

Dr. Aleksej Tikhonov
(Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin/Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg)

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

Abstract:

This work examines the lyrics and social media posts of nine rappers who either are of Ukrainian descent or grew up in Ukraine. The selection of musicians is not solely based on their origin but also on their relevance and social reach. The chosen rappers are considered the most successful rappers in their (working) countries - Ukraine, Germany, and Russia. Over the past 20 years, rap has evolved from an often marginalised music genre into the most popular global genre in terms of monetisation and streaming statistics. Particularly today, it is significant to look at the messages in their lyrics since the criticism now reaches a much broader target audience, and the musicians can become or are already opinion leaders. In some constellations, not only can the semantic value of the lyrics play a role with regard to their country's current social and political questions, but also the use of language itself, which can be located between mono-, bi-, multilingualism, and language contact. Since the early 2010s, a new rap trend has emerged in Germany – rappers with a Slavic background are reaching top positions in the charts, and the Ukrainian-Russian-German rapper Capital Bra has become the most successful musician in Germany in the 21st century. Some Ukrainian musicians have made their careers in Russia (e.g., T-Fest). In Ukraine, many rappers not only process the war in their country in their lyrics but also use their fame abroad (e.g., Alyona Alyona) for educational purposes about the war, Ukrainian culture, and for charity.

Keywords: Russia, Ukraine, Germany, war, rap lyrics, language, multilingualism

1. Introduction

Since the honorary doctorate for rapper Kanye West in 2015¹ (Owoseje 2022) and the Pulitzer Prize for Kendrick Lamar in 2018 (Pulitzer 2018), rap has not only arrived in the mainstream, but is the most dynamic music genre for today. The "Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History" describes rap and its origins as follows:

Rap is the musical practice of hip hop culture that features vocalists, or MCs, reciting lyrics over an instrumental beat that emerged out of the political and economic transformations of New York City after the 1960s. Black and Latinx youth, many of them Caribbean immigrants, created this new cultural form in response to racism, poverty, urban renewal, deindustrialization, and inner-city violence. (McCoy 2007)

Rap's cultural origin, political, social, and economic circumstances strongly influence the lyrics, which serve in the present study as a basis for linguistic and culturological analysis in the context of Russia's full-scale war against 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 or musicians of Ukrainian origin

¹ The Chicago art college revoked the title in 2022 due to the rapper's racist and anti-Semitic statements (Owoseje 2022).

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 behaviour of rappers from Ukraine, Russia, and Germany after February 2022. In particular, East Slavic multilingualism is the focus of the research question about the influence of the war on the language behaviour of popular interpreters. Relevant to the study are musicians born and possibly socialised in Ukraine and whose creative work centre is Ukraine, Russia, or Germany. In total, lyrics by nine musicians were analysed - From Ukraine: Monatik, Alyona Alyona, Kheitspich; From Russia: T-Fest, GeeGun, and Youra; and from Germany: Capital Bra, Olexesh, and Kalazh44.

2. Researching rap

Although rap has existed in the USA since the 1970s (cf. Alridge & Stewart 2005), it became an object of linguistic research in the 1990s. Stanley (1992) documented the 200 most essential song lyrics from early rap in a cultural and historical context. Stavsky & Mozeson (1995) published the first lexicon of hip-hop slang. In the 21st century, Olivo (2001) examined non-standard US English spellings in rap lyrics. In his corpus study, phonological and syntactic features of Afro-American colloquial English and their graphematic realisation were analysed. Westbrook (2002) defined around 2,500 rap terms in his reference work. The two most extensive works on rap and language to date are "Roc the mic right: The Language of Hip Hop Culture" (Alim 2006) and "What's Good: Notes on Rap and Language" (Levin Becker 2022). Above all, Levin Becker (2022) updates in his essayistic work the philological and culturological findings on current tendencies in rap - from interpreting the lyrics to the death of the author, according to Barthes, from the morphosyntactic creativity in the lyrics to the forensic linguistics of lyrics as evidence in court.

In terms of Ukraine, the musicologist Adriana N. Helbig published her monograph "Hip Hop Ukraine: Music, Race, and African Migration" in 2014, which focuses on diversity in Ukrainian rap and especially in Afro-Ukrainian rap. The Ukrainian musicologist Lehen'kyi describes rap as a political music style with an identity-forming function (cf. Lehen'kyi 2016: 76). 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) (cf. Kotkowski 2016: 244), where language becomes the central characteristic of identification (cf. Ibid.: 246).

The chronologically first philological publication about rap in Ukraine addresses strengthening national consciousness by using the Ukrainian language in the lyrics (cf. Mac'ko 2017: 225). Also, it is noted that until the mid-2010s, Ukrainian rap contained many calculus 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. The linguistic quality of the lyrics also tends more toward standard Ukrainian, with the rapidly declining influence of Russian (ibid.: 226). The reorientation of Ukrainian rap is also reflected in translation-scientific approaches, in which the methodology of translating and adopting French-language rap lyrics in Ukrainian is discussed (cf. Kosmac'ka & Kravčenko 2020). By not only creating a connection between France and Ukraine, but also by recognising rap as a part of modern Ukrainian culture, Ukrainian music in the 21st century is now positioned as a part of European and global pop culture (cf. Boryn 2020: 54). The process of Europeanisation or globalisation is also understood as the renaissance of Ukrainian rap and popular music in general, in which the musicians become more aware of Ukrainian as a part of this rebirth (cf. Lendél'-Sjarkevič et al. 2022: 131). Most musicians have partially or entirely distanced themselves from the Russian language and Russia since 2014 when Russia annexed the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea (ibid.: 128).

Rap research in Russia differs from Ukraine. It should be noted that Russia is the primary music importer in Belarus. From a pop-cultural point of view, there is a very close connection between the two countries, which is characterised by an insistent dictate from Russia and puts Belarus in an inferior position. Nevertheless, one Russophone Belarusian musician is one of the co-founders of commercial rap in Russia – Serėga (cf. Tanieva 2009; Kuranova 2010). The artist became the first rapper researched in Russia. The studies describe the emergence of subcultures from a social science perspective based on his fan community (see Tanieva 2009) or deal with the rhyme structure of his lyrics (see Kuranova 2010). The first linguistic studies categorise the language of rap as a substandard of the Russian literary language (cf. Kudinova 2010) and deal comparatively with the colloquial language neologisms in Russian and US-American rap (cf. Gricenko & Dunjaševa 2013). Later works also examine the Anglo-Americanisms in Russian rap (cf. Garaeva et al. 2017), the syntax of the lyrics and, in particular, categorise the lyrics of the rapper Oxxxymiron as a new genre of Russian poetry (cf. Diveeva 2018), which combines the characteristics of modernism and postmodernism (cf. Lassan 2018).

In 2018 the research landscape on rap fundamentally changed in Russia, coinciding with the start of Vladimir Putin's fourth term as the president. The focus has shifted significantly towards sociolinguistic, literary, and musicological approaches that compare rap in Russia with Western rock music in the USSR. Rap claims an effect on the formation of young people's lifestyle,

which is dominated by violence, crime, and drugs (cf. Krivcov 2019). Among other things, the study is based on a statistic that shows that 95% of rap musicians support this lifestyle. Only the source for the number is not mentioned. Other publications do not assume that Russian rap originated from US-American rap but rather from Russian prison chansons and Soviet rock, which denies the term *Russian rap* and advocates the categorisation of the genre as a contemporary hybrid version of the two mentioned genres (cf. Domanskij 2020; Krasnoščekov 2022).

In the context of German rappers, Cotgrove (2018) was the first linguist who extensively examined the lyrics in consideration of East Slavic languages. In addition to a detailed description of how multi-ethnolects in Germany developed under the influence of Turkish and Arabic (ibid. 72), Cotgrove took nine rappers of different origins into account (ibid. 74). One of the nine artists had an East Slavic migration background - Capital Bra (CB). Slavic languages among German rappers of non-Slavic origin are also a noteworthy research topic at the moment. Tikhonov's pilot study (2020) is focused on German rappers with a Slavic background. He analysed 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, Tikhonov concluded that hybrid identities are formed through language behaviour. One of the main findings was the frequent contextualisation of international politics in the artists' lyrics with Ukrainian and Russian backgrounds. In contrast, the rappers with a Polish background were revealed as apolitical and hardly relating to Poland as their homeland. CB sympathises with Putin yet simultaneously criticises the war in Ukraine. The latest finding comes from a stylometric comparative analysis of German rappers (Tikhonov 2022), which showed that language registers in rap are less about the place of birth or heritage language of the rappers and more about their place or region of socialisation. For German rappers with East and South Slavic backgrounds, the most dominant factor in their register use was whether they grew up in North, Southwest, or East Germany and where they also work as musicians.

3. The rappers

Before the analysis can be conducted, the rappers' biographical language data must be discussed and summarised in better detail. All rappers were selected based on their reach 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. The

following overview reflects the rappers' biographies and the corresponding information relevant to the study (Table 1):

Artist name	Year & place of birth	Work localization	The highest statistical achievement ² & the language of the lyrics
Monatik	*1986, Lutsk, northwestern Ukraine	Kyiv	“Kruzhit” (2017), YouTube, 141 Mio. Views), Russian
Alyona Alyona	*1991, Kapitanivka, central Ukraine	Kyiv	“Ridni Moi (feat. Jerry Heil)” (2022), YouTube, 10 Mio. Views, Ukrainian
Kheitspich (хейтспіч)	*early 2000s, Odesa, southern Ukraine	Odesa/Kyiv	„Ya vb'yu vsikh bogiv“ (2022), Spotify, 1,5 Mio. Streams, Ukrainian
T-Fest	*1997, Chernivtsi, southwestern Ukraine	Moscow; after 2022: EU	“Uleteli” (2018), YouTube, 123 Mio. Views, Russian
GeeGun	*1985, Odesa, southern Ukraine	Odesa, Kyiv, Moscow; since 2007: mostly Moscow	“DNK (feat. Artem Kacher)” (2018), YouTube, 64 Mio. Views, Russian
Youra	*1983, Alchesk, eastern Ukraine	Kyiv; since 2022: Russia	“Praktika” (2019), YouTube, 3 Mio. Views, Russian
Capital Bra	*1994, Asian part of Russia ³ , his family moved soon to Dnipro in eastern Ukraine and then to Berlin in 2001	Berlin	“110 (feat. Samra & Lea)” (2019), Spotify, 176,8 Mio. Streams, German
Olexesh	*1988, Kyiv, moved with his mother to Darmstadt in western Germany in 1994	Frankfurt am Main	“Magisch (feat. Edin)” (2018), YouTube, 108 Mio. Views, German
Kalazh44	*late 1990s/early 2000s, unknown birth place, he grew up in a Ukrainian family in Berlin	Berlin	“Royal Rumble (feat. Capital Bra, Samra, Nimo, Luciano)” (2020), Spotify, 56,8 Mio. Streams, German, Turkish

Table 1: Overview of the examined musicians

² It must either be a solo song or, in the case of a feature, the musicians examined are the first.

³ the precise birth place is publicly not available

4. Songs and languages of war and peace

The following chapter considers the lyrics related to Russia's war against Ukraine. Not only songs that were released after February 2022 are considered, but also those that were released after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The lyrics are divided by country, as are the musicians in Table 1. The central statements about war and peace will be analysed and finally compared supranational.

4.1 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 “Може вже досить” (eng.: Maybe It's Already Enough) in Ukrainian in January 2014. The song was a sign of solidarity with the Ukrainian people after, on January 19, the Ukrainian Parliament (Verkhovna Rada) initiated the package of so-called laws, which introduced criminal liability for defamation, extremist activity, and increased restrictions on holding mass actions, which caused mass protests of the civil society. 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 this track, ukrainian [sic!] people are dying from russian [sic!] attack STOP IT”⁴. In 2022 he released one more song in Ukrainian, in which the message became more obvious compared to his previous solidarity song from 2014:

*Він навіть не тямить, на кого стрибає,
Я розбиваю зухвало його танки,
Я вибиваю його зуби він вже не кусає,
Він навіть не тямить, що тим танкам гайки*

MONATIK - АРТ Оборона (2022)⁵

In the lyrics, the Ukrainian rapper most likely means Putin and his illusory ideas of war against Ukraine. The release of the song was accompanied by a post on Instagram on April 14, 2022 clarifying the message in Russian:

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bWLWSRGu91I> Accessed on June 7, 2023

⁵ 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 Defence (2022)

Я всегда был против войны, но не мы с ней пришли. Мы «освободителей» не звали! Всеми фибрами представлял поражение кровавого диктатора, пока воплощал эти мысли в музыку.⁶

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 *APT Оборона* (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. Partial or complete code-switching can, therefore, not be discussed here. On April 1, with the Ukrainian pop singer Jerry Heil, she published a musical prayer *Молитва*⁷ (Prayer) in Ukrainian on YouTube. On April 22, 2022, the musicians released the song *Рідні мої*⁸ (My Beloved Ones) that was published for the Christian-Orthodox Easter and was also designed in a prayer-like form:

*Рідні мої, рідні мої,
Із буди не гавка собака,
І котик на танку уже не мурчить,
Щоб діти навколо не плакали*

Alyona Alyona feat. Jerry Heil - Рідні мої (2022)⁹

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.

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 *руzzкий мир* (The Ruzzian World) and the following video description:

⁶ I have always been against the war, but we did not bring it. We did not call them "liberators"! I imagined the defeat of the bloody dictator with all my fibres, while I embodied these thoughts into music.

⁷ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcXT-a0KzWK/?hl=de> Accessed on June 11, 2023

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5A3ndYDeYkU> Accessed on June 11, 2023

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eZslMJsyKdw> Accessed on June 11, 2023

⁹ *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 – My Beloved Ones (2022)

Моя перша пісня в новому проекті, та остання пісня мовою брехунів, мародерів, твалтівників та вбивць. Була написана в перші дні після нападу росії на мою країну.¹⁰

In the song's title and the video description, the semantic level of the lyrics is already represented by conceptual graphematics: 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* (Kalmykova 2023). 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:

*Как трусливые крысы без всякой конкретики,
Сбросили бомбы пока все спали,
Плакали матери, плакали дети,
Кто могли – убежали,
Это очень мужской, блядь, поступок,
Спрятаться в бункере и пиздеть,
Я сам наполовину русский, но
При этом ненавижу их всех
[...]
Вы не знали что будет?
Я вам расскажу, бля,
Продолжайте молиться,
И бояться вождя,
Привыкайте выживать
И кормите дракона,
Пока руки в крови,
Но в углу стоит икона*

хейтспіч - руззкий мир (2022)¹¹

In the selected quote from the lyrics, a maximum of semantic content is compressed in the context of the war: 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

¹⁰ 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.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3UpoeJ2X07w> Accessed on June 11, 2023

¹¹ *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 icon in the corner.* kheitspich – ruzzian world (2022)

and reached over 350,000 views on YouTube. To date, the newcomer has produced at least thirteen other anti-war songs exclusively in Ukrainian.

4.2 Ukrainian rappers in Russia

T-Fest has been active in the Russian music business since 2013. With up to 123 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 *авжеж* (indeed) in Russian syntactic constructions. After February 2022, the language behaviour in the musician's lyrics changed. For the first time in his career, he released a song entirely in Ukrainian: *Дай мені звикнути* (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. The 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. Youra released the song *HABAR* (Bribery) entirely in Ukrainian for the first time in his career in October 2021. The track criticises corruption in Ukraine without specifying which level 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 the only time that 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:

*Первый микрофон, говорим Donbass!
Вот где народ вольный, атас!
Не надо было
заставлять розмовляти нас*
Youra - POZICIYA (2022)¹²

The lines take a clear political position in Russia's war against Ukraine. The population of Ukraine's Donbas region is defined as a *free population*, using the adjective *вольный* instead

¹² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Ldfc3ZL4m0> Accessed on June 11, 2023; In 2023, YouTube captioned the video: "The following content has been identified by the YouTube community as inappropriate or offensive to some audiences."

of *свободный*. The noun *воля* (freedom, will) is central to the derivation of *вольный* (free, full of will, permissive, unrestrained). The semantic value of *воля* is connoted in Russian, especially within intellectual concepts of Slavophilia, Sobornost' and ultimately Russian nationalism in the 21st century, as a *naturally created term* (cf. Egorova & Kirillova 2012: 167), which is associated with the infinite happiness and the endless expanses of Russia. *Свобода* (freedom), on the other hand, is understood today as *an artificially constructed and borrowed term* (ibid.), an import from the West. It can be ruled out that the choice of adjective is a ukrainism in Russian, such as in *вільна Україна* (free Ukraine), since the phonetic realisation and also the semantic-political context contradict this. As in the patriotic Russian connotation, Youra also locates the population of Donbas in a semantic area characterised by a separate notion of the so-called *Russian freedom* or *Russian will*. This localisation is then reinforced in the following sentence, in which one of the few examples of direct Ukrainian-Russian code-switching among Ukrainian rappers occurs: *Не надо было заставлятьRU розмовлятиUA насRU* (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 as a direct result of the *forced use of Ukrainian*.

4.3 Rappers of Ukrainian or East Slavic 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:

*Bitte hört mir zu, mehr verlang' ich nicht,
 Ich erklär' euch den Konflikt aus 'ner andren Sicht,
 Wir Ukrainer, wir wollten nie mit Russland Streit,
 Doch die Amis provozieren aus dem Hinterhalt,
 Politiker, die für alle Menschen reden,
 Es geht um Geld und Macht, uns geht's um Menschenleben,
 Russische Panzer, die in mein Land einfahr'n,
 Du siehst Tote vor dem Majdan*

Capital Bra - Kein Krieg (2014)¹³

¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hNRZ9pTOZgA> Accessed on June 11, 2023; *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 – No War (2014)

On the one hand, the invasion of Russian troops is criticised here. On the other hand, the reasons for this are not sought in the politics of the Kremlin, but rather the USA is presented as a secret warmonger. Further on in the text, it becomes more concrete:

*Ah, und sie reden nicht, sie schicken Militär,
Ein Kampf zwischen Gut und Böse, aber wer ist wer?
Und ihr erkennt das nicht, wir sind uns einig,
Scheiß auf die Amis, guck, wie Putin unser Land verteidigt,
Sie lügen in den Medien und ihr fällt drauf rein,
Guck, wie zwei Mächte unser Land aufteil'n,*

Capital Bra - Kein Krieg (2014)¹⁴

There is no question that Capital Bra identifies as Ukrainian. He emphasizes it again and again in his tracks: *Stabiler Ukrainer, bald Großverdiener* (song *Braun, Gelb, Lila* (2016)) (*Stable Ukrainian, Soon to Be a Big Earner* (song *Brown, Yellow, Purple*)), *Ich bin Ukrainer, fick Amerikaner* (song *Intro* (2017)) (*I'm Ukrainian, fuck the Americans* (Intro)), *Ich bin Ukrainer, // Ich trag' keine Grillz* (song *Makarov Komplex II* (2020)) (*I'm Ukrainian // I don't wear grillz* (Makarov Complex)). Despite his self-identification as a Ukrainian, positive reference to Vladimir Putin in lyrics, the layout of individual albums, and in interviews are not a contradiction for the rapper. On the day of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, February 24, 2022, the rapper posted the following image¹⁵ on his Instagram account with over four million followers: two hands symbolising a dove of peace and each in the national colours of Ukraine and Russia. The fans interpret it differently in the comment's column – some see it as “only” peace, some post the pro-Russian symbol of the war – the letter Z, and some are ashamed of Capital Bra as a Ukrainian. 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:

*Wenn plötzlich alle schießen,
Die gleichen Menschen, nur die Waffen sind verschieden,
Vielleicht 'ne andre Flagge, aber die gleiche Sprache,
Jeder Ukru, jeder Russe checkt doch, was ich sage
Aber ich kann's nicht versteh'n,
Zwischen uns noch nie Grenzen geseh'n,
Aber plötzlich gibt es Grenzen,*

¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hNRZ9pTOZgA> Accessed on June 11, 2023; *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 – No War (2014)

¹⁵ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaXe-2Cs4ds/?hl=de> Accessed on June 11, 2023

Plötzlich fliegen Bomben auf die Menschen

Capital Bra feat. Kontra K & Kalazh44 – Stop Wars (2022)¹⁶

The text 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 *Ukrofaschisty* (Ukrainian Fascists). The terms are also a staple of pro-Russian memes about Ukraine on the Russian-speaking internet (Reuther 2016).

Capital Bra's feature on the single *Stop Wars* is Kalazh44, a rapper with a history of Ukrainian migration. 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: *Keine Politik, mach ma' keine Politik, Bra, // Mach ma' keine Politik* (No politics, don't do politics, Bra, // Don't do politics). 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, 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. However, Olexesh plays with his identity, referring to himself

¹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SzNrwnY5JGc> Accessed on June 11, 2023; *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)

as *Russki Kanak*¹⁷ 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 Ukraina, Papa Russia,
Dasselbe Blut in uns, denn jeder kocht mit Wasser,
Ich will kein Gas, ich will Freiheit für die Illimpacca,
F*ck Politik, Militär, stoppt die Panzer
[...]
Scheiß Leben, bleib' stabil, fick' ich Politik,
Denn am Ende sind wir alle von 'nem Präsident gefickt,
Mann, ich vermisse meine Heimat, bald bin ich zurück,
Und dann wird jeder Stein wieder auf sein'n Platz gerückt*

Olexesh - Mama Ukraina, Papa Russia (2022)¹⁸

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 authorial self 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). There will probably not be a definitive answer to this question. 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.

¹⁷ The term *Kanake* has at least three meanings: (i) native Polynesia and the South Sea Islands, (ii) colloquial, pejorative, often a swear word for foreigner, foreign worker, especially Turkish people, and (iii) colloquial, pejorative, someone uneducated, simple-minded, a fool. In the article, meanings (ii) and (iii) are relevant. The term can be understood in a discriminatory and racist way. In the multilingual communities themselves, the expression can be used ironically as a self-designation. <https://www.dwds.de/wb/Kanake> Accessed on June 12, 2023

¹⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wYIJ9TExar0> Accessed on June 12, 2023; *Mama Ukraina, Papa Russia, // The same blood in us, because everyone boils with water, // I don't want gas, I want freedom for the Shtrassa (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 president, // 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)

5. Conclusion

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 language, which is a central 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 contextualising the war is different in all three. 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. 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 pro-Ukrainian. In the lyrics, there is a negotiation of one's own identity and the rejection of politics. The fact that the rappers themselves become political 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 even deal with the war and can not be categorised. 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.

In the end, the conclusion can be drawn that the war has significantly impacted Ukrainian rappers in Ukraine, Russia, and Germany. A clear trend can be seen in Ukraine, with rappers increasingly switching to Ukrainian whilst distancing themselves from Russian. However, when they use Russian, it is mainly in a negative context towards Russia. A similar picture can be observed in Russia, only in reverse. Here, Ukrainian is only used when it comes to negative statements about Ukraine. Alternatively, the war will be ignored entirely. T-Fest is an exception because he immediately accepted the consequences and chose the pro-Ukrainian side. In Germany, the rappers are for peace but unite various opposites and cannot decide about the situation in the war. It ends with the fact that supposed anti-war songs (Capital Bra & Kalazh44) are pro-Russian war songs upon closer inspection.

The war has drawn a clear boundary in East Slavic(-German) rap. The consistent use of Russian can no longer be justified. The war has also drawn a clear boundary between pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian in East Slavic(-German) rap. The Russian language is only allowed for Ukrainian rappers in specific contexts - (i) they address Russians, or (ii) it is one of their old songs. The consistent use of Russian can be seen as a pro-Russian attitude. Rap in Ukraine is becoming more Ukrainian but also 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.

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