

# PERCEPTION OF THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR AND THE IMAGES OF RUSSIA AND UKRAINE IN THE PROTEST MOVEMENT 'FRANKFURTER FREIGEISTER' IN FRANKFURT (ODER)

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**Abstract:** The German government's reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, and in particular the policy of sanctions against Russia and the supply of arms to Ukraine, led to a wave of discontent in parts of German society. The issue of the Russo-Ukrainian war was taken up by protest movements in various cities that had already formed at that time (including during the COVID-19 pandemic). The most regular and numerous were the demonstrations in East Germany, where thousands of people protested every Monday in the so-called 'Montagsdemonstration'. The 'Frankfurter Freigeister', a protest movement in Frankfurt on the Oder in Brandenburg, were no exception. The multitude of Russian flags, the contradictory demands and the aggressive actions of the protesters raise a number of questions about their perception of the Russo-Ukrainian war itself and of Russia and Ukraine in general. This article looks at the issues raised by the 'Frankfurter Freigeister' in relation to the war and the factors that may be driving them. But first of all, how does this protest movement perceive the Russo-Ukrainian war and the role of Russia and Ukraine in it?

**Keywords:** Russo-Ukrainian war, Ukraine, Russia, full-scale war, Eastern Germany, protest movements, Montagsdemonstration, Frankfurt (Oder), Brandenburg

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## I. 'Frankfurter Freigeister'

*'Hello lovelies, the German government is driving us further and further into a war against Russia.'*

(*'Frankfurter Freigeister'* on 05.02.2023)

Germany, Brandenburg, Frankfurt (Oder), Monday 17 October 2022, 6pm. The drumming, whistling, honking and shouting can be heard throughout Frankfurt city centre. The demands are controversial and, at first glance, appear to have little in common. Various posters, banners and numerous Russian flags seem incongruous in this context. Later, the column passes directly in front of the European University Viadrina. The protest - a 'Montagsdemonstration' - is repeated week after week, on the same day, at the same meeting point, at the same time.

The 'Frankfurter Freigeister' protest movement emerged in Frankfurt (Oder) during the COVID-19 pandemic as a response to the protective measures implemented by the federal and state governments. Following the conclusion of pandemic-related restrictions, it might be expected that the protests of the 'Frankfurter Freigeister' would come to an end. However, the outbreak of the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war and the response of German politicians to it became the new focus of the so-called 'Montagsdemonstration'. The Russo-Ukrainian war provided the protest movement with a new basis for expressing criticism and dissatisfaction with Germany's political decisions, giving it a second wind.

In the media, the protest movement was subject to close observation with a primarily critical stance. The press offered a sceptical account of the 'Frankfurter Freigeister', portraying them as a 'controversial' and 'conspiracy ideological' political group (Bau/ Kutzner 2021; Kluge 2022; Moreno 2023; Oderwelle 2023b). The protesters were often associated with right-wing extremist sentiments, a potential for violence and even with links to the so-called 'Reichsbürger' (Moreno 2023; Oderwelle 2022; Oderwelle 2023b). The press devoted particular attention to incidents such as the harassment of school students during the distribution of political advertising material on school grounds and the physical attack on a group of counterdemonstrators at a so-called 'large-scale peace demonstration' organised by the 'Frankfurter Freigeister' (Moreno 2023; Oderwelle 2023a; Oderwelle 2023b).

In contrast to the relatively superficial press reports, this work aims to provide an insight into the inner realities of the 'Frankfurter Freigeister' protest movement. The analysis is focused on the subjective perception of the Russo-Ukrainian war and, moreover, of the two countries involved. The conclusions presented are the result of an exhaustive analysis of the textual contributions, visual materials, video footage, and actions published on social media by the protest movement.

## II. Russo-Ukrainian war

Eight years after the occupation of the eastern Ukrainian regions, which was presented by the Russian government as a 'civil war', Russia launched a full-scale war against Ukraine on 24 February 2022. As a result, Ukraine is now engaged in a continuous, existential defensive struggle. The Russo-Ukrainian war is still ongoing, even at the time of this study, on the internationally recognised territory of Ukraine. Most of the damage has been and continues to be done to non-military infrastructure, resulting in the deaths of thousands of civilians in Ukraine. Put simply, the roles in this war are distinctly defined.

It is essential to understand that Russia attacked Ukraine on 24 February, without formally declaring it a 'war', but instead labelling it a 'special operation'. However, this time the war is not being justified on the grounds of another actor or a 'civil war'. Ukraine is attempting to defend its people and its territories, and is receiving financial, humanitarian, and military support (in the form of ammunition, combat vehicles, etc.) from various states, including the United Kingdom, Germany, Canada, Poland, France, the Netherlands, the United States, and many others (cf. Antezza et al. 2023). It is pertinent to enquire as to how these few facts are interpreted by the protest movement 'Frankfurter Freigeister'. What are the protester's perspectives on the Russo-Ukrainian war and the two countries in general? What roles are assigned to them in the comprehension of this protest movement and what characteristics define them?

### **III. 'Montagsdemonstration' in the focus of social science**

Most studies on the so-called 'Montagsdemonstration' do not focus on how protesters view the war between Russia and Ukraine (cf. Reichardt 2021; cf. Fröhlich/ Ranft/ Vollmann 2023). Furthermore, the main studies look at just two federal states: Saxony and Thuringia. According to these studies, the demonstrations were particularly widespread in these federal states (cf. Fröhlich/ Ranft/ Vollmann 2023; cf. Freund-Möller et al. 2023). Brandenburg and its 'Montagsdemonstration' are outside the academic focus here. Although in 2022, up to ten thousand people protested every Monday throughout the state (cf. Lohse 2022).

In contrast to the demonstrator's sceptical attitudes towards the pandemic, the topic of the Russo-Ukrainian war only emerges as a supplementary issue within the scientific context of the 'Montagsdemonstration'. Following the conclusion of the pandemic-related restrictions (a key demand of the protesters), it would be reasonable to assume that the demonstrators would no longer be pursuing their original purpose in taking to the streets. Nevertheless, they continued their protests, and the number of participants in them increased, as did the intensity of their expressions.

### **IV. Frankfurt (Oder): Context of the city**

With a population of approximately 57,000, Frankfurt (Oder) is the fourth most populous city in the German state of Brandenburg (Statista 2023). Frankfurt is situated near the German-Polish border and interacts extensively with the neighbouring Polish city of Słubice. Formerly a promising city in the GDR, Frankfurt is now one of the most economically disadvantaged cities in Germany, with a significant burden of debt.

The city of Frankfurt and its inhabitants experienced an extremely traumatic period during the reunification of Germany. The 1990s in Frankfurt were defined by a series of challenging socio-economic factors, including the rise of right-wing extremism, high rates of violence, unemployment, economic decline and the emigration of approximately one-third of the population. The negative experiences that occurred during and after reunification in Frankfurt starkly contrasted with the more positive ones that took place in the former GDR. This is the socio-political context in which the protest movement, known as the 'Frankfurter Freigeister', was established.

### **V. East and West**

The Federal Republic of Germany has been a unified state for over three decades. The laws of the Federal Republic of Germany and the laws of the European Union are legally binding throughout the country. Common language, currency, television, newspapers, the

sporting world championships and football – there are numerous areas of common interest between the two sides. After all, there is no border between East and West Germany and therefore no more border controls. Nevertheless, a number of differences remain, including those in salaries, architectural styles, identity, and attitudes towards life and political events (Faus/ Storks, 2019; Hans Böckler Foundation, 2022). The border that separated East and West Germany, while no longer a physical presence, nevertheless retained its tangible and significant impact on the lives of individuals and their collective consciousness.

Notwithstanding the impact of globalisation, the internet and social media, the ‘post-reunification generation’ is also shaped differently in East and West Germany (cf. Faus/ Storks, 2019). Despite having grown up in a unified country, West and East Germans born after reunification have been socialised differently (Faus/ Storks 2019: 73). This characteristic is more pronounced among the older generations, who were socialised in the former FRG or GDR. A study on the first post-reunification generation, published by the Otto Brenner Foundation, indicates that the narrative transmission of the transformation experiences of the preceding generation has a particular effect on the socialisation and political and social attitudes of young people (Faus/ Storks 2019: 73). This is determined by the impact that reunification had on the parents (Faus/ Storks 2019: 73). Consequently, we can speak of disparate socialisation, orientation and ideological patterns between East and West Germany, which influence the interpretation of society and politics.

The phenomenon of the ‘Frankfurter Freigeister’ established in East German society cannot be researched without consideration of the post-socialist context of today’s East Germany. This also includes the ideational influences of the former GDR, which were passed on from generation to generation in East Germany and have a lasting impact on the present day. The special relationship with the former Soviet Union, which is often transferred to modern Russia, is also historically and politically rooted and cannot be separated from it. The confrontation between the Eastern and Western blocs, between socialism and capitalism, constituted an essential aspect of the prevailing paradigm of life. Especially for Germany, which stood at the centre like no other country when the border between the two blocs fell.

## **VI. Ideological interrelations between the former GDR and USSR**

What characterised everyday life in the former GDR? The GDR continued to celebrate May 8th, the ‘Day of Liberation’, as a public holiday until 1968. Military cemeteries of fallen Soviet soldiers, pioneers, Soviet memorials. School essays about the heroic deeds of the Soviet soldiers who liberated the German people from fascism. Soviet films and books, fairy tales, fictional characters – this and much more was closely associated with the USSR in everyday life in the GDR (cf. Kowalczyk/ Wolle 2001). This constituted a significant aspect of the reality in which individuals in the GDR were socialised and with which they were indubitably familiar. Once internalised, these models became formative for the subjective perception of the individual and for their view of the world.

The words ‘The Soviet Union was such a fairytale castle full of wonderful things’ were used to describe the perception of the USSR in the GDR (Kowalczyk/ Wolle 2001: 9). The Soviet Union was perceived as a fairytale castle, wherein all aspects of life were dichotomised into black and white and in which the Soviet soldiers stood for the ‘good’, whereby they were usually simply called ‘Russians’ (Kowalczyk/ Wolle 2001: 10). The ‘Soviet’ was an inseparable part of GDR society. The term ‘Soviet’ was used interchangeably with ‘Russian’ by the general

public. This is exemplified by the popular designation of the olive-green colour of the Soviet soldiers' uniforms as 'Russian green' (Kowalczyk/ Wolle 2001: 10). The equalisation of the USSR and Russia in the GDR served to highlight Russia in comparison to the other Soviet republics. Consequently, the other Soviet republics were relegated to a position of lesser visibility and influence, overshadowed by the prominence of Russia. As a consequence of the enduring Russocentrism, these countries were effectively excluded from the everyday knowledge of the GDR. Similarly, Ukraine constituted the 'invisible' component of the Soviet Union in relation to Russia.

Certain approaches to the GDR's politics of remembrance that emerged in the post-war period also play an important role in the perception of 'Frankfurter Freigeister'. The GDR presented itself as a 'peace-loving state' within the 'peace-loving' community of socialist states, which was contrasted with the 'West' as a supposed 'warmonger' (Tillack 2012: 29). The GDR propagated the notion of itself as a 'peace-loving Germany', wherein fascism and hatred of nations were deemed incompatible, a perspective that was also validated from the outside, including the Soviet Union (Tillack 2012: 29). The GDR therefore opposed the FRG, which was accused of failing to acknowledge its Nazi past (Tillack 2012: 30). In the Soviet occupation zone of Germany, the concept of socialism was equated with that of peace, as the region was compelled to join the community of socialist states. This association resulted in the automatic ascription of an anti-fascist stance and a perception of 'peace-lovingness'.

As with socialism itself, the concept of peace became an integral aspect of the GDR's socio-political paradigm. The 'peacefulness' of the GDR and the socialist states was emphasised in newspaper articles, reports, speeches at memorials and in everyday life (Tillack 2012: 31). The 'dove of peace' was one of the most frequently encountered political symbols in the GDR (cf. Wolle 2022). The song 'Little White Dove of Peace', composed by kindergarten teacher Erika Schirmer, achieved considerable popularity throughout the GDR and became an 'earworm' (cf. Wolle 2022). The popularity of this song in the GDR was a curious paradox: 'Probably no other song was sung so tirelessly in the GDR and peace was every other word in a state that was armed to the teeth.' (cf. Wolle 2022). In the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, the GDR song 'Little White Dove of Peace' has experienced a new wave of attention in Germany (cf. Merz 2022). It is also sung by protesters in Frankfurt.

## **VII. Selection of data and analysis**

The results presented here are based on an analysis of the official telegram channel of the 'Frankfurter Freigeister' protest movement. The telegram channel is the sole communication channel for the protesters, both in terms of internal and external communication. As asserted by the demonstrators themselves, no alternative channels of communication are in operation. The telegram channel serves as the primary source for the exchange of information and announcements regarding upcoming demonstrations and protest actions among the movement's supporters. Telegram also plays an important role in protest movements in Germany, which largely used it to organise and inform themselves, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (cf. Pivtorak et al. 2023). Even after the pandemic and especially in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, it was and is actively used (cf. Pivtorak et al. 2023).

The period covered by this study is 13 months, extending from February 2022 to February 2023. This time span is intended to represent the development of the representation of the Russo-Ukrainian war by the protesters in the initial year. Furthermore, contributions from the period preceding Russia's invasion of Ukraine will be analysed. This allows for an

examination of whether specific preconceptions were already present before the war escalated.

This research project is concerned with the analysis of the narratives through which the Russo-Ukrainian war and the images of the two states are constructed and presented by the 'Frankfurter Freigeister'. In addition to the systematic approach, the qualitative content analysis allows for a flexible interpretation of the data, enabling the capture of a comprehensive range of narratives. To achieve this objective, a content-analytical category system was employed for the categorisation of the textual material. One of the methods of quantitative content analysis, frequency analysis, is suitable for determining the significance of certain topics in the media representation of the war by the protesters (cf. Mayring 2022: 15). The data, which has been qualitatively analysed and categorised, is thus subjected to further quantitative processing to facilitate a comparison of the occurrence of the different narratives.

### VIII. Supercategory 'Image of Russia'

The statements of the telegram channel 'Frankfurter Freigeister', which focused on Russia in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, were assigned to the super-category '*Image of Russia*'. Four categories emerged from the analysis of the material obtained. The data for this supercategory were recorded in Figure 1.

The category '*Doubts about the presentation of Russia's role in the Russo-Ukrainian war*' was assigned to those statements in which Russia is not clearly presented as the party that attacked Ukraine but appears in another role. For example, as a state 'against which a war was declared' or which was 'forced' to do so. The spectrum of categorised statements ranged from denying the possibility of a Russian attack on Ukraine to the statement on a poster on 11 October 2022: 'Ami go home; Russia is NOT the enemy!' In contrast to the US, Russia was defended and indirectly absolved of responsibility for the war.

On the day of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a so-called 'peace rally' was organised in Frankfurt, which was actively advertised on the 'Frankfurter Freigeister' telegram channel. At this event, people with clearly recognisable Ukrainian symbols were verbally attacked, insulted and ostracised. The same did not apply to Russian symbols. Two months later, on 24 April 2022, the 'Frankfurter Freigeister' questioned Russia's role in the Russo-Ukrainian war with the statement: 'Why is the guilt of the war declared one-sided here [?]'. The invasion of Ukraine was also relativised by the fact that the other states 'do not recognise Russia's protest and its security interests' (29.06.2022). On posters, demonstrators defined Germany's current policy and relations with Russia as 'hatred and incitement' (26.09.2022) and called for a 'return to diplomacy towards Russia' (11.10.2022) and consideration of the 'legitimate security interests of all, i.e. including Russia' (25.11.2022).

In the case of '*Equation of contemporary Russia with the former USSR*' statements were assigned where it was clear from the context that the former USSR was being referred to as 'Russia'. Thus, in these cases, Russia was equated with - or embodied - the former USSR. In most cases, these statements referred to the Second World War, such as on 16 February 2022: 'In retrospect, this unprecedentedly painful war should have welded Germany and Russia together forever.' Again, of all the Soviet republics, only Russia was singled out and placed in the spotlight. On 9 January 2023 it was written: 'A German government has thus led Germany into a war against Russia AGAIN - AGAIN!!!' with a reference to the Second World War, which again was only about Russia, while Russia was only part of the former So-



viet Union, more precisely one of the 16 Soviet republics (from 1940). Furthermore, it could be questioned what exactly the 'Frankfurter Freigeister' were referring to when they used the words 'Russian' or 'Russia' in other cases: whether they meant exclusively 'Russian' and 'Russia' or rather 'Soviet' or 'the Soviet Union'.

The category '*Positive relations with Russia or the special German-Russian relationship*' included statements that had a positive connotation towards Russia or referred to the special relationship between Russia and Germany. The statements subdivided here took different forms: from a slogan on posters a few days before and directly on the day of the Russian attack on Ukraine on 24 February 2022 'I stand for peace with Russia' to a clear position in favour of 'German-Russian friendship!' (seven months after the invasion of Ukraine, on 26.09.2022). At several demonstrations a banner in German and Russian, designed in the colours of the Russian flag, was carried: 'Together against sanctions and warmongering' (8.11.2022; 23.01.2023). The demonstrators demanded, among other things, 'Finally leave Russia alone and away with the sanctions!' (22.11.2022). Finally, a banner on a car 'Side by side with Russians', with an oversized Russian flag in the background, clearly expressed the position of the protest movement (26.02.2023).



**Fig. 1:** Number of statements assigned to the supercategory 'Image of Russia' in the period 1.02.2022–28.02.2023

The category '*Recognising Russia's role as the aggressor in the Russo-Ukrainian war*' referred to a clear identification of Russia as the state that attacked Ukraine. In total, there were only two statements in the 13 months analysed here. These statements were each accompanied by a reference to another actor. For example, the statement from 12 March 2022 was linked to the narrative of US influence and the alleged 'bio-laboratories': 'On 24 February, the day Russian troops invaded Ukraine, US President Biden ordered all bio-laboratories in Ukraine to be sterilised [...]'. On 29 June 2022, the Russian attack on Ukraine was clearly described as an 'invasion' and even classified as a 'crime against international law'. Nevertheless, it was relativised with the presumed 'provocation' by the West, which was the central focus of the passage: 'Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a crime against international law. But this crime was prepared by the West and deliberately provoked by the massive arming of Ukraine.'

Figure 1 clearly shows the frequency of each category. While the first category '*Doubts about the presentation of Russia's role in the Russo-Ukrainian war*' contains rather undecided, neutral to relativising statements, the statements assigned to the third category '*Positive relations with Russia or the special German-Russian relationship*' include clearly positive descriptions of Russia. Furthermore, almost half of the statements fall into this category. The category '*Equation of contemporary Russia with the former USSR*' is more concerned with historical and emotionally charged statements, none of which can be defined as critical of Russia. Only in the fourth category does Russia's negative role in the Russo-Ukrainian war take the form of a clear identification of Russia as the aggressor. But even in these cases, Russia's guilt was mentioned more as a side issue, which in turn served as a bridge to addressing the role of the US and the West in this war. Consequently, the primary objective was not to condemn Russia as the aggressor. From this, it can be inferred that 'Frankfurter Freigeister' protest movement has a clearly positive image of Russia in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war.

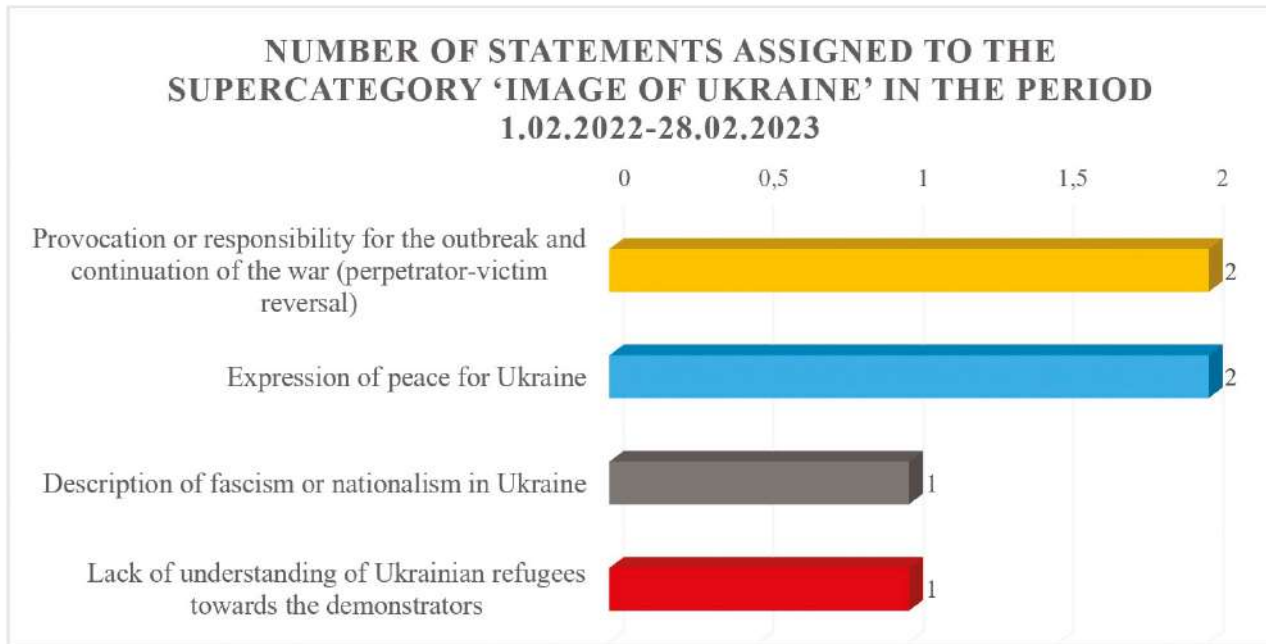
### IX. Supercategory 'Image of Ukraine'

Statements from the Telegram channel regarding Ukraine in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war were categorised within the supercategory '*Image of Ukraine*'. As Ukraine was rarely the focus of attention of the 'Frankfurt Freigeister', the categories to which the statements were assigned became increasingly specific, with some categories containing only a single statement. Four categories emerged during the analysis, which are explained in greater detail in this section. The data for this supercategory are shown in Figure 2.

The category '*Description of fascism or nationalism in Ukraine*' focused on statements that explicitly or implicitly alleged the presence of fascism or nationalism in Ukraine. In this case, one such mention was identified throughout the analysed period, and it marked the first occasion on which the focus was placed on Ukraine. On 20 March 2022, a screenshot was published accompanied by the following text: 'Video from the Facebook group 'Anti-maidan.deutsch' about fascism in Ukraine deleted.' The report was subjected to criticism on the grounds of censorship in the media, which allegedly portrayed a 'different' image of Ukraine than that represented by the 'Frankfurter Freigeister' and therefore did not allow this information to be disseminated.

In the category '*Provocation or responsibility for the outbreak and continuation of the war (perpetrator-victim reversal)*', the statements were classified as such when the responsibility for the Russo-Ukrainian war was attributed to Ukraine itself. For example, on 24 April 2022 - two months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the 'Frankfurter Freigeister' claimed: 'The Ukraine-war would never have taken place if Zelensky had accepted the offer of neutrality' and later 'Ukraine (President) rejected a comprehensive European security agreement with the participation of the USA and Russia and neutrality'. Ukraine was thus declared responsible for Russia's actions, including the military invasion of Ukraine by another state and for the war in general. The narrative portrayed Ukraine as having a 'right of co-decision' or an active role in initiating the war, or as having the option to decide for itself.





**Fig. 2:** Number of statements assigned to the supercategory *'Image of Ukraine'* in the period 1.02.2022–28.02.2023

The category *'Lack of understanding of Ukrainian refugees towards the demonstrators'* also contains a single statement. Following the broadcast of the RBB television programme *'Wir müssen reden'* on 18 October 2022, the *'Frankfurter Freigeister'* published a statement on the event two days later. The statement offered a critique of numerous aspects, including the alleged lack of understanding expressed by the Ukrainian refugee women regarding the challenges faced by demonstrators, with a particular focus on the women's citizenship status.

The category *'Expression of peace for Ukraine'* included statements in which the *'Frankfurt Freigeister'* explicitly referred to Ukraine in their expression of desire for peace. This represents a significant aspect of the protest movement, which saw only two statements over the course of the 13-month period. The initial statement was released on 11 October 2022 and featured a multitude of demands, including the Ukrainian aspiration for peace: *'Peace for Ukraine [...] no arms deliveries to war zones'*. Two weeks later, this statement was reiterated on another poster, this time in Ukrainian: *'Mu хочемо миру'*. No additional related statements were identified, either in visual form or in textual format on the Telegram channel.

Ukraine is the subject of only six mentions over the thirteen-month period (see Figure 2). This makes Ukraine a relatively infrequent focus of the *'Frankfurt Freigeister'*. This equates to less than one mention per month. In the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, which is being waged on Ukrainian territory, it is evident that Russia is far more prominent than Ukraine. This is evidenced by the fact that, in the same period, there have been 31 statements relating to Russia (see Figure 1), which represents less than a fifth of the total number of statements relating to Ukraine. Therefore, it can be concluded that Russia is the subject of greater interest among the *'Frankfurter Freigeister'* in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war than Ukraine.

## X. 'Frankfurter Freigeister' and their perception of the Russo-Ukrainian war

Three months after the military escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian war, the first official 'Montagsdemonstration' was organised by the 'Frankfurt Freigeister'. From this point onwards, the protest movement found organisers and speakers for their demonstrations, in addition to preparing the necessary equipment, including loudspeakers and stages. The protest movement became increasingly organised and began designing their own posters and flyers for the purpose of advertising the weekly 'Montagsdemonstration'. The 'Frankfurter Freigeister' made a significant advancement: originating as informal 'walks', an organised and progressively expanding protest movement with considerable mobilisation potential developed within a few weeks. This is evidenced, among other things, by the number of participants in the Frankfurt 'Montagsdemonstration', which, according to police statistics, reached over 1,000 people in a period of one and a half months and reached its culmination on 26 September 2022 with almost 2,000 demonstrators.

From the first demonstration organised and registered by the 'Frankfurter Freigeister', the focus of the gathering was directed in particular towards the Russo-Ukrainian war. On the protest movement's first invitation leaflet (see Fig. 3), published on 3 June 2022, it was emphasised that the alleged 'supporters of the war' - 'supporters of arms deliveries to Ukraine' - were not welcome at the demonstration. This remained the only demarcation. This demonstrates both the negative connotation of Ukraine and the lack of condemnation of Russia's military aggression as well as the dissociation from right-wing groups. On 8 June 2020, the 'Frankfurter Freigeister' published the first poster for the 'Montagsdemonstration' in the visual form we know today.



Wir laden ein:

am 6. Juni, um 18:00 Uhr, zur Demo in Frankfurt (Oder).

Die Versammlung wurde unter dem Thema:

**Demo für Frieden, Freiheit, Selbstbestimmung**

angemeldet. Es ist eine themenoffene Veranstaltung. Einige Einschränkung: Die Befürworter von Waffenlieferungen in die Ukraine sind nicht erwünscht, da dies ein Anheizen des Krieges und viele weitere Todesopfer bedeutet. Die Veranstalter bitten die Kriegsbefürworter, nicht an diesem Demonstrationzug teilzunehmen.

Treffpunkt:

Montag den 6. Juni 2022 um 18:00 Uhr auf dem Marktplatz vor dem Rathaus.

Wir laufen die durch die Spaziergänge bereits bekannte Runde. Im Anschluss kann jeder, der das Bedürfnis hat, an einem offenen Mikrophon in manierlicher Weise das Wort ergreifen. Wir stehen und laufen für Frieden mit allen Völkern der Welt, für unsere Freiheit und für Selbstbestimmung.

Wir fordern unter anderem eine freie Impfenentscheidung und das sofortige Verbot dieser mRNA Substanzen, die Rechte unserer Kinder zu wahren und eine friedliche und lebenswerte Zukunft in Freiheit. Wir sagen "Nein" zu jedem Krieg und zu Kriegstreibern!

Wir fordern die Aufarbeitung der Geschehnisse der letzten 2 Jahre in unserem Land und dass die Verantwortlichen endlich in persönlicher Verantwortung genommen werden!

Erwünscht sind Lichter, Kerzen, Herzen, Schilder und Banner.

Wir bleiben jeden Montag friedlich, standhaft und entschlossen, bis wir wieder in Frieden, Freiheit und Selbstbestimmung leben können.

Die Veranstalter bitten die Teilnehmer um ein entspanntes Verhältnis zur Polizei.

Katrin Arnold (Versammlungsleiter)



Fig. 3: Poster for 6 June 2022

Fig. 4: Poster for 13 June 2022



Fig. 5: Poster for 30 January 2023



Fig. 6: Poster for 25 February 2023

The posters for the demonstrations of the 'Frankfurter Freigeister' clearly reflect their dynamic in relation to the Russo-Ukrainian war (see Fig. 3-6). It begins with a simple invitation leaflet with a 'dove of peace' and a short text for the 'Montagsdemonstration' on 6 June 2022 (Fig. 3). A final version of the poster was produced for the demonstration on 13 June 2022, which was repeatedly updated: again, with a 'dove of peace' above Frankfurt city centre and a demand for 'peaceful coexistence instead of warmongering' (Fig. 4).

On 30 January 2023 the poster template was changed for the first time: in black, white and red, with tanks in the foreground and a (presumably shot) bleeding dove (Fig. 5). The degree of brutality increases even further in the next poster. In preparation for the 'large-scale peace demonstration' scheduled for 25 February 2023, commemorating the anniversary of the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war, Frankfurt is replaced in the background by ruins, a cemetery and a mushroom cloud with two children looking out of a window (Fig. 6).

Two months after the first official demonstration of the 'Frankfurter Freigeister', on 15 August 2022, the protest movement declared the position on the Russo-Ukrainian war to be the **lowest common denominator of all demonstrators**. During the entire period analysed, it was repeated that the war was 'currently probably the most important issue' for the entire protest movement (16.01.2023) and that it was 'the dominant topic at the Montagsdemo' (23.01.2023). This realisation has enormous significance for understanding of the dynamics of this movement: The COVID-19 pandemic, through which the 'Frankfurter Freigeister' had emerged as a protest movement, lost its primacy over the Russo-Ukrainian war, which became the new primary source of motivation for the protest.

The demonstrations organised by the 'Frankfurter Freigeister', were called for 'peace, freedom, self-determination'. However, by taking a clear stance against the supply of armaments to Ukraine, the protest movement refused to support a country in its defence against an aggressor. The impassioned appeal for 'peace' was predominantly interpreted as a mere



absence of military conflict or even as occupation of Ukraine by Russia, which had been 'coerced into it by the West'. This also corresponds to the contradictory logic of 'peace' propagated in the former GDR. The supposedly 'peace-loving' attitude of the 'Montagsdemonstration' and the protesters themselves is emphasised in almost every self-description, such as 'our demonstration for peace, freedom and self-determination', 'peaceful but loud for peace', 'peaceful and friendly people', 'peace activists' many other variations. Their own 'peaceful' position placed in stark contrast with Germany's official political line: 'On Monday, 17 October 2022, 1,100 to 1,200 people took to the streets in Frankfurt (Oder) to demonstrate for peace and against the policies of our government.' (18.10.2022).

The 'Frankfurter Freigeister' repeatedly express mistrust of German politics in relation to the Russo-Ukrainian war: 'We are currently experiencing propaganda about the Ukraine war, which continues to deliberately stir up fear.' (15.10.2022). Germany's role in this war has been overstated and misrepresented: 'By supplying weapons to Ukraine, German politicians have not only approved of World War 3 with Russia, they have encouraged it.' (15.10.2022). By providing military support to Ukraine, among other things, Germany is portrayed therefore not only an active party to the war, but also the cause of the war.

Despite the ambition to know the 'truth' and to be supposedly neutral, the 'Frankfurter Freigeister' are undoubtedly pro-Russian. This is evidenced not only by the visible display of Russian flags at the weekly demonstrations. The 'Frankfurter Freigeister' cite information from Russia's state media and use hashtags in Russian. The solidarity with Russia is expressed with posters such as 'Side by side with Russians'. It should also consider the 'security interests of Russia' and 'build mutual trust' (25.12.2022). It is notable that there is no reference to the people of Ukraine or the responsibility of Russia for this war.

## **XI. Conclusion**

In the period under analysis, from 1 February 2022 to 28 February 2023, the protest movement 'Frankfurter Freigeister' demonstrated on a regular basis and was accompanied by a variety of contributions on their Telegram channel. In the period following the escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian war, this topic became of such significance among the protesters that it became the 'lowest common denominator' of all 'Frankfurter Freigeister' (15.08.2022). An increasing number of texts, posters and speeches from the protest movement made reference to the Russo-Ukrainian war and the two countries involved.

The prevailing images of Russia and Ukraine in the protest community in Frankfurt were completely different. The distribution of the protesters' attention between Russia and Ukraine was also clearly unequal. Russia was far more often the focus of the 'Frankfurter Freigeister' and, in contrast to Ukraine, was portrayed as an independent actor. In general, the perception of Russia within the protest movement was predominantly positive. The protesters referred to the former USSR and sometimes confused it with today's Russia. Despite its former affiliation with the Soviet Union, Ukraine, in contrast to Russia, was regarded as a 'terra incognita' by the 'Frankfurter Freigeister', with only occasional and superficial references. The results are thought-provoking and offer potential avenues for further research.

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