

Processing of the Russian war against Ukraine in the lyrics of **Ukrainian rappers** in Ukraine, Germany, and Russia

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abstract

This article is a linguistic exploration of the lyrics and selected social media posts of nine contemporary rappers from Ukraine, Russia, and Germany, all of whom are of Ukrainian descent. The selection of these artists is based not only on their ethnic background but also on their considerable popularity and cultural influence within their respective countries. The primary objective of this study is to examine the pragmatic aspects of their lyrics and linguistic behavior, with particular attention to potential instances of language shift or code-switching, which can be socio-politically motivated. Additionally, the article explores the role these artists play in the socio-political landscape shaped by Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine. Given that rap has emerged as one of the most dynamic genres in global mainstream music, it is imperative to analyze the messages conveyed in its lyrics, as they now reach a significantly broader audience compared to the genre's early decades (1970s–1990s). Many of these musicians have attained the status of opinion leaders, amplifying their sociopolitical influence. Within the broader context of East Slavic linguistic dynamics, the choice of language – regardless of its pragmatic function – can itself serve as a potent political statement.

KEYWORDS: Ukraine, Russia, Germany, rap lyrics, language.

Since the honorary doctorate for rapper Kanye West in 2015¹ and the Pulitzer Prize for Kendrick Lamar in 2018,² rap has not only arrived in the mainstream but is one of the most dynamic music genres today. Rap, a genre that initially emerged in the US in the 1960s/1970s as entertainment, but also as a musical protest against discrimination, poverty, violence, and other sociopolitical grievances,³ is still ideally suited today for analyzing the processing of war as the culminated form of violence. Its roots in protest make it a powerful tool for engaging with and understanding sociopolitical issues. Rap's cultural origin, political, social, and economic circumstances strongly influence the lyrics, which serve in the present study as a basis for a linguistic analysis in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which started in February 2022. Although the beginning of the war dates back to the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, the events of February 2022 confronted more Ukrainian musicians as well as musicians of Ukrainian origin with a new reality. The language of their lyrics became a political statement, regardless of whether the musician conceived a political connotation for the song or not.

The following article examines the linguistic behavior of rappers from Ukraine, Russia, and Germany after February 2022. The selection of rappers for this analysis is based on their status as the most popular rap artists in Ukraine for 2022 or, in the cases of Russia and Germany, as the most popular rappers of Ukrainian origin. The question is how the war influences the tension between Ukrainian, Russian, and Ukrainian-Russian bilingualism in the lyrics, and whether any code-mixing or code-shifting



Monatik, T-fest, Capital Bra, Alyona Alyona, GeeGun, Olexesh, Kheitspich, Youra, and Kalash44.

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phenomena occur.⁴ The question is highly relevant for several reasons: (1) Ukraine has been strongly influenced by Ukrainian-Russian bilingualism in recent decades;⁵ (2) there has been a trend towards the emancipation of Ukrainian language since the 1990s⁶, which was strengthened by the war⁷ and; (3) many Ukrainians have emigrated in recent decades, e.g. to Russia and Germany,⁸ and in their new realities of life, they may look at the linguistic realities in Ukraine differently and; (4) the Russian government made the language question or the question of the alleged discrimination against Russophone Ukrainians one of the main reasons for attacking the neighboring country.⁹ Relevant to the study are musicians born and/or socialized in Ukraine and whose creative work center is Ukraine, Russia, or Germany. In total, lyrics by nine musicians were analyzed – from Ukraine: Monatik, Alyona Alyona, Kheitspich; From Russia: T-Fest, Gee-Gun, and Youra; and from Germany: Capital Bra, Olexesh, and Kalash44. The choice of musicians is based on their popularity: they are the most streamed musicians, who identify themselves as Ukrainians in the rap genre in their countries. Aspects such as music video analysis, the performance of sociopolitical content at the concerts, and semiotics of the design of the releases are not part of this analysis, as these and similar factors exceed the linguistic questions posed in the article and are domains of other academic disciplines.

Researching East Slavic rap

The analysis in this article concerns rap produced by professional musicians who identify themselves as Ukrainians, and

are working in Ukraine, Russia, or Germany. Accordingly, it also involves research on rap in these three countries, focusing on rappers from Ukraine. Music reviews and journalistic analyses of rap are not considered here, as these formats generally lack or only partially maintain the standards of scientific objectivity.

In terms of Ukraine, as early as 2005 Laada Bilaniuk noted that the choice of language in the lyrics of Ukrainian musicians can be an ideological question,¹⁰ and that, for example, in rap as the “language of the street” *surzhyk* (a colloquial hybrid of Ukrainian and Russian) is also used.¹¹ At the same time, from a sociological point of view, the rap subculture in Poland and Ukraine is described as a postmodern rebellion against the past (socialism) and the present (conservatism)¹², where language style becomes the central characteristic of identification.¹³

THE FIRST CHRONOLOGICALLY Ukrainian philological publication about rap in Ukrainian addresses the strengthening of national consciousness by using the Ukrainian language in the lyrics in 2017.¹⁴ Also, the publication notes that until the mid-2010s, Ukrainian rap contained many calque borrowings from Russian, which has since changed. Ukrainian-language rap continues to develop, not only in the underground or the sub-cultures, but also among the broader public. With the rapidly declining influence of Russian, the linguistic quality of the lyrics also tends more toward standard Ukrainian.¹⁵ This trend aligns with the broader societal shift in Ukraine, where the use of the Russian language is sharply declining, particularly in the aftermath of 2022.¹⁶ By creating a connection between France and Ukraine

and recognizing rap as part of modern Ukrainian culture, Ukrainian music in the 21st century is positioned as part of European and global pop culture.¹⁷ The process of Europeanisation and globalization is also understood as the renaissance of Ukrainian rap and popular music in general, because the musicians become more aware of Ukrainian as a part of this rebirth after the Soviet time¹⁸. Most musicians have partially or entirely distanced themselves from the Russian language and Russia since 2014, when Russia annexed the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea¹⁹ – something I will elaborate on in more detail below.

THE FIRST RAPPER researched in Russia is Serëga, a Russophone Belarusian musician and one of the co-founders of commercial rap in Russia.²⁰ The first academic studies in Russia describe the emergence of subcultures from a social science perspective based on Serëga's fan community²¹ or deal with the rhyme structure of his lyrics.²² Angelina Kucherova notes that Russian rap research still has several fundamental deficits: There is no clear definition of Russian rap, nor has its history been thoroughly examined²³ – the only exception here is the article by Ilya Kukulkin from 2020, which attempts to present the history of Russian rap very briefly.²⁴ In Russia, existing analyses often rely on single examples from lyrics selected according to unclear principles, and in many cases, they are biased publications by students and young researchers.²⁵ Of the Ukrainian musicians from Russia selected for this article – T-Fest, Gee-Gun, and Youra – only the most streamed among them (T-Fest) has been covered in Russian research. Even if the successes of GeeGun and Youra (see Table 1) show, that the musicians are by no means unknown in the rap scene in Russia, they have so far been ignored by research. However, T-Fest's tracks, as already mentioned above, are also a topic for young researchers, who deal with T-Fest and the Kazakh Russophone rapper Skryptonite exclusively as Russian artists and discuss them in the context of the “expansion of Russian rap”.²⁶

THESE OBSERVATIONS indicate that interactions in the context of rap and the languages used vary significantly among the East Slavic countries. English research literature shows an interest among Western academics in Russian rap and also in the context of the war;²⁷ however, rappers of Ukrainian origin in Russia remain outside the discussions. Nevertheless, T-Fest plays a role in the German research literature, as explained in the article by historian Evgenij Kazakov. Here he is categorized as a Ukrainian rapper, and the sanctions imposed by the Russian state against him are described.²⁸

In relation to German-Ukrainian rappers, Cotgrove was the first linguist to examine the lyrics in consideration of East Slavic languages in German Rap.²⁹ In addition to a detailed description of how multi-ethnolects in Germany developed under the

influence of Turkish and Arabic,³⁰ he considered nine rappers of different origins.³¹ One of the nine artists had an East Slavic background – Capital Bra (CB). Slavic languages used by German rappers without a Slavic background are also an ongoing research topic at the moment. My pilot study focuses on German rappers with a Slavic background.³² I analyzed lyrics by Schwesta Ewa (SE), Capital Bra, Olexesh (OL), and Krime (KR). The study compared Polish influences (SE & KR), Ukrainian-Russian influences (CB & OL), and identity models in German rap. Like

Cotgrove, I concluded that hybrid identities are formed amongst other things through language behavior. International politics are frequently mentioned in the lyrics of artists with Ukrainian backgrounds. In contrast, the analysis of all lyrics, as the most extensive data source for linguistic research on rap, revealed that rappers with a Polish background are apolitical and show little connection to Poland as their homeland. The latest finding comes from a stylometric

comparative analysis of German rappers, which showed that language registers (i.e., situational language use) in rap are less about the rappers' place of birth or heritage language and more about their region of socialization.³³

The rappers

Before the analysis the rappers' language biographies must be discussed and summarized. All rappers were selected based on their views' statistics on YouTube and streaming numbers on Spotify in 2023. The higher a musician's statistics, the more relevant he or she is. This method resulted in the top 3 musicians for each country examined (Table 1):

Songs and languages of war and peace

As outlined in the preceding section, the view and streaming statistics indicate that these artists are not peripheral figures within their national music industries; rather, they rank among the most frequently played musicians in the mainstream. The selection of lyrics for analysis is centered on two critical junctures in Russia's war against Ukraine: the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. All the lyrics and songs examined were either released during these periods or directly in response to these events.

Ukrainian rappers in Ukraine

Monatik, who has been active as a professional rapper since 2013, is the only Ukrainian rapper in the present analysis who could have reacted to the annexation of Crimea, as Alyona Alyona and Kheitspich only became professional musicians in the late 2010s/early 2020s. Monatik, who was and is primarily a Russophone rapper, released the song *Mozhe vzhe dosyt'* [Maybe It's Already Enough] in Ukrainian in January 2014. The

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Table 1. **Overview of the examined musicians**

	Artist name	Year & place of birth	Work localization	Highest statistical achievement*	Main languages of the lyrics
	Monatik	1986, Luts'k, Northwestern Ukraine.	Kyiv	<i>Kruzhit</i> (2017), YouTube, 141 million views.	Russian 
	Alyona Alyona	1991, Kapitanivka, Central Ukraine.	Kyiv	<i>Ridni moi'</i> (feat. Jerry Heil) (2022), YouTube, 10 million views.	Ukrainian 
	Kheitspich (хейтспіч)	Early 2000s, Odesa, Southern Ukraine.	Odesa/Kyiv	<i>IA vbiu vsikh bogiv</i> (2022), Spotify, 1,5 million streams.	Ukrainian 
	T-Fest	1997, Chernivtsi, Southwestern Ukraine.	Moscow; after 2022: EU	<i>Uleteli</i> (2018), YouTube, 123 million views.	Russian 
	GeeGun	1985, Odesa, Southern Ukraine.	Odesa, Kyiv, Moscow; since 2007: mostly Moscow	<i>DNK</i> (feat. Artem Kacher) (2018), YouTube, 64 million views.	Russian 
	Youra	1983, Alchev'sk, Eastern Ukraine.	Kyiv; since 2022: Russia	<i>Praktika</i> (2019), YouTube, 3 million views.	Russian 
	Capital Bra	1994, Siberia (precise birth place is not available). His family soon moved to Dnipro in Eastern Ukraine and then to Berlin in 2001.	Berlin	<i>110</i> (feat. Samra & Lea) (2019), Spotify, 176,8 million streams.	German 
	Olexesh	1988, Kyiv, moved with his mother to Darmstadt in Germany in 1994.	Frankfurt am Main	<i>Magisch</i> (feat. Edin) (2018), YouTube, 108 million views.	German 
	Kalazh44	Late 1990s/early 2000s, unknown birthplace, his family moved from Ukraine to Berlin, where he grew up.	Berlin	<i>Royal Rumble</i> (feat. Capital Bra, Samra, Nimo, Luciano) (2020), Spotify, 56,8 million streams.	German, Turkish  

song was a sign of solidarity with the Ukrainian people after, on January 19, the Ukrainian Parliament (Verkhovna Rada) initiated the package of contested laws, which introduced criminal liability for defamation, extremist activity, and increased restrictions on holding mass actions, which caused mass protests of the civil society. Back then, the Euromaidan protests took place in Ukraine as an expression against rapprochement with Russia, Russia's anti-EU propaganda in Ukraine, and for a pro-EU government shift. The protests ended in violent conflicts between the protestors and the governmental forces. Russia used Ukraine's internal political instability and began annexing Crimea on February 20, 2014. In 2022, Monatik re-released the song on his YouTube Channel with the anti-war message in English and Russian on the Ukrainian flag as the background: "While you are listening [sic!] this track, ukrainian [sic!] people are dying from russian [sic!] attack STOP IT".³⁴ He was one of many Ukrainian and some Russian musicians who posted this message on their YouTube channels, including Alyona Alyona, who will be discussed in this article later. In 2022 he released one more song in Ukrainian, in which the message became more obvious compared to his previous solidarity song from 2014:

He doesn't even know who he's
fighting,
I defy and smash his armour,
I knock his teeth out and he won't
bite anymore,
He doesn't even realise his tanks are
just junk

MONATIK – *ART Oborona* (2022)³⁵

In the lyrics, the Ukrainian rapper most likely means Putin and reveals Putin's ideas of war against Ukraine as illusions. The release of the song was accompanied by a post on Instagram on April 14, 2022, clarifying the message in Russian: "I have always been against the war, but we did not bring it. We did not call the "liberators"! I imagined the defeat of the bloody dictator with all my fibres, while I embodied these thoughts into music."³⁶

On June 30, 2022, Monatik, who until then had communicated on Instagram either in Russian, Ukrainian, or English (the order of the relative occurrence frequencies of the languages), wrote a bilingual Instagram post – first in Ukrainian and then the exact same text repeated in Russian. The post referred to his single *ART Oborona* (ART Defence) and did not refer to the languages of communication. After this post, the musician communicated on Instagram almost exclusively in Ukrainian, less often in English. Since then, Russian has only appeared as quotes from his older songs.

ALYONA ALYONA, a professional musician since 2018, has been rapping in Ukrainian from the beginning of her career. Code-switching and code-shifting can, therefore, not be discussed here. On April 1, with the Ukrainian pop singer Jerry Heil, she published a musical prayer *Molytva*³⁷ [Prayer] in Ukrainian on YouTube. On April 22, 2022, the musicians released the song *Ridni moi*³⁸ [My

Beloved Ones] that was published for the Christian-Orthodox Easter and was also designed in a prayer-like form:

My beloved ones, my beloved ones,
The dog no longer barks,
Even the cat doesn't purr on the porch,
The crying of children shall no longer ring out

Alyona Alyona feat. Jerry Heil – *Ridni moi* (2022)³⁹

Alyona Alyona has continued to release at least six anti-war songs. According to her Instagram account, she has always supported charities for the Ukrainian people and army and volunteered herself in civil aid. In the same duo, Alyona Alyona and Jerry Heil represented Ukraine at the Eurovision Song Contest 2024 in Sweden with the song *Teresa & Maria* and placed second in the finals.

THE YOUNGEST RAPPER in this analysis, Kheitspich started his project with the commentary right after the full-scale Russian invasion with the Russian YouTube single *pyzzkuii mir* [the ruzzian world] and the following video description: "It's the first song in the new project and the last one in the language of liars, looters, rapists, and murderers. It was written in the first days after the russia's [sic!] attack on my country".⁴⁰

In the song's title and the video description, the pragmatic level of the lyrics is already represented by conceptual graphemics: The name of the attacking country is written in lowercase in the description, thus expressing the absent respect for the country; in addition, the adjective *Russian* is written in the title with a double <zz> instead of

an <ss>, with which the rapper refers to the Russian war symbol – the letter <Z>.⁴¹ The rapper also references the Russian language and explains that he will use this language for the last time. In the lyrics, it is clear that he chose the language to address Russians:

Like cowardly rats with no concrete idea,
Did you drop bombs while everyone slept,
Mothers and children wept,
Who could – ran away,
That's damn very manly,
Sitting in a bunker and lying,
I'm half Russian myself,
However, I hate them all.
[...]
You didn't know what was going to happen?
Damn, I will tell you,
Keep praying,
Fear the leader,
Get used to surviving,
Feed the dragon,
Your hands are smeared with blood,
But there is an [orthodox] icon in the corner"

Kheitspich – *ruzzkii mir* (2022)⁴²

**"ALYONA ALYONA
HAS CONTINUED
TO RELEASE AT
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WAR SONGS."**

The selected lyrics excerpt exhibits an exceptionally high concentration of pragmatic content related to the war, with a particular emphasis on the aggressor's behavior in Ukraine and in Russia: the musician accuses the Russian population of ignoring the war; describes Putin as a coward waging war from a bunker; the double standards and the war support of the Russian Orthodox Church are also discussed. The song *ruzzian world* went viral for a short time and reached over 450,000 views on YouTube. To date, the newcomer has produced at least thirteen other anti-war songs exclusively in Ukrainian.

Ukrainian rappers in Russia

T-Fest has been active in the Russian music business since 2013. With more than 120 million views on YouTube, he is one of the most popular rappers in Russia. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the 24th of February 2022, he ended cooperation with the Moscow label *Gazgolder*, left Russia, and toured the EU with Russian and Ukrainian musicians to raise Ukraine funds through the concerts. His working language until 2022 was almost exclusively Russian, with Ukrainian playing a minor role at the lexical level, e.g., through the use of the adverb *avzhezh* [indeed] to emphasize Russian sentences, as for example in *Pravda* (Truth) (2014):

Hit the target well,
Missed again, I stepped back again,
'Cause I'm a kid, Ouu! Yeah, I'm a khokhol
[Ukrainian],
Check out my flow, this is a flow for my brain,
In your face face ra-ta-ta,
I'm not trap, but we love the 808 [drum machine], indeed,
We love the cash

T-Fest – *Pravda* (2014)⁴³

Notably, this excerpt comes from a song released in January 2014, just before the annexation of Crimea. In it, T-Fest refers to himself using the pejorative Russian term for a Ukrainian: *khokhol*. This choice is likely interpreted by listeners as a critique of the negative attitude prevalent in the Russian state media toward Ukraine during the Euromaidan. Following this critique, T-Fest raps about machine gun fire directed at an imagined enemy to whom he addresses these lines, expressed through the interjection *ra-ta-ta*. The presence of a few anglicisms in the lyrics does not require extensive analysis, as they are common in rap across various linguistic contexts; for instance, terms like *cash* appear frequently in rap music of other countries as well. After February 2022, the language behavior in the musician's lyrics changed. For the first time in his career, he released a song entirely in Ukrainian: *Dai meni zvyknuty* [Let Me Get Used to It] (2022), and for the first time showed Spanish influences in Russian-language lyrics as in *Me gusta* [I like it] (2022).

ODESA-BORN, Moscow-based rapper GeeGun did not change his language use in lyrics after February 2022. He consistently used Russian with barely noticeable lexical influences from English.

Ukrainian does not play a role in the musician's lyrics. On the other hand, Youra is a particularly interesting case because of his pro-Russian political statements and the use of languages. Youra released the song *HABAR* [Bribery] for the first time in his career a song entirely in Ukrainian in October 2021. The track criticizes corruption in Ukraine without specifying which parts of Ukrainian society the lyrics focus on. In July 2022, Youra released the song *POZICIYA* [Position], which consists of dominantly Russian lyrics and a few words in English and Ukrainian. Considering all the Ukrainian rappers examined, this is a rare case when Russian-Ukrainian code-switching occurs within one song, although the song remains trilingual Russian-English-Ukrainian. The corresponding passage of the Russian-Ukrainian code-switching states:

The first microphone, Donbass [sic!] is speaking!
Here is where the people are full of will/free,
watch out!
We shouldn't have been
forced to speak [Ukrainian]

Youra – *POZICIYA* (2022)⁴⁴

The lines take a clear pro-Russian political stance in Russia's war against Ukraine, because here the Donbas region is personified and speaks to the listeners about the attempted compulsion to switch from Russian to Ukrainian. The population of Ukraine's Donbas region is defined as a "free population", using the adjective *vol'nyi* instead of *svobodnyi*.⁴⁵ The noun *volia* [freedom, will] is central to the derivation of *vol'nyi* [free, full of will, permissive, unrestrained]. The Slavophile and Tsarist Army General Kireev referenced the concept of *volia* in 1889 within the following context:⁴⁶ "Our state formula is expressed as follows: One will (that of the Tsar) and many minds (the council of the land [= parliament])". This statement encapsulates the Slavophile perspective, which emphasized the Tsar's absolute will alongside the consultative role of the parliament. This viewpoint was deeply rooted in the principle of *sobornost'* – the spiritual and organic unity of the church, the people, and the state. As it was over 100 years ago, the term remains highly politicized today and is part of a worldview constructed by the Kremlin. The semantic value of *volia* is thus connoted in Russian, especially within the intellectual concepts of Slavophilia, *Sobornost'* and ultimately Russian nationalism in the 21st century, as an "organically emerging term",⁴⁷ which is associated with the infinite happiness and the endless expanses of Russia.

THE ENDURING INFLUENCE of this ideology in contemporary Russian political thought is exemplified by a recent blog post⁴⁸ authored by Alexander Dugin, director of the Higher Political School at the Russian State University for the Humanities and a prominent Kremlin-affiliated nationalistic philosopher. His post, titled "The World of Civilizations: Sobornost' in a Multipolar World", presents a transcript of his speech outlining the ideological foundations and strategic objectives of Russia's war against Ukraine. *Svoboda* [freedom], on the other hand, is understood today in the same

context of Kremlin's ideological worldview as "an artificially constructed and borrowed term",⁴⁹ an import from the West.

It can thus be ruled out that the adjective is a Ukrainism in Russian, such as in *vil'na Ukraïina* [free Ukraine], since the phonetic realization and also the pragmatic-political context contradict this. As in the patriotic Russian connotation, Youra also locates the population of Donbas in a semantic area characterized by a separate notion of the so-called *Russian freedom* or *Russian will*. This localization is then reinforced in the following sentence, in which one of the few examples of direct Ukrainian-Russian code-switching among Ukrainian rappers occurs: *Ne nado bylo zastavliat' _{RU} rozmovliaty _{UA} nas _{RU}* [We shouldn't have been forced _{RU} to speak (Ukrainian) _{UA}]. In contrast to the rest of the syntactic construction, the verb *to speak* is not implemented in Russian but in Ukrainian, which means Youra took up the Kremlin's narrative about the so-called Russian language ban in Ukraine in the song. The acts of war in the Donbas are presented here as a direct result of the forced use of Ukrainian.

Rappers of Ukrainian origin in Germany

Russian-born but raised in Eastern Ukraine and Germany, rapper Capital Bra first took a stand on Russia's war against Ukraine in 2014. The title of his track is an anti-war statement: *Kein Krieg* [No War], but in the lyrics, he raps in German:

Please listen to me, that's all I ask,
I'll explain the conflict to you from a different
point of view,
We Ukrainians, we never wanted to quarrel with
Russia,
But the Americans provoke from an ambush,
Politicians who speak for everyone,
It's about money and power, we're about human
lives,
Russian tanks entering my country,
You see dead people in front of the Maidan
Capital Bra – *Kein Krieg* (2014)⁵⁰

On the one hand, the invasion of Russian troops is criticized here. On the other hand, the reasons for this are sought in the US as a secret warmonger. Further on in the text, it becomes more concrete:

Ah, and they don't talk, they send the army,
A battle between good and evil, but who's who?
And you don't see that, we agree,
Fuck the Americans, look how Putin defends our
country,
They lie in the media and you fall for it,
Look, how two powers split up our country
Capital Bra – *Kein Krieg* (2014)⁵¹

Capital Bra identifies as Ukrainian, not as Russian. He contextualizes Ukraine as "our land" and emphasizes being Ukrainian

again and again in his tracks: *Stable Ukrainian, Soon to Be a Big Earner* (song *Brown, Yellow, Purple* (2016)),⁵² *I'm Ukrainian, fuck the Americans* (song *Intro* (2017)),⁵³ *I'm Ukrainian // I don't wear grillz* (song *Makarov Complex* (2020)).⁵⁴ He also makes positive references to Vladimir Putin in lyrics, the layout of individual albums, and in interviews.

On March 2, 2022, Capital Bra released the single *Stop Wars* along with rappers Kontra K and Kalazh44. The musicians also started a platform where their fans can donate money to Ukraine, Syria, Yemen, Ethiopia, and Iraq. Capital Bra says in his part of the song:

When suddenly everyone shoots,
The same people, only the weapons are different,
Maybe a different flag, but the same language,
Every Ukru, every Russian checks what I say,
But I can't understand,
We've never seen boundaries between us,
But suddenly there are boundaries,
Suddenly bombs are falling on people

Capital Bra feat. Kontra K & Kalazh44
– *Stop Wars* (2022)⁵⁵

The lyric of the single brings dubious statements to the listener: Because the eight lines serve Putin's narrative, with which the politician justifies the war, among other things. Capital Bra sings about Ukrainians and Russians being *the same people*, speaking the same language, most likely meaning Russian. In addition, there are the personal designations *Ukru* [Ukr(ainian)] and *Russe* [Russian]. While *Russian* is neutral here, *Ukru* could be interpreted as a derivation from Russian *Ukr* or *Ukrop*. Both terms are condescending to Ukrainians and are located in the same semantic spectrum as *Ukrofashisty* [Ukrainian Fascists]. The terms are also a staple of pro-Russian memes about Ukraine on the Russian-speaking internet.⁵⁶

Capital Bra's feature on the single *Stop Wars* is Kalazh44, a rapper with a Ukrainian background. About seven weeks after the joint single, Kalazh44 released the album *District13*, which includes a feature with Capital Bra. The song is called *Keine Politik* [No Politics]. Even though the musicians had made numerous political statements in *Stop Wars* just two months earlier, the main line of the hook at the end of April 2022 is: No politics, don't do politics, Bra, // Don't do politics.⁵⁷

ANOTHER GERMAN RAPPER of Ukrainian origin who plays a role in the topic of the Russian war against Ukraine is Olexesh. Olexesh is the first German rapper with a Slavic background to achieve commercial success. To date, he has released six albums, received the HipHop.de Award for Best Live Act in 2017, and his videos have over 100 million views on YouTube. Like Capital Bra, he self-identifies as Ukrainian, as evidenced by many of his lyrics, music videos shot in Ukraine, and the Ukrainian coat of arms in his album designs. At the same time, unlike Capital Bra, Olexesh does not equate Ukrainians and Russians. In addition to his Ukrainian post-Eastern bloc identity through mentioning "*the*

East”, the USSR etc. in several lyrics, Olexesh’s role in *being a Slav* is also striking because he not only speaks of himself as a *Slav* but also of a *Slavic empire*. However, it remains unclear whether it is a metaphor for his perception of the ethnic structure of inmates in German prisons, an expression of a hybrid post-Eastern bloc identity (usually not tied to ethnic characteristics), or a reference to pan-Slavism. Olexesh plays with his identity models, referring to himself as *Russki Kanak*⁵⁸ in a few songs. Regarding identity, Olexesh is flexible and represents a new hybrid identity model in German pop culture.

ON FEBRUARY 26, 2022, Olexesh posted a clear pro-Ukrainian sign on his Instagram account with over 800,000 followers: A photo of a child standing in a wheat field with the blue sky above, the child holding the Ukrainian flag. On March 5, 2022, he released *Mama Ukraina, Papa Russia*. The song says:

Mama Ukraine, Papa Russia,
The same blood in us, because everyone boils
with water,
I don’t want gas, I want freedom for the Sh-
trassa [Street_{UA}],
Fuck politics, army, stop the tanks
[...]
Fuck life, stay stable, I fuck politics,
Because in the end we’re all fucked by a presi-
dent,
Man, I miss my homeland, I’ll be back soon,
And then every stone will be put back in its place
Olexesh – *Mama Ukraina, Papa Russia* (2022)⁵⁹

The cover of the single with his parents’ wedding photo could give the impression that it is actually about Olexesh’s mother and father. However, in recent years he has mentioned in various interviews that his father is from Belarus, whilst his mother comes from Ukraine. So it remains to be seen why the father of the lyrical I in the song became Russian. The association of Ukraine with a woman could primarily point directly to Olexesh’s mother, but also to the grammatical gender of the country’s name in German, Russian, Ukrainian, or finally to Putin’s depiction of Ukraine as a *Krasavitsa* [Beauty], which is sexist idea about the personification of Ukraine as a beautiful woman who is inferior to masculine Russia.⁶⁰ Shortly after the song’s release, Olexesh also published his biography as a book under the same title.⁶¹ From a philological perspective, this metaphor belongs to the concept of “nation as a family” in which certain parts of the nation assume the paternal role, and certain parts of the nation the maternal role⁶². After February 2022 some Russian musicians,

such as the band Leningrad, also sing about a brotherhood or unity of Russia and Ukraine, which excludes Ukraine’s independence as a state.⁶³ Russia’s political nuances of constructing president’s image also play a role here, as since the 1990s, Boris Yeltsin’s and Aliaksandr Lukashenka’s (for Belarus) PR campaigns have attempted to portray them as a hero, brother, or father of the nation, depending on the situation. This PR effort continued under Putin.⁶⁴ In connection with the image of Kyiv as the medieval “mother of Russian cities,”⁶⁵ even though the name of the city is grammatically masculine in Ukrainian and Russian, a contextualization of Ukraine from a pro-Kremlin position cannot be ruled out in the song’s title. In the end, it remains highly questionable to what extent Olexesh’s lyrics go into such pragmatic depth and

are subject to extensive philological analysis. What is certain, is that the connotation of Ukraine and its individual cities, such as Odesa as woman and mother,⁶⁶ and, on the other hand, Russian cities, such as Rostov, as man and father,⁶⁷ is common. However, the fact is that Olexesh’s relationship with Ukraine is more nostalgic than that of Capital Bra, which is strengthened by the intro of the song, in which his grandmother says in Russian: “And yet it’s good that you left back then,” referencing Olexesh’s and his mother’s migration to Germany. Finally, the various metaphorical classifications of Ukraine and Russia show that Ukraine and its cities are either grammatically feminine or artificially feminized from the Kremlin’s perspective (the example with Kyiv). In contrast, Russia is often artificially masculinized by the Kremlin, which contradicts the Russian grammatic categories, where Russia and Moscow are feminine.

Discussion

This article examined how the escalation of the Russian war against Ukraine in February 2022 was processed in the songs of Ukrainian rappers in Ukraine, Russia, and Germany. A particular focus was on the choice of languages, which is a central social and political issue, especially in Ukraine and Russia.

As might be expected, the war is a hugely important topic for rappers in Ukraine. Since February 2022, the war has reached all spheres of life of Ukrainians. All three rappers examined (Monatik, Alyona Alyona, Kheitspich) address the war in their lyrics. The approach to contextualizing the war is different in all three examples. Monatik has (re)released two anti-war songs. Both songs are in Ukrainian, which is untypical for the Russophone musician and has a special meaning. However, Monatik changed his communication language on social media in 2022 and now communicates primarily in Ukrainian. Russian plays almost no role in his communication. Alyona Alyona has always released tracks exclusively in Ukrainian, which she continued after 2022.

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More than half of her new songs are about war. An exciting case is Kheitspich, who only started his music project with the full-scale invasion and only released one song in Russian, in which he addresses the Russians directly. In the song, he tries to educate them about the war but simultaneously expresses a wide range of negative emotions towards Russia, Russians, the Russian Orthodox Church, and Putin. Other anti-war songs by Kheitspich are in Ukrainian and are aimed at Ukrainians or dealing with pain and anger.

AMONG UKRAINIAN RAPPERS in Russia, a comparable case is Youra, who did just the reverse of Kheitspich, switching to Ukrainian in a song to convince Ukrainians that they were wrong. He takes a clear pro-Russian position and accuses Ukraine and the collective West of escalating the war. In his new songs, T-Fest indirectly addresses the war on a poetic level, allowing for various interpretations. Nevertheless, it is a fact that he takes a clear pro-Ukrainian position, which is shown by his language switch to Ukrainian and the strict breaking off of cooperation with Russian labels and leaving Russia. The third rapper GeeGun showed no dismay, at least publicly and in his lyrics. He does business as usual and in Russia does rap in Russian.

A differentiated picture emerges among the German rappers of Ukrainian origin. None of the three rappers can be classified as clearly pro-Ukrainian. In the lyrics, there is a negotiation of one's own identity and the rejection of political topics. The fact that the rappers themselves become political in their lyrics is not a contradiction for them. Nevertheless, it can be clearly said that all three rappers are for peace, just in different scenarios. Capital Bra can be understood as a supporter of Putin and can be classified in a similar field as the rapper Youra. Kalazh44 does not deal with the war and cannot be categorized. Olexesh is more cautious with his view of the war and says there must be peace again, rejecting gas and therefore Russia. He feels a stronger emotional-nostalgic connection to Ukraine than Capital Bra and Kalazh44. The rappers' linguistic behavior and statements about languages confirm these observations. While Capital Bra and Kalazh 44 don't use Ukrainian in their songs, and Capital Bra questions whether Ukrainian and Russian are truly separate languages, Olexesh uses individual Ukrainian words (e.g., *Shtrassa* [Street]) in his German lyrics and is not categorically pro-Russian or in favor of peace under the Russian flag, as Capital Bra is.

IN UKRAINE, rappers increasingly switch from Russian to Ukrainian. When they do use Russian, it is mainly to express negative emotions and thoughts towards the Russian government, Putin directly or the people in Russia. In Russia, the reverse seems to apply. Here, rappers use Ukrainian only to make negative statements about Ukraine. Alternatively, the war is ignored in the lyrics entirely, as the example of GeeGun showed. The exception is the example of T-Fest. He immediately accepted the consequences (termination of the contract with his producer in Moscow and the exit from the Russian music market, where he had been mainly active until then) and chose the pro-Ukrainian side. In Germany, the rappers are for peace but unite it remains

ambivalent under which flag peace should be achieved and whether the rappers even want to declare their allegiance to Russia or Ukraine. This leads to a situation in which supposed pro-Ukrainian anti-war songs (prominent examples are Capital Bra & Kalazh44) can be interpreted as pro-Russian (war) songs upon closer inspection of the pragmatic level of the lyrics.

Conclusion

In the majority of the analyzed cases the war has had the effect that language use in East Slavic(-German) rap has become marked by clear boundaries between political positioning for Ukraine or for Russia. The consistent use of Russian in the lyrics of rappers who work in Ukraine can no longer be justified. The Russian language seems to be only allowed for Ukrainian rappers in specific contexts; either, 1) they address Russians, or 2) it is one of their old songs. The consistent use of Russian can be seen as a pro-Russian attitude as the example of Youra shows in particular. Ukrainian is used much more consistently in rap in Ukraine than before February 2022 and the genre becomes also linguistically more diverse due to new, e.g., English or Spanish influences. Rap in Russia remains mainly monolingual Russian. With Ukrainian rappers in Germany, however, the situation is less clear. In this case, deficits in linguistic, cultural, or historical competencies could explain why the rappers try to unite numerous contradictions in their songs and then intentionally or unintentionally produce pro-Russian war songs. The distinguishing feature here compared to Ukraine and Russia is that these texts are communicated to an audience that is mainly located in Germany, Austria and Switzerland and therefore, due to the geographical distance from the war, would not necessarily have a specific and categorical attitude towards the war before listening to those songs. The opinions could only be shaped by these lyrics. ✖

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