and calls to limit the influence of the far-right among hooligans are often heard (Sova/Fare 2015), not much is known about the concrete attempts of the far-right to approach and politicise hooligans. This paper explores the frames circulated on the hooligan online scene and examines how far-right groups attempt to transform these frames. For this purpose, we selected six hooligan Twitter accounts and corresponding websites and analysed their content and the content of related websites.

The structure of this paper is organised as follows. We start with introducing the literature dealing with political and violent football fan practices and their relation to social movements, and concretely to the far right. We then present our approach, consisting of frame analysis and outline our sampling approach, giving an overview of the selected data. In the empirical part of the paper we discuss three dominant frames that emerged from the data analysis: (a) praise of violence, (b) opposition to ‘modern football’ and (c) racism. We conclude with a discussion of our findings.

2. Football fandom and political activism

During recent decades, numerous scholars have examined the relationship between football fandom and politics. They point to the stadium as a political space (Guschwan 2016) where political dissent or social resist-

ance (e.g. Taylor 1971) is expressed through visual, verbal and symbolic fan practices, and conceptualise football activism using the terminology of “new political movements” (Zaimakis 2016). They stress and study the role of fans in public protests, such as the Gezi protests in Turkey 2013 (e.g. Battini/Koşulu 2018), the mass unrest in Tuzla, Bosnia-Herzegovina (Gilbert 2018), or during the Egyptian revolution (e.g. Tuastad 2014). Moreover, they provide insights into nationalist and racist political frames shared and adopted by supporters (e.g. Cleland 2014; Llopis-Goig 2013; Trost/Kovacevic 2013) and growing claims ‘against modern football’ within the fan scene (e.g. Kennedy 2013; Vukušić/Miošić 2018). According to Dag Tuastad (2014), football has remained, particularly in authoritarian regimes with a suppressed or largely absent civil society, one of the few if not the only arenas open to the expression of social and political identities, political messages and struggles with authorities.

The football stadium as political space, and fandom as arena for social political identities, also provide space for illiberal positions. While much attention focused on racism in British football (Back/Crabbe/Solomos 1999), there is a growing number of studies focusing on post-communist countries and documenting racist, xenophobic and nationalist behaviour in football fandom, such as collective racist chanting, monkey noises, exhibition of neo-Nazi symbols, and violent attacks and riots against migrants, ethnic minorities and the LGBT movement (e.g. Arnold/Veth 2018; Fare/Sova 2015, 2017; Llopis-Goig 2013; Trost/Kovacevic 2013). However, only a few works investigate the relationship between fan or hooligan groups and the far-right movement in more detail, and explain how and at what places these groups inter-relate and communicate.

The politicisation of fans – particularly in the context of right-wing ideas – becomes even more relevant when considering the role of violence in football fandom. Adrien Battini and Deniz Koşulu (2018) have used the term “militant capital” to explain the position of fans in public protests. Physical confrontation skills acquired through fan practices around football matches are assessed as essential features of fans’ participation in political protests. In general, violence is often referred to in the context of ‘hooliganism’ and has been particularly discussed in regard to the British fan culture. Hooligans can be distinguished from non-hooligan supporters through their willingness to embrace violence, while at the same time they differ from ordinary

street gangs as they support specific football clubs (Spaaij 2008: 373). Hooligans' violence is closely related to fandom and claims to support one club (Radmann 2014). In the Russian context, instead of hooliganism, the term *okolofutbol'shiki* (literally 'around-football-ers') is more commonly used to refer to groups of fans and activities that are connected with violence (see Glathe 2016). Whereas in public non-scientific discussion, 'hooliganism' is often perceived as unpolitical and senseless violence, various scholars have pointed to the social meaning of violence (e.g. Bodin/Robéne 2014; Rehling 2011; Spaaij 2008).

The literature on the far-right singles out communities of football hooligans as one of the major subcultures providing support and recruits for the far-right (Caiani/Della Porta/Wagemann 2012). By far-right, we mean those informal or formal groups or individuals pursuing ethnic reductionism, a subordination of all political issues to the issue of the relationship between ethnic groups, and the prominence of one ethnos over the others. Most often they conceive ethnicity as something that one is born into, such as a culture, language, confession, religion, race, or a certain ancestry (Rydgren 2007; Varga 2014: 792).

While much of the literature concentrates on the other major subculture – skinheads – and its links to the far-right, football hooligans have not received the same attention in the far-right literature. Nevertheless, the studies devoted to how the far-right interacts with other subcultures inform the present paper. It is in particular the skinhead subculture, with its celebration of violence and partly also of racism, that is informative in this respect (Blee 2005; Simi 2010; Wood 1999). This literature reminds us that recruitment into the far-right is no mass phenomenon. Only a minority of these subcultures openly adhere to far-right ideologies such as national-socialism or white supremacism, and only small parts of these subcultures agree to participate in political actions, including violent actions with political aims; yet, despite such limited involvement, most acts of violence are attributable to subcultural groups' members (Blee 2005; Wood 1999). In fact, it is important to introduce here the distinction between narrative and strategic violence, developed in studies of the American far-right and its relationship to skinheads and other subcultures (Blee 2005): while major parts of these subcultures regard violence in the form of staged fights between groups as central to their identity, this sort of violence is 'narrative' rather than 'stra-

tegic’; this means affirming or narrating the boundaries and identity of the group, and is not concerned with the pursuit of political goals (this latter form would be ‘strategic’). Nevertheless, narrative violence can be racist (that is, targeting racialised others) and the affirmation of racialised boundaries can be central to its perpetrators.

An important issue in the literature is whether the far-right manages to channel subculture members towards perpetrating more strategic forms of violence (Simi 2010). We argue that what the online scene reveals about the far-right’s present-day attempts to approach hooligans in Russia is not so much about achieving coordinated attacks, but about shaping the hooligans’ version of ‘narrative violence’, complementing the existing narrative of rivalry between football teams and their supporters with one of enmity vis-à-vis ‘non-whites’. We make use in this context of the “frame alignment” concept of Benford and Snow (1986), arguing that what the far-right attempts is a “transformation” (Benford et al. 1986: 473) of the hooligans’ existing “schemata of interpretation” from one particular to the world of football and inter-team rivalry to one that is more systemic.

Another issue of particular relevance for our research is the effect on the far-right movement of the crackdowns and increased prosecution of far-right actions by authorities. As an effect of increased and more effective prosecution, the survival of the far-right movement takes prominence over political goals. Keeping alive “the spaces of hate” in which to circulate far-right ideas and gain new recruits is the key to such survival. Such “spaces of hate” refer to the “crashpads, concerts, backyard barbeques, and the Internet [where far-right members] meet, exchange ideas, and build solidarity” (Simi/Futrell 2010: 120). It is especially cybersphere that plays a crucial role in this context, as it helps to overcome the isolation of other far-right spaces and helps linking “otherwise disconnected local activists” (Caiani/Borri 2014; Simi/Futrell 2010: 120off.). Moreover, recent quantitative scholarship on the German situation showed that far-right content on social media does not only help the dissemination of racist ideas, but also “motivate[s] real-life action” and hate crimes against immigrants and refugees (Müller/Schwarz 2017). Studies concerning the far-right and hooligan cybersphere in Eastern Europe and in particular Russia remain scarce, despite the importance for many far-right and hooligan groups of maintaining and developing the existing cybersphere.

The far-right in Russia has a rich history of engagement in isolated and mass acts of violence, and football hooligans are just one subculture that far-right activists have tried to mobilise for their actions. In this respect, the presence of far-right messages we document in present-day Russia on hooligan online networks hardly constitutes a surprise. In what follows, we briefly introduce the Russian far-right, some of its key actors, as well as some of its best-known acts of violence, including those for which it joined its efforts with parts of the hooligan scene.

3. The Russian far-right and its engagement in violence

The Russian far-right can be traced back to the 1980's Pamyat' group; its paramilitary wing abandoned Pamyat' to establish the Russian National Unity (*Russkoye natsional'noe edinstvo*, RNE) in 1990. RNE constituted the most important far-right force of the 1990s, but by the early 2000s it had lost much of its clout among far-right adherents (Shenfield 2001; Varga 2008). The most important organisations to replace RNE were its direct descendants, Slavic Force (*Slavyanskaya sila*, SS) and later Slavic Union (*Slavyanskii soyuz*, SS).² The mid 2000s brought the creation of the Movement Against Illegal Immigration (*Dvizhenie protiv nelegal'noi imigratsii*, DPNI), established and led by former Pamyat' member Aleksandr Belov (Plotkin). The DPNI played a decisive role in organising "The Russian March", the largest event to bring far-right organisations together, a demonstration which has taken place in Moscow yearly since 2005; the DPNI also facilitated violent mass mobilisations of members and supporters in response to alleged crimes of immigrants, most importantly in the case of the 2006 Kondopoga arsons (Tipaldou/Uba 2014). In 2004, skinheads and former RNE members established the National-Socialist Society (*Natsional-sotsyalisticheskoe obshchestvo*, NSO). In terms of participation in the "Russian March", the NSO was by the mid-2000s as important for the far-right as the DPNI. Given its involvement in some 27 politically motivated murders between 2007 and 2008, most NSO leaders were imprisoned, forced to leave the country, or committed suicide (Varga 2017). However, as argued in the empirical part, NSO survivors continued their activities and still represent the major far-right network striving to politicise the hooligan scene.

Alongside formal organisations, the parts of the skinhead subculture that adhered to racist ideologies (national-socialism, white supremacism) formed another important component of the Russian far-right (Pilkington/Garifzianova/Omel'chenko 2010; Tarasov 2001). Gangs emerging from this subculture organised several mass attacks on people with non-Slavic complexions in the early 2000s (the Yasenevskaya market and the Tsarytsino metro station pogroms being the best known). They were also involved in the killing of close to 500 people in individual attacks in the second half of the 2000s (Laryš/Mareš 2011; Varga 2017). The second half of the 2000s also produced better organised groups, operating underground, preparing attacks in advance, ensuring a certain selection of victims, and securing access to weapons and explosives (Laryš/Mareš 2011). The first and best known group emerged from the St. Petersburg hooligan scene, the eight-member NSBTO (*Natsional-sotsyalisticheskaya boevaya terroristicheskaya organizatsiya*, or the National-Socialist Combat Terror Organisation). It existed between 2003 and 2006, carrying out at least nine murders before most members were arrested and one shot dead by police (Worger 2012).

With the arrest or death of NSBTO, NSO and other violent members of the far-right scene, as well as with increased scrutiny of the far-right mobilisation following the Kondopoga uprisings, it appeared that authorities were finally in control of the situation by 2010, and that “the state authorities have been aware of the plans of the extremist groups and have been able to prevent the occurrence of such [a pogrom-like] a scenario” (Laryš/Mareš 2011: 138). Yet 2010 was to see by far the most spectacular mobilisation to that date, with some 3,000 football hooligans and far-right activists rioting on the very close to the Kremlin located Manezhnaya Square to avenge the death of a Spartak fan at the hands of Caucasians, raising hands in Nazi salutes, clashing with police, killing one and injuring at least 40 other people (Glathe 2016). The DPNI was banned following its encouragement of violence on Manezhnaya, but the ban against DPNI and many other far-right organisations (including the Slavic Union and the NSO), did not settle the issue of violence, with thousands participating in 2013 in the Biryulyovo riots near Moscow.

This brief exposition of the Russian far-right's post-communist history serves the purpose of highlighting the context in which hooligans interact with the far-right, a context in which the two sides cooperated repeatedly.

While the far-right could never truly mobilise hooligans to participate in more than riots, it is important to remember that it was the hooligan scene that gave the far-right its first “white hero”, Dmitri Borovikov, the former Zenit hooligan and leader of the NSBTO, killed by authorities during his arrest, and commemorated ever since by the far-right as the first symbol of ‘white resistance’ (Varga 2017; Worger 2012). Furthermore, the Manezhnaya riot showed that even when under the scrutiny of authorities, hooligans and far-right activists could challenge the government by launching their most spectacular mobilisation to date. The next section presents our methodology of selecting and analysing several hooligan twitter accounts to draw a series of conclusions about how far-right actors attempt to influence the hooligan scene.

4. Methodology

Our analysis is based on six Twitter accounts of fan and hooligan groups (see table 3). Building on a previous study of the Russian right-wing hooligan subculture (Glathe 2016), we selected these accounts by taking “FansEdge88” (FE88) as the starting point from which to keep track of their followers and respective following accounts to select further relevant accounts. FE88 proved to be a significant player within the right-wing hooligan network, linked not only to numerous hooligan groups but also to various far-right organisations of neo-Nazi and white supremacist orientation, such as NSO-descendant Wotan Jugend, or White Rex. By screening the tweets of their followers and the accounts that FE88 members themselves follow, we selected other accounts sharing content that we classified as far-right in the sense of posting racist, white supremacist, or national-socialist symbols. The linked profiles of these accounts (followers and pages they follow) were likewise examined and selected to establish whether their content qualified as right wing. We only chose accounts of groups, rather than individual accounts which have at least 50 followers and are still active. Altogether, we found 21 accounts meeting the defined criteria (i.e. right-wing content, content of violence, group accounts and still active) from which we chose six accounts that seemed to be of particular importance in terms of content in order to help answer our research question.

In comparison to the period of the previous study, that observed websites until February 2014, we found that far fewer accounts show openly far-right content. We interpret this as the result of a significantly stricter prosecution of ‘extremism’ and violence in sport.

Twitter Account	Followers	Following
@gladiators_firm	11,200	173
@russian_ultras	9,858	21
@ultra_spartak	7,607	9
@fanstyle	7,060	33
@FansEdge88	1,637	124
@revansh14	241	68

Table 3: Selected Twitter Accounts

Source: own elaboration

Although FE88 was our starting point, we observed that other Twitter accounts are even more connected within the virtual network of fan and hooligan groups. In terms of followers, Gladiators_Firm proves to be the most relevant user (11,200), followed by Russian_Ultras (9,858) and Ultra_Spartak (7,607). In contrast, FE88 is followed by only 1,637 users, but remains an important source due to its immense posting activity.

Figure 1 indicates a relatively dense network of the selected right-wing fan and hooligan groups. It illustrates that most of the selected accounts are connected among themselves. Except for one account (Fanstyle), every account is followed by at least another user of our sample. Russian_Ultras are followed by three and Ultra_Spartak by four accounts of the sample. There are two ‘cliques’ (the yellow lines in figure 1) of inter-connected accounts, having connections that can be assessed as particularly close (Revansh and FE88; Russian Ultras and Ultra Spartak), and there is a ‘circle’ of three accounts with links going in one direction (Revansh, Gladiators, FE88); we interpreted this as also indicating closeness (see red lines in figure 1). From

both the relatively high number of followers and the characteristics of the network it can be assumed that our selected sample represents significant cases within the Russian right-wing fan subculture, making our study relevant despite the small size sample.

We researched each Twitter account to select data and then analysed this data in more detail, using an inductive approach. Within the scope of the selected twitter accounts and corresponding web sites, various forms of information and data were collected, including articles, interviews (sometimes biographical) with fans and hooligans, various visual expressions of fandom such as graffiti, banners, and stickers, as well as photos and videos of fan performance.

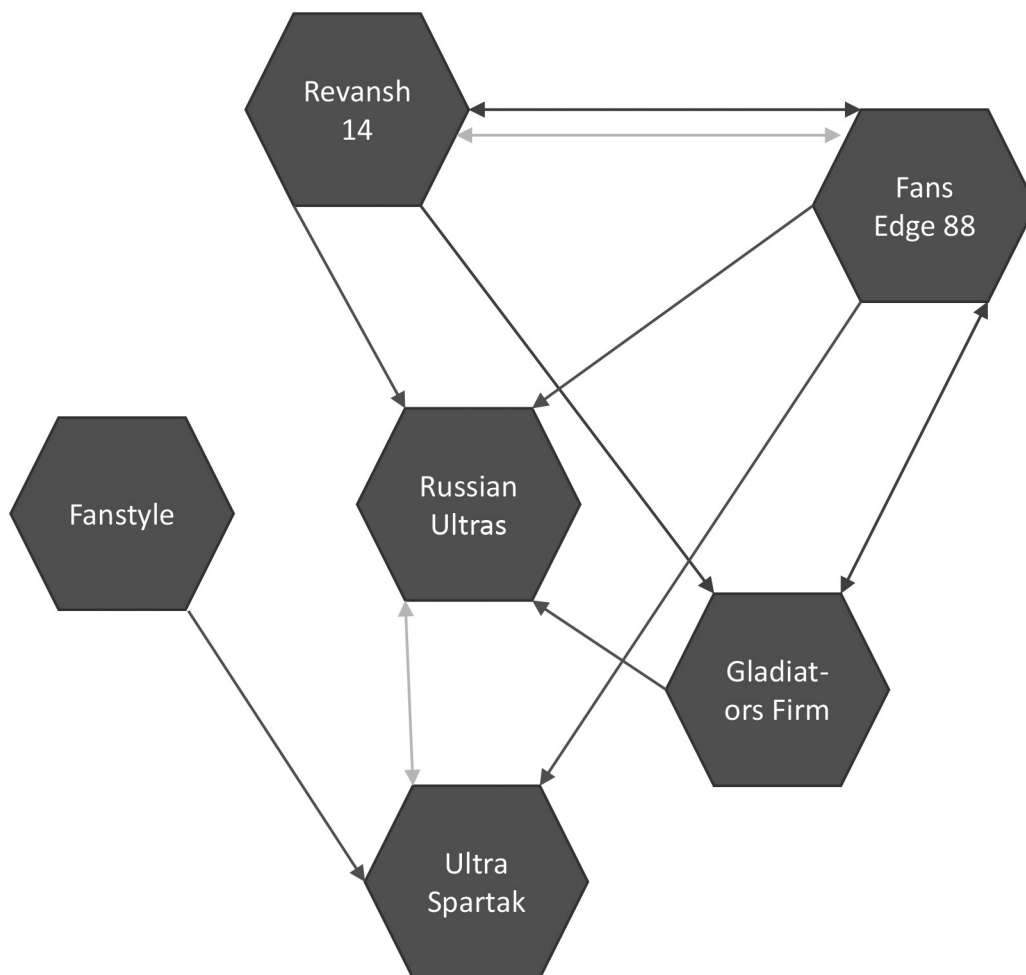


Figure 1: Ties between selected twitter accounts

Source: own elaboration

The sampling procedure described above is aimed at selecting several significant cases of right-wing politicised football-related social media accounts in order to examine in depth their content and that of related websites and blogs. We consider the selected Twitter accounts as significant, since all of them contain racist and nationalist content, show high numbers of followers (apart from @revansh14, see table 3), and are part of a common online network (see figure 1). By analysing the selected accounts we intend to demonstrate some of the frames that connect fans with the far-right movement. Due to the small sample size, however, we are not able to generalise our results to the whole hooligan movement in Russia. We are also not able to assess the impact of the selected accounts on the fan community in general. Instead, we seek to identify points of contact that have remained unexplored so far and to develop hypotheses regarding the relationship between fans and far-right actors and the ways in which organised groups politicise and shape the fan movement today. Frame analysis reveals not only ideological overlaps, but also strategies and spaces of politicisation that are used by far-right actors. Future research projects could complement the analysis of social media channels by field research, including qualitative interviews and field observation.

5. Frames of interaction between the hooligan scene and the far right

In this paper we apply frame analysis to identify several major frames that serve as a base for interaction between the hooligan scene and the far-right. Here, we discuss three frames that emerged from the analysis of the above-mentioned Twitter accounts and affiliated websites. First, there is the imagery of the violent football hooligan, participating in mass brawls but also taking revenge for alleged acts of violence committed against fellow hooligans by Russian citizens from the North Caucasus. Second, the enmity towards established structures of modern football, from the Russian Football Federation to UEFA, forges the much-hated image of the corrupt football official promoting 'tolerance' and banning hooligans from stadiums. Third, racism and enmity in particular towards Caucasians but also towards black players, has long formed the common ground between hooligans and

the far-right in Russia. As we argue below, far-right actors attempt something akin to ‘frame transformation’, that is to transform the way in which hooligans relate to Caucasians from a position of enmity towards other ethnic or religious groups into a narrative in which Europeans defend the ‘white world’ from racialised others.

5.1 Framing violence

We distinguish the following forms of violent practices shaping the Russian hooligan subculture on the basis of how the selected Twitter accounts present violence inside and outside the stadiums: a) crowd troubles and mass brawls around match days³ (see e.g. posts by *Gladiators_Firm* 22.04.2016; *fanstyle* 12.04.2017; *Ultra_Sever* 31.3.2017; b) informal mixed martial arts (MMA) fighting in the woods or at other outlying places (e.g. *fanstyle* 01.07.2017; *fans-edge.info* 09.06.2012); c) formal MMA tournaments (e.g. *fans-edge.info* 23.02.2015; 29.04.2015); and d) racist attacks (e.g. *fans-edge.info* 11.06.2013; 18.09.2013). The social meaning and subjective realities of violent practices can be monitored best at the Twitter account of FE88, as they regularly produce interviews with members of, and publish articles about, the hooligan subculture. In various texts, the notion of an ongoing ‘war’ is presented as an essential component of the subculture. ‘Firms’ (groups of hooligans participating in organised fights) are perceived as armies, and people involved in fights are referred to as warriors that defend the honour of their teams or countries (*fans-edge.info* 17.03.2017). Fighting fans and hooligans are contrasted with the normal Russian population that is afraid or unable to fight in a war and to defend its ‘homeland’ (*fans-edge.info* 17.03.2017). To put it in Anoop Nayak’s words, fighting heroically and bravely in an imagined war articulates a “masculine fantasy” (Nayak 2005) that is shared within the Russian hooligan subculture.

That violence is framed and legitimised within a discourse about what constitutes masculinity, is an insight other researchers have pointed out earlier in regard to the hooligan subculture (e.g. Radmann 2014: 559). What distinguishes the Russian case is that masculinity is not only understood in terms of hardness, strength and fearlessness, but also as being healthy, athletic, and, above all, not drinking (*fans-edge.info* 12.06.2016). This sense of masculinity reminds one of a ‘straight edge’ lifestyle and seems to be one element that connects hooligans with far-right actors in Russia

who also claim ‘straight edge’ ideas. For instance, the Russian neo-Nazi group Wotan Jugend, an organisation formed by remnants of the NSO and whose texts feature heavily on FE88, explain that the notion of Straight Edge refers to self-control, and argue that “smoking and the consumption of alcohol are signs of weakness that finally result in your defeat [...] Similar dependencies are generally unworthy of a white person, and in the case of struggle a criminal offence”.⁴ This kind of far-right straight edge imagery and messages found its way into stadiums, as a banner in the colours of tsarist Russia (by far the most widespread political symbol among Russian fans of right wing orientation) reads “Die for your homeland. And not from heavy drinking” (see photo 1). This slogan was included in the Federal List of Extremist Materials in 2011 and was used, for example, by the far-right during the so-called Russian March 2012 in Kaliningrad.



Photo 1: Russian fans with straight-edge banner
 Source: posted by @revansh14 on September 29th 2015⁵

Aside from the notion of ‘war’, fights are perceived as a sport in a more trivial sense, where men want to compete and show their strength (fans-edge.info 17.03.2017). Recent developments where younger men seemingly join the movement just because fighting has come into fashion is negatively

assessed by the old hands (fans-edge.info 11.06.2015). Devotion and fidelity to the team, the collective, for one's "brothers and friends" is understood as essential in order to know why and whom to fight for (fans-edge.info 11.06.2015). In this view, violence is not a value in itself, but something that is valued only in connection to loving football and the team. While it is not surprising that hooligans make sense of violent practices, the question that arises here is under what conditions violence follows political reasons. Here, we observe a transformation from violent practices in the forms of a) (brawls) and b) (organised fights) to c) professionally organised tournaments. While forms a) and b) use violence to assert the participants' identity of hooligans or *okofutbol'shchiki* as being attached most and foremost to their team, form c) seeks to erase differences between supporters, and constructs a narrative of the 'white warrior'.

Examples of tournaments include "Strakha NET" (engl. No Fear), which was held annually until 2014 by the two neo-Nazi hooligan groups "Einfach Jugend" and "Red Blue Warriors", both supporting CSKA Moscow (fans-edge.info 04.02.2014). Another example (fans-edge.info 04.12.2012) is the tournament "Dukh voina" (engl. Fighter Spirit) which has a larger scale and is more professionally organised. It drew the participation of many organised collectives and showed just how large the scene of mixed-martial arts clubs is in Russia, in particular in Moscow (participating MMA clubs include Vityaz', Rod, the White Rex Fight Team, Perun, Rusich, and Voin Moskya, Ratibor). Another neo-Nazi series of fighting events in Russia is "Donskaya vol'nitsa", whose organisers declared in an interview published by FE88 that they aim to spread a healthy lifestyle and to attract the "healthy white youth to competitive sport" (fans-edge.info 21.01.2013) [an analysis of pictures taken by the organisers shows that fights were organised under the banner of Soproivlenie, a neo-Nazi organisation headed by former martial arts champion Roman Zventsov]). This tournament still exists in Russia, as becomes clear from their Vkontakte profile, but is no longer advertised on FE88.

Some of these tournaments became professional events organised by companies or sport clubs such as White Rex (e.g. Dukh Voina) and Rusich (e.g. Russian Crossfit Championship, Open boxing championship 2017), commercial entities that deny having any political aims whatsoever. Despite these claims, such actors nevertheless communicate their ideolog-

ical allegiance, either through visual symbols or by commenting on events. For instance, in 2017, White Rex, on its Facebook website, branded as a “racial traitor” a Russian woman facing a death sentence in Vietnam for carrying drugs for her Nigerian partner. On the visual side, White Rex and Rusich ‘warriors’ display an ever-growing array of tattoos, often centrally figuring runes and SS skulls. Materials produced by these groups (both also sell apparel) is replete with Nazi and white supremacist symbolism. For instance, White Rex products feature “established 14.08.08” (“14” is an allusion to David Lane’s ‘14 words’, the key US-white-supremacist slogan; “08.08” an allusion to “Heil Hitler”). The PPDM-group (*Po programme Dedushki Moroza*, Father Frost Program), a group of body-builders using the White Rex and Rusich brands, even renounces fighting, replacing it with body-building and fitness-events entitled “Hammer of Will” (*Molot voli*). PPDM-videos of its members showing their rune tattoos and brandings, muscles, and training sessions are heavily distributed on hooligan twitter accounts and websites. PPDM, while restraining from political commentaries, also uses the Nazi “Jedem das Seine” (in Russian translation) as its slogan. Again, any kind of *okofutbol’shchiki*-allegiances are downplayed in the organised events of PPDM, White Rex, and Rusich, and instead leave room for a ‘white brotherhood’ identity and a discourse that frames violence (in the form of participating in tournament fights) as preparation for a future or even the present, in which, according to White Rex, “in Moscow we are not masters anymore” (this comment illustrates a picture showing Muslims gathering in Moscow).

5.2 Framing resistance ‘against modern football’

Protest activities against a so-called ‘modern football’ represent a central project that has united and mobilised fans in many European countries since the beginning of the 1990s (see e.g. Kennedy 2013). Under the slogan ‘against modern football’ (AMF), this movement criticises the growing commercialisation of football and aims to ‘reclaim’ the sport that is perceived as being increasingly taken away or becoming alienated from its (traditional) fan base (Vukušić/Miošić 2018: 440). In this context, they also criticise increasing state attempts to control and restrict supporters’ activities, measures including pyrotechnics, choreography and banners, as well as the surveillance of fans (*ibid.*). Despite the common frame regarding an

alienating commercialisation of modern football, the specific struggles and opponents of the movement differ between different regions due to the local political context (Brentin/Hodges 2018).

In the Russian case the hooligan subculture frames the participatory struggle around ‘modern football’ in an illiberal way. It frames the critique of a commercialised form of football in xenophobic and racist terminology, particularly in reference to transfers and the naturalisation of foreign players. The naturalisation of foreign players is seen as a symptom of ‘modern football’ and particularly criticised in cases of black football players (fans-edge.info 16.02.2016). It is argued that there would actually be enough Russian players, and so it is therefore not necessary to naturalise foreign players (fans-edge.info 07.06.2016), a point sometimes illustrated by visual frames warning of a threatening black dominance (fans-edge.info 22.01.2016). Moreover, the critique of ‘modern football’ commercialisation is directed against established institutional structures, from the Russian Football Federation (RFS) to UEFA, and often finds its expressions in slogans such as “Love football. Hate UEFA” (fans-edge.info 15.09.2016) or “RFS – Mafia” (Gladiators_Firm 12.11.2014). For the hooligans, these institutions create corrupt modern football, officially promoting ‘tolerance’ while banning hooligans from stadiums. Telling, in this context, is the reaction to the case of trainer Igor Gamula (of the football club Rostov), disqualified for five matches after “joking” about too many black players in the team during a press conference in October 2014 (ria.ru 12.11.2014). Referring to this incident, Gladiators_Firm has posted a caricature of a vampire representing the “RFS mafia” (Gladiators_Firm 12.11.2014) who is sucking blood out of a football and titled with the hashtag #JusticeForGamula (in the original #PravdaZaGamuloj). Here, it becomes obvious that the RFS is not only hated for its role in commercialising football but also for enforcing rules against racism that are perceived as illegitimate repression.

Moreover, racism is propagated and justified by linking the commercialisation of ‘modern football’ and ‘modern fandom’ to a loss of values and morality: “In times when the fan sector is loudly chanting the names of African legionnaires, when smartphone flashlights replace good old [pyro]fires, and likes in social networks are more valued than honesty and decency. One would like to say that not everything can be bought with money and that there are people who in any case remain faithful to their

ideas and continue supporting one's club for ever and everywhere" (fans-edge.info 12.04.2016). The rejection of corruption, of 'modern' forms of entertainment and of cheering for "African legionnaires" are all mentioned together and reflect an understanding in which 'tolerance' vis-à-vis black players is assessed as immoral, as it stands for the desire merely to make profit. In contrast to that, authentic fandom is seen as shaped by values such as honesty, decency and faithfulness, which involves a rejection of foreign players, even if they contribute to the club's success. This quote also indicates an understanding of 'modern football' as liberal and tolerant, something they quite clearly reject (see photo 2).



Photo 2: Russian fans with anti-tolerance banner
Source: published by Revansh14 on January 15th 2015

The hated image of the corrupt 'modern football' official promoting 'tolerance' becomes even more relevant ahead of the World Cup 2018. Just a few weeks before the Confederations Cup (taking place one year ahead of the World Cup and basically representing its dress rehearsal), fans of Spartak Moscow hung two huge banners during the derby against Lokomotiv Moscow in response to a BBC documentary on Russian hooligans. In the film, Russian fans and hooligans were portrayed as preparing for a festival of violence. In contrast to this view, the two banners promoted a totally different picture of football fans in Russia presenting them as

welcoming, using the hashtag “WelcomeToRussia2018” and the cutline *Bolelshchiki Bolshoy Strany* (“Fans of a great country”). However, these banners were not left uncommented by online hooligan outlets. At first, the fan group “Ultra Sever” (@ultra_spartak) distanced itself from the banner (ultra_spartak 18.03.2017). Subsequently, Revansh14 posted several comments regarding the banner, attacking it as symptomatic of ‘modern football’ in a similar way as discussed above. One of the posts represents a photo (see photo 3) contrasting Polish hooligans who are proud of their violent image, with modern Russian ultras who are promoting a welcoming image of Russian fans ahead of the World Cup, subtitled “true ultras / modern ultras”. Another post by Revansh14 condemned this banner as a sign of the corruption which is leading to the “death” of the “true” fan movement (14.revansh.org 18.03.2017). In this context, ‘modern ultras’ appear not only as tolerant and open-minded but as manipulated by business groups who destroy the authentic fan scene that was violent, dangerous and independent.



Photo 3: Banners preceding the World Cup 2018

Source: published by Revansh14 on March 18th 2017

5.3 Racism

Racist ideas constitute a common denominator when it comes to the political ideas shared by the networks studied for this paper. There are, however, large differences in the extent to which the networks researched openly support racist ideas. Well-known groups such as Gladiators hardly express any racist ideas that go beyond the boycott of Caucasian locations for Spartak hooligans. ‘Gladiators’ represents one of the best-known ‘firms’ associated with the team Spartak Moscow. Even where the Gladiators commemorate the death of firm members or Spartak supporters, allegedly at the hands of Caucasians, there are no racist comments accompanying the posts (examples include Yurii Volkov, killed in 2010, and Anton Feoktistov, killed in 2015). Nevertheless, Gladiators also participate in the re-posting of fellow Spartak fans’ ‘banana chanting’ at players of African origin, as well as banners defending such chanting by claiming that “banana is no crime, we ate, eat, and will eat it” (Gladiators_Firm 14.01.2016).

In contrast to Gladiators, FE88 and Revansh14 do not just express a more developed form of racism: going far beyond the simple white/black labelling or ‘banana chanting’, these networks openly circulate neo-Nazi and white supremacist content. We were concerned not just with the content, but also with the source of this content (it turned out that it almost never originated on the respective websites), as well as with which forces of neo-Nazi orientation stood behind these materials. We were particularly interested in FE88, given that its Twitter account features a higher number of posts than other hooligan accounts (7,000 posts since 2011), and given that it is followed by groups with relatively high numbers of followers, such as Gladiators (11,000 followers vs. only 1,600 in the case of FE88). In fact, the FE88 political thematic session is by far the section with most posts, going back to 2012 (unlike “Against modern football” for instance, which only goes back to 2014).

Most political posts on websites and associated Twitter accounts such as FE88 are authored by far-right activists of Wotan Jugend or its predecessor, Restrukt. Restrukt and Wotan Jugend, established by former NSO-members Martsinkievich and Roman Zheleznov, represent the dominant far-right voice on Fans Edge. They openly praise late NSO leaders Maxim Bazylev and Roman Nifontov, who both committed suicide after the NSO was banned in connection with 27 murders. Both Bazylev and Nifontov

produced numerous written materials in which they praise violence, and in the case of Bazylev even encouraged terror acts against Caucasians, Central Asians and Russian state authorities. On every April 20, the birthday of Adolf Hitler, Wotan Jugend posts laudatory material on Hitler, usually re-posted by Fans Edge. They also publicise and encourage actions such as “White Wagons”, in which unidentified people of ‘Slavic appearance’ abuse and throw out of tram or metro wagons persons who appear to be of different origin. The most recent (August 2017) FE88 post describes an attack on Iranian students in Orel, leaving three of them hospitalised, and mentioning that on the same day the Orel Jokers (another, Orel-based, ‘firm’) marked its anniversary.

A task that FE88 took upon itself is to cultivate the memory of the most extreme forms of far-right violence in Russia. Thus its re-posts from Restrukt/Wotan Jugend include overviews of when “pogroms used to be big” and part of “terror” campaigns, as well as laudatory presentations of “white heroes” such as Bazylev and Borovikov. The tone in these articles remains one of deep enmity, not just towards immigrants, but also towards authorities, with open calls for violence against the government. FE88 dedicated numerous posts between 2014 and 2015 to the conflict in Ukraine, taking, in the name of solidarity with another ‘white’ people, the side of Ukraine. Also in this case, most texts were re-posts from Wotan Jugend.

6. Conclusion

Our analysis found that, despite the authorities’ offensive against the far-right of neo-Nazi orientation, this segment of the far-right is still very active in circulating political material among hooligans. It also attempts to export its oppositional stance vis-à-vis government into the hooligan scene. Here, it taps into the discontent of hooligans with ‘modern football’, and specifically with the leadership of the Russian Football Federation and of UEFA, as well as of major Russian football clubs.

The second finding relates to the increasingly varied far-right actors that approach the hooligan scene: remnants of the NSO in the guise of Restrukt and Wotan Jugend, with their open neo-Nazi propaganda, have been joined by newer organisations such as Soprotivlenie, Rusich, White

Rex and PPDM. These organisations – sport clubs or commercial companies – claim to have more in common with sport (especially mixed martial arts) than with politics, with most leaders coming from the world of sport (comprising practitioners of martial arts but also football hooligans). Some, such as White Rex and RusUltras even specialise almost exclusively in the production of apparel (mostly t-shirts and longsleeves) that they distribute or sell at events they helped to create. However, despite their at first sight de-politicised appearance, these organisations are headed by former neo-Nazis (PPDM), or use Neo-Nazi and white supremacist visual codes (stylised swastikas and Nazi-imagery and allusions such as “established 14.08.08”), and often express outright support for white supremacy. Their videos are heavily circulated within the networks researched, showing that the neo-Nazi far-right has managed to keep a foothold in the hooligan subculture.

Narrative violence – in particular in the form of mass fights between hooligans – remains the main form of violence openly celebrated in the Russian hooligan scene; in this sense, there is little that entitles one to speak of ‘politicisation’ in the sense we referenced in the introduction, with the Western media fearing that hooligan violence might be coordinated by far-right actors. Nevertheless, over the last decade the Russian far-right has attempted to politicise narrative violence and influence its forms and narratives. First, there is an ongoing transformation from the anonymous hooligan participating in mass fights to the heavily-built, rune-tattooed tournament ‘warrior’. Second, this visual transformation is accompanied by a change in lifestyle, producing an understanding of masculinity that is linked to a ‘straight edge lifestyle’. Perhaps most telling in this respect, straight edge ideas as a base for interaction between the hooligan scene and the far-right movement become particularly obvious in the case of the body-builders and fighters forming the PPDM collective. They regularly produce videos that promote a hard masculine image and call to pursue a straight edge lifestyle, including fitness, weight training, abstention from alcohol consumption, and a healthy diet. PPDM body-builders tattooed the straight edge symbol on their arms, and it also features in their logo (it is drawn conveniently to resemble the Gifu Rune, also used by the Neo-Nazi Thor Steinar label). One of their recent videos, produced by White Rex, calls for the overcoming of “fear and weakness” that results from

“conformity, tolerance and individualism” (fans-edge.info 06.01.2017). These images contrast strongly with the stereotypical image of hooliganism, as depicted for instance by Konstantin Smirnov in his 2012 documentary film “Nefutbol”, showing “Yaroslavka firm” members (CSKA supporters) drinking, smoking, and verbally abusing women.

Another finding of our study concerns the protest ‘against modern football’ that displays an illiberal framing within the Russian hooligan scene. It connects the critique of commercialisation with a rejection of an open-minded and liberal fandom, constructing these qualities as embodiments of corruption and alienation from ‘true’ fandom. It targets modern fan and entertainment practices such as smartphone flashlights and the hated selfies instead of pyrotechnics, as well as any appreciation of black players from abroad. In the context of the Russian fan scene, commercialisation is interpreted as corruption, and in that respect an open-minded fandom is discredited as corruptible and its encouragement by authorities viewed as a strategy to manipulate football for financial interests. This perception comes to a head in relation to the marketing of the Russian Federation as a welcoming host of the World Cup 2018. The commercialisation endorsed by institutions such as UEFA and the RFS is seen in sharp contrast to a perceived displacement of original and authentic fandom that is increasingly regulated and controlled by the state, so that the question has been raised regarding whom or what exactly the World Cup is intended for (Ultra_spartak 20.05.2017). The perception of an increasing displacement of the authentic fan scene and thus the restriction of a space for a specific social political identification is apparently evoking resistance in the form of violence and racism, perhaps because this is a very spectacular way to distance oneself from ‘modern football’. At the same time, this illiberal way of framing resistance ‘against modern football’ produces new areas of contact with the far-right movement in Russia.

1 The target of the chanting was Lokomotiv goalkeeper Guilherme, <https://www.facebook.com/WeAreCSKA/videos/670721219798604/>, 24.02.2018

2 There were also far-right organisations with different genealogies, of tsarist and orthodox inspiration, and those of the Eurasian movement; since these organisations were less connected to the hooligan scene, this paper does not mention them further. See Kozhevnikova and Shekhovtsov (2009) for an encompassing review of all currents of Russian nationalism.

- 3 For videos and photos documenting riots in Marseille during the European Championship see tweets between June 11 and June 15 2016 at @russian_ultras
- 4 In the original: „Kurenje i upotrebljenje spirtnogo – te slabosti, kotorye rano ili pozdno privedut tebya k proigryshu [...] Podobnye zavisimosti voobshche nedostoiny belogo cheloveka, a v usloviyach borby prestupny.” <https://vk.com/88wotanjugend14>, 24.02.2018.
- 5 This photo, originally published by Ultrasnews (Nr. 7), additionally presents the following specification: “Let alcohol rule our enemies inside and outside the stadium...but we stay abstinent, healthy, strong – to make it short, we will be real football hooligans – in the positive sense of the word.”

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ABSTRACT Die Studie untersucht die Beziehung zwischen Fußballhooligans und der rechtsradikalen Bewegungen in Russland vor dem Hintergrund der dort anstehenden Fußball-Weltmeisterschaft 2018. Anhand der Analyse ausgewählter Twitter Accounts und dazugehöriger Fan Blogs und Social-Media Kanäle von Hooligan Gruppen arbeiten wir drei zentrale Frames der Online Community und die damit verbundenen Verknüpfungen zur rechtsradikalen Bewegung heraus: a) Enthusiasmus für Gewalt, b) Gegnerschaft zu ‚modernem Fußball‘ und c) Rassismus. Wir zeigen, dass die rechtsradikale Bewegung nicht nur bestehende xenophobe und rassistische Deutungsmuster aufgreift, sondern auch die Form und den Kontext der von Hooligans verübten Gewalt prägt. Darüber hinaus stellen wir dar, dass die Kritik an ‚modernem Fußball‘, die insbesondere vor dem Hintergrund der anstehenden Weltmeisterschaft an Relevanz gewonnen hat, in Russland ein illiberales Framing aufweist, wodurch rechte Positionen und Gewalt gerechtfertigt und als ‚wahres‘ und ‚unbestechliches‘ Fan-Sein interpretiert werden.

Julia Glathe
Osteuropa-Institut der Freien Universität Berlin
julia.glathe@fu-berlin.de

Mihai Varga
Osteuropa-Institut der Freien Universität Berlin
mvarga@zedat.fu-berlin.de