

THE POLITICAL ETHICS OF GERMAN SOCCER FANS

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Abstract

This article investigates the complex interplay between soccer fandom and political activism in Germany, emphasizing fan groups' emergence as significant political stakeholders. It explores the evolution of fan engagement from sports-specific to broader societal issues, illustrating how supporters articulate dissent against commercialization and advocate for ethical governance within clubs. Through representative examples of various clubs, from Stuttgart to Hamburg and from Frankfurt to Munich, this article highlights fans' responses to controversial policies like Monday fixtures, the European Super League, and human rights violations. Utilizing sociologist Tim Crabbe's analytical framework that approaches soccer culture via distinct contexts, this study critiques enduring assumptions about political homogeneity in fan behavior and examines how select groups navigate their identities as quasi-political entities. The findings suggest that German soccer fans increasingly challenge traditional notions of belonging, positioning themselves as active participants in club governance and wider societal debates. This analysis contributes to understanding the intricate relationship between soccer fandom, political activism, and club governance in Germany.

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Introduction

Soccer stadiums have long served as political and cultural battlegrounds across Europe. Examples of these contested terrains outside Germany are many and span the political spectrum, from fans' expressions of Basque identity at Atletico Bilbao and Real Sociedad's matches during the fascist Franco regime in Spain to the promotion of Serbian nationalist ideals by Ultra groups of Red Star Belgrade in support of war criminal Slobodan Milosevic.¹ Similarly, in Germany, examples range from the Fourth Division FC Chemnitz player Daniel Frahn's association with both the ultra-right Hooligan group Kaotic Chemnitz and the disbanded NS-Boys² to SC Freiburg's Corillo Ultras fighting the influence of right wing political parties and propaganda.³ Soccer terraces, as much as the pitches themselves, have therefore in varying degrees long provided political fodder. And with the increasing social mediatization of soccer,⁴ the intersection of political engagement and soccer fandom has turned into a 24/7 phenomenon as thousands of fans gather in near-permanent discursive spaces.⁵ Engaged in person on match days within the vernacular culture's "collective rituals and symbolic practices," supporter activities regularly bridge the temporal gaps between game days within the culture industry of (social) media coverage.⁶ Supporters' collective display of backing or opposition to clubs, associations, and national

¹ Franklin Foer, *How Soccer Explains the World: An Unlikely Theory of Globalization* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010).

² James Thorogood, "Daniel Frahn, Chemnitzer FC and the battle with their right-wing fans," *Deutsche Welle*, August 27, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/daniel-frahn-chemnitzer-fc-and-the-battle-with-their-right-wing-fans/a-50179270>.

³ "Kein Platz fuer [sic] AfD und rechte Hetze," *Nordtribune.org* (blog), January 20, 2024, <https://nordtribune.org/albums/sc-freiburg-hoffenheim-32-18-spieltag-1-bundesliga/>.

⁴ The term mediatization here loosely draws on Stig Hjarvard, "The Mediatization of Society," *Nordicom Review* 29, no. 2 (2017): 102–131, doi: 10.1515/nor-2017-0181.

⁵ The politicization of German soccer fans is neither sudden nor recent. With the rise of ultras in German stadiums in the 1990s, one could trace the rise of their politicization alongside the "gentrification" of the game back to that decade, as suggested by Gerd Dembowski, "Rassismus: Brennglas Fußball," in *Deutsche Zustände*, Folge 5, ed. Wilhelm Heitmeyer (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2007), 217–225. See also Rebeccah Dawson et al., eds., *Football Nation: The Playing Fields of German Culture, History, and Society* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2022).

⁶ Tim Crabbe, "From the Terraces to the Boardrooms," *International Review of Modern Sociology* 32, no. 2 (2006), 241–256, here 253.

politics once may have been limited mostly to stadium or fan group gatherings. Now, they continue in social media environments asynchronously, around the clock, and, ostensibly, even more anonymously than in stadium crowds. With the accelerated blending of sports and politics, both are consumed and generated on the same social media platforms, and algorithmically merged. An intensification of the politicization of soccer therefore appears inevitable, resulting also in a back-and-forth between fans and politicians. And the possibilities of continual engagement for fan group participants with their peers thus only adds to the stabilization and challenges of their identity profiles – creating, as Mark Doidge has suggested, “a space of continuous performance.”⁷ With a focus on German soccer fan groups and clubs, select studies have consequently honed in on these junctures of group identities and fans’ political engagement, whether with a focus on Dynamo Dresden’s self-declared apolitical but in reality right-leaning Ultras,⁸ or in analyses of FC St. Pauli’s leftist and non-conformist banner waving.⁹ While studies of representative clubs underscore above all a perceived polarization of Ultras versus Hooligans, or Antifa versus HooNaRa (HooligansNazisRacists), the sophistication of how fan groups as stakeholders participate in political debates beyond established tribal lines is this article’s primary concern. Although scholars in sports management, social psychology, and public policy have broadly identified sports fans as an under-investigated ethical community, consideration of German soccer fans as “stakeowners” (i.e. stakeholders with rights *and* responsibilities) has been largely missing.¹⁰ This article compares select examples as representative of how German soccer fans express

⁷ Mark Doidge, Radoslaw Kossakowski, and Svenja Mintert, *Ultras: The Passion and Performance of Contemporary Football Fandom* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 96.

⁸ Daniel Ziesche, “‘The East’ strikes back. Ultras Dynamo, Hyper-Stylization, and Regimes of Truth,” *Sport in Society* 21, no. 6 (2018): 883–890, doi: 10.1080/17430437.2017.1300389.

⁹ Petra Daniel and Christos Kassimeris, “The Politics and Culture of FC St. Pauli: from leftism, through anti-establishment, to commercialization,” *Soccer & Society* 14, no. 2 (2013), 167–182, doi: 10.1080/14660970.2013.776466. See also Mick Totten, “Football and Community Empowerment,” *Soccer & Society* 17, no. 5 (2016): 703–720, doi: 10.1080/14660970.2015.1100436.

¹⁰ Bram Constandt, Milena M. Parent, and Annick Willem, “Does It Really Matter? A Study on Soccer Fans’ Perceptions of Ethical Leadership and Their Role as ‘Stakeowners,’” *Sport Management Review* 23, no. 3 (2019): 374–386, doi: 10.1016/j.smr.2019.04.003. The idea of “moral ownership,” as introduced in David and Peter Kennedy’s case study of Everton FC supporters, is a related concept, although in their discussion it is utilized almost exclusively in terms of economic considerations (moral economy; political economy; economic ownership). See David Kennedy and Peter Kennedy, “Towards a Marxist Political Economy of Football Supporters,” *Capital and Class* 34, no. 2 (2010): 181–198, doi: 10.1177/0309816810365520. See also Daniel Fitzpatrick, “The Moral Economy of the English Football Crowd: The European Super League and the Contingency of Football Fan Activism,” *Capital and Class*, February 15, 2024, doi: 10.1177/03098168241232375.

a sense of activism and ownership that highlights their political dissent and how ethical considerations frequently determine their actions. Understood to reflect the active role of soccer fans in influencing club management's decisions, ultras as *stakeowners* or prosumers generate the cultural and emotional content that fuels clubs' images and, with it, the perceived charge for fans to partake in or actively shape stadium politics and beyond.

In order to explore the scope, motivation, and impact of supporter engagement, this article concentrates on three sporting contexts or arenas in which fan activism plays out. By analyzing discourses from the vernacular (club, fan groups, game day performance of supporters), culture industrial (social/media and sponsorship), and institutional (club management and boardroom) arenas of German soccer – an analytical framework proposed by sociologist Tim Crabbe¹¹ – this article posits two main questions: Can assumptions about political homogeneity in fan behavior be upheld given the diversity of German soccer ultras?¹² And is the assertion correct that it is *fans'* behavior that “creates conflicts with other stakeholders and affects club policy”?¹³ Given the different possibilities of political engagement, this topic is too far-ranging to be exhaustively covered in a short study. However, consideration of how fan groups conceive of their communities as quasi-political bodies and what issues matter to them can help explain both their concern with organizational constructs and norms as well as those concerns' extension to fans' sense of self as actors in discursive spaces. This article therefore concentrates on representative episodes that show how fans influence their clubs and associations to re-examine policies as part of their corporate ethics strategy.¹⁴

Our analysis of fans' political engagement thereby highlights how German fandom has evolved to serve as a principal site for contesting notions of contemporary identity, beyond what has been more narrowly associated with ideas

¹¹ Crabbe, “From the Terraces,” 252.

¹² Udo Merkel, “Football Fans and Clubs in Germany: Conflicts, Crises and Compromises,” *Soccer & Society* 13, no. 3 (2012): 359–376, doi: 10.1080/14660970.2012.655505.

¹³ Philipp Winskowski, “Managing for Stakeholders in Football: Conflicts Arising from the Goals and Behaviour of Active Fans,” *Soccer & Society* 23, no. 8 (2022): 1143–1159, doi: 10.1080/14660970.2022.2042267.

¹⁴ We use the looser concept of corporate ethical strategy here instead of a more codified notion of corporate social responsibility (CSR) to emphasize how the motivation of fans often deviates from their club's corporate structures and thereby claims ethical resistance against it. For additional information about CSR in German soccer, see Johannes Jäger and Matthias Fifka, “A Comparative Study of Corporate Social Responsibility in English and German Professional Football,” *Soccer & Society* 21, no. 7 (2020): 802–820, doi: 10.1080/14660970.2020.1749052.

of national belonging.¹⁵ Instead, supporters' attachment to specific localities in German soccer is tied to displays of local or regional expressions of self.¹⁶ While supporters' engagement may thus first materialize and be motivated locally or regionally, its impact reaches beyond what Mike Cronin calls the "sacred spaces" of the stadium.¹⁷ It is through a local and regional sense of belonging that supporters' stances of resistance develop against what is seen as the encroachment of principles associated with modern soccer. The reach, for example, of subcultural movements like Against Modern Football (AMF) – beyond regional resistance toward becoming a transnational movement – illustrates how supporters' engagement locally/regionally both inside and outside the stadium has representative significance beyond limited localities.¹⁸ Therefore, this article focuses on regionally-specific examples of supporter engagement in different sporting contexts, with the understanding that these are broadly representative for German soccer.¹⁹ By looking at examples of how fans of different clubs from different regions have become focal points in political and media debates, this article thereby considers ostensible forms of exclusive sports activism (club and association policies) and its proximity to – and even transformation into – more general forms of societal and political engagement (e.g. immigration policies, political extremism, and corporate influence).²⁰ We include illustrations from Stuttgart

¹⁵ For more on the ideas of national belonging in German soccer, see, among others, Matthias Kaelberer, "From Bern to Rio: Soccer and National Identity Discourses in Germany," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 30 (2017): 275–294, doi: 10.1007/s10767-016-9234-6, and Udo Merkel, "German Football Culture in the New Millennium: Ethnic Diversity, Flair and Youth on and off the Pitch," *Soccer & Society* 15, no. 2 (2013): 241–255, doi: 10.1080/14660970.2013.849189.

¹⁶ Local pride and regional belonging are illustrations of topophilia which are prevalent among ultras and supporters of movements such as Against Modern Football. This intersection of topos and subcultural manifestations is prevalent in soccer as arenas and spaces associated with local clubs are frequently saturated with traditional meanings. See Alan Tomlinson, *A Dictionary of Sports Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹⁷ Mike Cronin, "Enshrined in Blood. The Naming of Gaelic Athletic Association Grounds and Clubs," *The Sports Historian* 18, no. 1 (1998): 90–104, doi: 10.1080/17460269809444771.

¹⁸ For more on AMF and how it can be transnational at once without "any clear leadership" and against homogenizing principles, see Mark Doidge et al, "The Impact of International Football Events on Local, National and Transnational Fan Cultures: A Critical Overview," *Soccer & Society* 20, no. 5 (2019): 711–720, doi: 10.1080/14660970.2019.1616264.

¹⁹ Large portions of supporters see themselves as "tradition keepers" as shown in the discussion about the symbolism of soccer clubs within constructions of regional identities by Adriano Gómez-Bantel, "Football Clubs as Symbols of Regional Identities," *Soccer & Society* 17, no. 5 (2015): 692–702, here 692, doi: 10.1080/14660970.2015.1100430.

²⁰ Sport activism here is used as a form of engagement or advocacy, as Mick Totten shows, "for social or political change in sport, or through sport; for social or political change elsewhere." See Mick Totten, "Sport Activism and Political Praxis within the FC Sankt Pauli Fan Subculture," *Soccer & Society* 16, no. 4 (2014): 453–468, here 455, doi: 10.1080/14660970.2014.882828. Nino Numer-

and Hamburg (in the context of disputed player identities), Leipzig (and the intertwining of AMF with party political intrusion), Frankfurt (and the debate about exclusion of club members associated with a right-wing political party), as well as Munich (and the member-driven initiative to force Bayern Munich to sever ties with sponsor Qatar Airways).²¹ Notwithstanding the fact that the classical idea of fans' membership in an imagined community still matters, Nathan Kalman-Lamb's suggestion that "[t]eam sport supplants ... the nation as a form of identification in the context of ever-advancing capitalist societies" is central to this article and reinforces the need to focus on local/regional examples as representative.²² At the same time, such a notion is conceptually important beyond the fan perspective. It clarifies not only the intersection of fans' identities with their role as stakeowners and how that intersection informs their political ethics, but also why it is equally important to consider clubs' responses to and treatment of their fans as part of a broader discourse.

Sports Activism In-Between Stadium and Societal Concerns

It is important to acknowledge upfront that the idea of soccer fans' political engagement does not immediately have to appear as an outright single-mindedness on broad societal concerns. Instead, it can remain ostensibly more centered on matters specific to the world of German soccer. All the while, even such sports activism rarely operates in a vacuum and speaks in the end to an often-larger matter. Three examples illustrate the sports-specific-turned-societally-important ways in which German fans have engaged first within the vernacular culture of the stadiums before taking their actions and protests to social media and the culture industry. In the case of professional German soccer, one might immediately think of fans' steady and repeated articulation of

ato differentiates between forms of soccer activism "in" (to address soccer issues) and "through" (to address non-soccer issues) before resolving this tension as "more or less connected" via the notion of a "football fan activism complex." See Dino Numerato, *Football Fans, Activism and Social Change* (London: Routledge, 2018), 9. Because these two directions are rarely neatly separated from one another, our article avoids this wording to preclude perceptions a binary.

²¹ Because of the heterogeneity of supporters and their specific political interests, other relevant topics could have been addressed but were omitted due to the limited scope of our analysis: LGBTQ+ (Bayer Leverkusen and Werder Bremen), gender equality (St. Pauli and Dynamo Dresden), reactions to the wars in Ukraine and Israel/Gaza (FSV Mainz, Hamburg SV, and others), or, most recently, the DFL-investor protests nationwide.

²² Nathan Kalman-Lamb, "Imagined Communities of Fandom: Sport, Spectatorship, Meaning and Alienation in Late Capitalism," *Sport in Society* 24, no. 6 (2020): 922–936, here 929, doi: 10.1080/17430437.2020.1720656.

resistance to the scheduling of *Montagsspiele* (fixtures on Monday evenings) away from traditional weekend slots.²³ Before the 2017/18 season, games traditionally took place on Saturday afternoons, with a few matches on Fridays and Sundays as gameday book ends, in order to accommodate Champions League participants. With financial motivation leading Bundesliga clubs and the DFL (German Football League) to agree initially on five Monday fixtures per season,²⁴ the ensuing four-year battle between fans and the DFB (German Football Association) is well documented. And the fight epitomizes how fans in the stadiums performed on a large scale while organizing in locally-specific ways.²⁵ From colorful banners at most games – both in terms of design and choice language – fans, beginning with the first *Montagsspiel* between Eintracht Frankfurt and RB Leipzig in February 2018, made it known that they objected to the new schedule. Fan protests targeted the game’s commercialization and what they saw as attacks on traditional fan cultures. How could fans possibly journey several hundred miles across Germany at the end of a workday to support their teams? The prioritization of TV schedules for prime-time considerations over spectator experiences was visibly at the center of the conflict. Elaborate choreos, banners, chants, toilet paper rolls thrown onto pitches, and even periods of silent fan sections and game boycotts were ever-changing forms of never-ceasing fan protests. “No to Monday games” – this slogan quickly took over German stadiums, as social media and fan publications just as swiftly attacked both the DFB and select club leaders for supporting the new game schedule. Just a little over a season in, then, the end of *Montagsspiele*, scheduled for 2022, was celebrated in November 2018 by fan organizations and Germany’s leading soccer publication *kicker* alike as a distinct fan victory. Helen Breit, member of

²³ Resistance against *Montagsspiele* were not just a phenomenon of the 2010s as game day scheduling in the 2. Bundesliga was already targeted by fan protests in the 1990s, which were acknowledged as reasons that these were ultimately cancelled. See, for example, Florian Nussdorfer, “Der Montag hat keinen Platz mehr,” *11Freunde*, February 17, 2022, <https://11freunde.de/artikel/der-montag-hat-keinen-platz-mehr/5386375>. At the moment, there are also first waves of protest at games of the German Frauen-Bundesliga against *Montagsspiele* that were first introduced a year ago. See “Türchen 4: Die Nutrias und Proteste gegen Montagsspiele,” *bolztribuene* (blog), December 4, 2024, <https://bolztribuene.de/2024/12/04/adventskalender-4-protest-montagsspiele/>. All translations are our own.

²⁴ “Eintracht-Präsident Fischer will Montagsspiele abschaffen,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, March 7, 2018, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/sport/fussball/bundesliga/eintracht-frankfurt-praesident-fischer-gegen-montagsspiele-15481666.html>.

²⁵ Matt Ford, “Bundesliga Monday games to be discontinued as fan protests persist,” *Deutsche Welle*, November 21, 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/bundesliga-monday-games-to-be-discontinued-as-fan-protests-persist/a-46390559>.

the fan organization *Unsere Kurve* [Our Curve], noted precisely this sentiment in an interview with the Sport-Informations-Dienst: “That the protests led to the discontinuation of the Monday games is a big success of the fan scene.”²⁶ Success was not only seen in the concrete outcome of ending the unwanted scheduling of games. It was, perhaps even more importantly, seen widely by fan organizations and individual protesters alike as a key success, in and of itself, that fans had organized in protest in the first place.

Swift organizational responses emerge in this way as a defining characteristic for fan groups when they identify new targets for activism. Amid discussions about reforms of the UEFA Champions League format and the concurrent, but so far failed, formation of a European Super League (ESL), BVB Dortmund Ultras *The Unity*, for example, immediately voiced their opposition with banners outside their club’s training grounds (“Clear words instead of empty lines: ESL – Refusal now and forever”).²⁷ Envisioned to comprise only the most successful teams from Europe’s top leagues, the ESL was quickly seen by more than just fans as a threat to existing formats of European club competition, which are widely regarded as part of a soccer tradition. Experts and fans alike feared that the ESL would create a closed system, exclusively favoring elite clubs and eliminating opportunities for smaller teams to advance. Thus, even Dortmund’s nemeses, Bayern Munich’s ultras, shared similar disapproval both in and around their stadium (“Whether Super League or CL reforms: football for fans, not millionaires”).²⁸ *Red Fanatic München* immediately took their protest online when they issued a statement on behalf of the ultra section *Südkurve* asking the club to reject all plans for a Super League and instead to focus on soccer as “bodenständig und demütig” (rooted and humble).²⁹ Understood as a rejection by what can only be seen as a traditionalist self-understanding of fans and as an embrace of

²⁶ “Neuer Spielplan auch dank der Proteste. Heute steigt das letzte Montagsspiel – ‘Großer Erfolg für die Fanszenen,’” *Kicker*, April 12, 2021, <https://www.kicker.de/heute-steigt-das-letzte-montagsspiel-grosser-erfolg-fuer-die-fanszenen-801856/artikel>.

²⁷ “Super League: Bayern sagen ‘Nein’ – BVB-Ultras positionieren sich klar,” *Ruhr Nachrichten*, April 20, 2021, <https://www.ruhrnachrichten.de/bvb/super-league-bayern-sagen-nein-bvb-ultras-positionieren-sich-klar-w1625588-2000221007>.

²⁸ Matt Ford (@matt_4d), “Bayern Munich supporters on the weekend their club won a 31st German championship,” X, May 9, 2021, 10:05 a.m., https://x.com/matt_4d/status/1391303292412645379.

²⁹ “Nein zur Super League, Nein zur beschlossenen Reform – Bayernfans gegen den Ausverkauf des Fußballs,” *Red Fanatic München* (blog), April 20, 2021, <https://redfanatic-muenchen.com/cms/nein-zur-super-league-nein-zur-beschlossenen-reform-bayernfans-gegen-den-ausverkauf-des-fussballs/>.

thriving fan cultures in Germany,³⁰ game day protests against *Montagsspiele* and Champions League reforms thereby appear as much as performances of what soccer fans regard as exemplary as they do concrete articulations of objections against corporate and external influences.³¹

With their outright purpose of curbing the influence of single or external club investors, ongoing debates about the DFL's 50+1 rule directly tie into this tension between fans and corporate interest. This membership governance rule essentially stipulates that clubs qua their fans/members maintain a majority of the voting rights in perpetuity, and consequently, "clubs will not be allowed to play in the Bundesliga [and Bundesliga 2] if commercial investors have more than a 49 percent stake."³² However, the rule underscores at once the proximity of fans' self-understanding as constituents, that is, as voting members, and the broader implications of what may, on the surface, appear as soccer-specific concerns only. Clubs exempt from the 50+1 rule, such as the Volkswagen-financed VfL Wolfsburg and Bayer industries-backed Leverkusen, have quasi-organically evolved since their founding from *Werksmannschaften* (factory or company teams) into widely accepted organizations with supporter clubs across the country and abroad.³³ Their recognition – since their inception predates the founding of the Bundesliga in 1963 – still stands in contrast to so-called *Retorten-Fußballvereine*. This epithet, best translated "test-tube soccer clubs," targets billionaire-owned TSG Hoffenheim³⁴ and, more notably, the universal-

³⁰ Siemen Schmidt and Jorg Koenigstorfer, "Fan Centricity of German Soccer Teams: Exploring the Construct and Its Consequences," *Soccer & Society* 23, no. 1 (2012): 89–103, doi: 10.1080/14660970.2021.1915780.

³¹ For more on the tension between domestic and international soccer developments and competitions, see John Williams, "Rethinking Sports Fandom: The Case of European Soccer," *Leisure Studies* 26, no. 2 (2007): 127–146, doi: 10.1080/02614360500503414.

³² "German soccer rules: 50+1 explained," *Bundesliga.com*, May 22, 2022, <https://www.bundesliga.com/en/news/Bundesliga/german-soccer-rules-50-1-fifty-plus-one-explained-466583.jsp>. See also "Satzung des Ligaverbands," *DFB*, May 22, 2022, 8, http://www.dfb.de/fileadmin/_dfbdam/14_Satzung_Liga_DFL.pdf; and Sebastian Björn Bauers et al., "Club Members in German Professional Football and Their Attitude towards the '50+1 Rule' – A Stakeholder-Oriented Analysis," *Soccer & Society* 21, no. 3 (2019): 274–288, doi: 10.1080/14660970.2019.1597717.

³³ Bayer 04 Leverkusen lists a fan club each in Luxemburg and in Russia among its own. See "Die Bayer 04-Fanclubs – Leidenschaft von Monheim bis Moskau," *Bayer 04 Leverkusen Homepage*, May 23, 2022, https://www.bayer04.de/de-de/news/fans/die-bayer-04-fanclubs-leidenschaft-von-monheim-bis-moskau?vid=20181128_Fanclub_1976-2.

³⁴ Dietmar Hopp, founder of German software giant SAP, held 96% of the membership vote between 2015 and 2023, when, with approval from Hoffenheim's club membership, he returned the majority of his voting shares. See "Mitglieder stimmen Antrag auf Rückgabe der Stimmrechtsmehrheit zu," *TSG Hoffenheim Homepage*, June 12, 2023, <https://www.tsg-hoffenheim.de/aktuelles/news/2023/06/mitglieder-stimmen-dem-antrag-auf-rueckgabe-der-stimmrechtsmehrheit-zu>.

ly-aborred Red Bull corporation-financed RB Leipzig, which was created only in 2009 after purchasing the playing rights of Oberliga side (fifth-division) SSV Markranstädt. While it is often the idea of financial fair play (or lack thereof) that motivates soccer fans and journalists alike to voice disapproval of projects like Leipzig inside and outside stadiums, AMF arguments (“10 years RBL = 10 years too many! Piss off!”) and governance objections (lack of “member determination, the 50+1 rule, [...] fundamental values of a soccer club”)³⁵ almost always appear simultaneously. It is important to note that critical examinations of these traditionalist arguments as exemplars of antisemitic resentment communication – a term coined by Julijana Ranc³⁶ – do highlight how problematic the criticism of German fans against Leipzig can appear. Just as this argument, however, is based on examining discourse and representation *without* motives, intention, or victims’ perception,³⁷ one can approach the discourse around traditionalist arguments and stakeowner expressions without projecting latent or unstated motives onto it.

Remarkably, the rhetoric used by Leipzig in defense of its success has failed to negate criticism leveled against the organization, even as it attempts to draw on traditional soccer markers of belonging and even regional identity. In a Twitter exchange (now X), for example, with Michael Kretschmer, Prime Minister of Saxony, following Leipzig’s 2022 win of the DFB-Pokal (German Cup), the club appeared to appropriate traditionalist domains of regional belonging and selflessness by embracing its supporters and community by claiming the cup win “für uns alle: Diesen Club, unsere schöne Stadt Leipzig und ganz Sachsen!” (for all of us: this club, our beautiful city of Leipzig and all of Saxony!).³⁸ Leipzig’s choice to respond to critics on social media exposes a keen awareness that what the club misses, and which other traditional clubs, members, and fans instead have long possessed may still be the prerequisite for its own (hoped for and) eventual acceptance in the world of German soccer: the claim to build on or

³⁵ Anton Zirk, “RB Leipzig erwartet in Mönchengladbach 19-minütiges Pfeifkonzert,” *Sportbuzzer.de*, August 29, 2018, <https://www.sportbuzzer.de/artikel/rb-leipzig-erwartet-in-monchengladbach-19-minutiges-pfeifkonzert/>.

³⁶ Julijana Ranc, “*Eventuell nichtgewollter Antisemitismus.*” *Zur Kommunikation antijüdischer Ressentiments unter deutschen Durchschnittsbürgern* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2016).

³⁷ See Pavel Brunssen, “Antisemitic Metaphors in German Football Fan Culture Directed at RB Leipzig,” in *Football Nation: The Playing Fields of German Culture, History, and Society*, ed. Rebecca Dawson et al. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2022), 218–239, here 220.

³⁸ RB Leipzig (@RBLeipzig), “Danke! Dieser Pokal ist für uns alle: Diesen Club, unsere schöne Stadt Leipzig und ganz Sachsen!,” X, May 22, 2022, 0:04 a.m., <https://x.com/RBLeipzig/status/1528134689768316928>.

have a tradition, to have regional roots rather than being a club designed for marketing only.³⁹ That the Tweet was tellingly generated and promoted through the marketing channels of an Austrian-owned company, rather than the club's still limited fanbase or perhaps its mere 21 regular voting members, underscores this point.⁴⁰

Leipzig struggles, at opportune moments, to create widely acceptable imagery that speaks to these evidently necessary traditions. Within the context of the already-mentioned first German Cup victory, for example, the social media department of RB Leipzig used the iconic and hallowed trophy for what can only be described as blatant product placement. Instead of a celebration of the traditional chalice, from which players enjoy a sip or two of a celebratory beer, the Leipzig PR department decided to share on Twitter an action shot of their midfielder, Kevin Kampl, as he poured a "Celebration Can" of Red Bull into the trophy for its official inauguration ("offiziell eingeweiht").⁴¹ A moment that could have fashioned an indelible image of a Leipzig player as *one of us*, connecting the team with celebrating soccer fans beyond the RB Leipzig fan base, instead further intensified already negative reactions toward the club. This post contrasts sharply with how fans of Leipzig's final opponent, SC Freiburg, had chosen to celebrate their earlier semifinal win over Hamburg SV: an image on social media of one of their players leaving Volkspark stadium with a case of beer. That Leipzig's failed product placement was anything but accidental was quickly and candidly acknowledged by online media close to the club.⁴² To add insult to the injury of non-Leipzig fans, instead of providing a narrative with simple material evidence that Leipzig had now become a part of German soccer history, the club in its place shared again on Twitter a close-up of the club's name engraved on the trophy underneath iconic predecessors like Borussia Mönchengladbach and Kickers Offenbach, however with added braggadocious commentary: "gewöhn

³⁹ For conflicts between parts of the RB Leipzig fan base and club management, see Pavel Brunssen, *Antisemitismus in Fußball-Fankulturen* (Weinheim: Beltz Juventa, 2021).

⁴⁰ Ullrich Kroemer, "Zwei Neue im Verein: RB Leipzig hat jetzt 21 Mitglieder," *RBlive*, March 31, 2021, <https://rblive.de/news/zwei-neue-im-verein-rb-leipzig-hat-jetzt-21-mitglieder-3297788>. RB Leipzig membership is costly, and new members gain membership only if accepted by club leadership, which is made up almost entirely of Austrian employees of the Red Bull GmbH.

⁴¹ RB Leipzig (@RBLeipzig), "Damit ist der Pokal offiziell eingeweiht. Natürlich nur mit dem guten Tropfen: Der RB Leipzig Celebration Can," X, May 22, 2022, 12:21 p.m., <https://x.com/RBLeipzig/status/1528320030278033409>.

⁴² "Kampl und Olmo provozieren mit Dose. RB Leipzig kann mit Hatern gut leben," *RBlive*, May 23, 2022, <https://rblive.de/news/kevin-kampl-red-bull-dfb-pokal-provokation-etwas-hate-kommt-rb-leipzig-gelegen-3382493>.

each dran” (get used to it).⁴³ It is an intriguing example of the fine line between expressing confidence – not at all unusual in social media self-representation in the world of sports – and intentional provocation; the clash of word (i.e., accept the new) and image (Leipzig embedded in the tradition of German soccer) encapsulates the broad tension between the club and soccer fans.

Following this type of provocation, unsurprisingly, there were no congratulatory messages for Leipzig’s Cup victory from other teams, but instead statements of support for their opponent. Third-division VfL Osnabrück’s unusual step to issue a public statement by President Holger Elixmann and Managing Director Michael Welling received special media attention, as it not only backed SC Freiburg, which had defeated Osnabrück in an earlier round but, more importantly, also outlined how fans’ emphasis on traditions are explicitly tied to a desire for clubs to maintain an appropriate corporate ethics strategy:

Different from other clubs, the promotion of togetherness and of the sport are not the focus [of RB Leipzig], the public good were not a founding idea and the values of the game did not inspire its development – instead the promotion of the brand “Red Bull” and the value of the brand “Red Bull.” Soccer were instrument and means, instead of external investors as a means for developing the soccer club.⁴⁴

Fans’ activism is understood to focus on maintaining the traditional principles of German soccer, and here it is clearly tied to broader interests. “Togetherness,” “the public good,” and, broadly speaking, “values” are seen as motivation for club management to affirm these qualities directly against the corporate influence on soccer, as embodied by RB Leipzig. Osnabrück’s management, in step with its fanbase, is moved by more than just being “tradition keepers,”⁴⁵ as supporters serve as more than just carriers of group identity: they are carriers of a desire for ethical articulation per their claim (and acceptance here by club leadership) of being *stakeowners*.

Reaffirming the intersection of sports and politics, especially in social media, the buzz created by Osnabrück’s public statement gains further significance in light of the simultaneous celebration of Leipzig’s win by politicians. Thrusting RB Leipzig squarely into the context of a loaded pan-German ideology, the then

⁴³ RB Leipzig (@RBLeipzig), “Auf ewig ein Teil dieser großartigen Pokal-Historie. Gewöhnt euch dran,” X, May 22, 2022, 7:30 a.m., <https://twitter.com/RBLeipzig/status/1528246779346444288>.

⁴⁴ Michael Welling and Holger Elixmann, “Warum der VfL Osnabrück dem SC Freiburg die Daumen drückt,” *VfL Osnabrück*, May 20, 2022, <https://www.vfl.de/offener-brief-pokalfinale/>.

⁴⁵ Gómez-Bantel, “Football Clubs,” 692.

co-chairperson and federal spokesperson of the AfD [Alternative for Germany], Tino Chrupalla, politicized the club's win with an emphasis on "Saxon stalwartness and Austrian entrepreneurial spirit" as a win over political 'correctness.'⁴⁶ With one simple tweet, Chrupalla thus cast aside the issue of financial fair play, apparently reserved for the sphere of soccer, and attempted to turn the event instead into a broader, nationally relevant political topic; it was generally considered a failed attempt, however, as the rather underwhelming attention to his tweet – with fewer than 450 retweeted and quoted tweets between May 21 and July 15, 2022 – statistically underscores. Soccer fans mostly did not engage Chrupalla. Their reticence repeats and reinforces the increasing resistance to these types of national tropes in favor of the articulation and contestation of notions of belonging on a more local or regional level.⁴⁷

Club-Families, Political Freedom, and Corporate Image Control

Among fans and their clubs, notions of belonging are often most publicly articulated in the context of player identities. This phenomenon extends soccer contexts into the broader social and political sphere and thereby breaches presumed gaps between the two. Support for players, regardless of their background, admittedly often differs between fan groups, depending greatly on a player's success, reputation, and even their general appeal, etc. The examples of forwards Silas Wamangituka from VfB Stuttgart and Bakery Jatta from the Hamburger SV, however, bring into focus the role occupied by fan groups to curate and reimagine a sense of community among supporters and their club. Most clubs certainly cannot be characterized as progressive and inclusive communities like St. Pauli, where supporters' progressive attitudes toward LGBTQ+ issues, fascism, refugees – and more – are not only accepted but promoted by club management, making the club "the symbolic champion of social inclusion in a sport that often divides and excludes as much as it unites."⁴⁸ At the Hamburg-based club, a progressive sense of community is deliberately promoted at

⁴⁶ Tino Chrupalla (@Tino_Chrupalla), "Ich gratuliere RB Leipzig zum verdienten Sieg im #DFBPokal-finale!" X, May 21, 2022, 11:23 p.m., https://twitter.com/Tino_Chrupalla/status/152812435440389441.

⁴⁷ Kalman-Lamb, "Imagined Communities of Fandom," 929.

⁴⁸ David Kennedy and Peter Kennedy, "Introduction: Reflections on the Context of 'Left Wing' Fan Cultures," *Soccer & Society* 14, no. 2 (2013): 117–131, here 124, doi: 10.1080/14660970.2013.776463. Some examples of fan activism, including feminism, LGBTQ+ rights (Bayer Leverkusen and Werder Bremen), gender equality (St. Pauli and Dynamo Dresden), reactions to the wars in Ukraine and Israel/Gaza (FVS Mainz, Hamburg SV, and others), memory culture, the DFL-in-

all fronts, from publications and game day music to charity events and merchandise.⁴⁹ For other clubs, however, it is often more difficult to determine whether fans' behavior is driven by self-serving interest to ensure the club's well-being (that is, by avoiding scandal, the shaming from other fan groups, and, of course, assuring competitive success) or whether there could be communal or ethical considerations driving their actions.

The discussions about Jatta and Wamangituka's identities are exemplary in this context, albeit slightly different. Jatta, a Gambian refugee, had been on the receiving end of a two-year-long media campaign by Germany's largest tabloid, *Bild*, which eventually turned into a legal battle against him, claiming that he had entered Germany with a false identity to gain refugee status.⁵⁰ In the case of Congolese Wamangituka, his agent falsified the player's documents and pressured him to accept this illegal move before ultimately coming clean together with his club.⁵¹ Unsurprisingly, both incidents were litigated at once inside and outside the stadium. Quickly, both clubs and fan groups expressed their support for the players as one of *them*. It thereby underscored the centrality of fan groups in creating community, both real and imagined. Both players were predictably supported on game days as supporter clubs displayed banners and created new chants (vernacular). And when the groups went on social media to express further solidarity (culture industrial), they held up both players as one of theirs who had found a new "Heimat" (home) in theirs ("Silas Katompa Mvumpa or Wamangituka... I don't care what he is called [sic] he is one of us!"; "You are one of us Baka – and it will be like that forever!").⁵² At the same time, club statements reproduced this communal idea as they reiterated throughout the protracted ordeals that Jatta and Wamangituka were part of a club- "Familie."⁵³ Intriguingly,

vestor protests nationwide, etc., show similar discussions about ethical behavior and supporter demands for their clubs but are beyond the scope of this article.

⁴⁹ Totten, "Sport Activism."

⁵⁰ Enrico Michellini and Klaus Seiberth, "(Anti-)Hero, Refugee, Soccer Player: The Case of Bakery Jatta. A Discourse Analysis of German Newspapers," *Soccer & Society* 24, no. 5 (2022): 622–635, doi: 10.1080/14660970.2022.2080668.

⁵¹ Christof Kneer, "Abstiegskampf in der Bundesliga: Er ist dann mal wieder weg," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, February 22, 2022, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/sport/fussball-vfb-stuttgart-silas-katempa-mvumpa-1.5534579>.

⁵² Luca (@forzastuttgart), "Silas Katompa Mvumpa oder Wamangituka... Mir egal wie er heißt er ist einer von uns!" X, June 8, 2021, 10:00 a.m., <https://x.com/forzastuttgart/status/1402173693833498624?s=20&t=3UJdc0kTuk3dnP1q-BDooQ>; HSV Supporters Club (@hsv_sc), "Solidarität mit unserem Spieler und Mitmenschen Bakery #Jatta," x, December 6, 2021, 3:09 p.m., https://x.com/hsv_sc/status/1467858618733285383.

⁵³ VfB Stuttgart, "Silas erklärt seine Identität," *VfB Stuttgart Homepage*, June 8, 2021, <https://www.vfb.de/de/vfb/aktuell/neues/profis/2021/silas-wamangituka-stellungnahme>.

Stuttgart's sustained expression of solidarity and inclusion designed for its German fan base was notably left out of the English-facing version on its website. The club's evident awareness of how its media presence matters and directly speaks to its fans suggests two interrelated ideas. It speaks to the domestic fan base's (i.e. fans as prosumers) influence on the official communication of their club, and, at the same time, to a perhaps more commercial motivation of the club to leave out something political from their communication to non-German speaking fans in international markets.

Culture industry and vernacular culture – two of the discursive contexts highlighted by Crabbe – came together instantly, as regional media aligned with the fans' position and backed both players. Descriptions of Jatta and Wamangituka as their native sons ("Jatta? Daffeh? Hamburg lad") created an unambiguous contrast to the national media blitz by *Bild* and its sports outlet *Sport Bild*.⁵⁴ The tone of most fans, clubs, and the media was one of welcome and, notably, featured expressions of local and regional inclusion and belonging. Predictably, however, detractors during and after the conclusion of both incidents turned the failed legal persecution away from regional into nationalist narratives, not unlike we already saw for AfD spokesperson Chrupalla. Online hecklers not only continued to doubt the veracity of both players' statements and identities but attempted to portray these individual high-profile cases as representative and universally applicable to refugees and foreigners in Germany, many of who would, therefore, have to be equally illegal.⁵⁵ Again, lest we forget, it had been concluded by German authorities and courts that neither Jatta nor Wamangituka had been at fault. So, the creation of false narratives by politicians and media outlets went against reality and intentionally fanned the flames of divisiveness according to ethnic and national markers of difference. Yet this reality, locally anchored and articulated in Stuttgart and Hamburg, was defended by fans and clubs, reinforcing a unified ethical stance and resistance to populist agendas.

Populist, nationalist insertions like these into the world of German soccer by individuals and political parties are, of course, far from isolated and have correspondingly motivated other distinct reactions beyond supporters for domestic club sides. One such practice stands out for its constancy: the AfD's practice of

⁵⁴ Simon Braasch, Robin Meyer, and Mike Schlink, "Jatta? Daffeh? Hamburger Jung," *Hamburger Morgenpost*, July 3, 2020.

⁵⁵ Numerous replies to VfB Stuttgart's Tweet regarding Wamangituka's statement included assertions of other supposed instances of false identities in Germany. VfB Stuttgart (@VfB), "Sillas klärt seine Identität. Zur Meldung," X, June 8, 2021, 9:46 a.m., <https://x.com/VfB/status/1402170032516440066>.

calling for the removal of players like Mesut Özil, Ilkay Gündoğan, and Antonio Rüdiger from the national team for controversies either manufactured or heightened by the party's own outrage.⁵⁶ It is a practice one may well describe as cancel culture, despite the AfD's paranoid rejection of this very practice, which reinforces the proximity of political and social issues inside and outside Germany's soccer stadiums. Ironically, calls in different clubs and at different divisional levels – from fan organizations to club leadership – to consider the exclusion of AfD members from membership or at least game day bans boomeranged the narrative from the party's attack on players to attacks on the party itself.

How soccer's political payback revealed locally-specific characteristics, even as it shared an ethical resistance to right-wing ideology in boardrooms and terraces, can further be traced through three other examples. First, anti-establishment St Pauli has displayed a long-standing willingness and even inclination to back its supporters and affiliate the club with anti-right wing slogans like FCK NZS.⁵⁷ Similarly, in 2018, fans of recently promoted third-division side VfB Oldenburg objected to an AfD state convention with game day banners suggesting that the only way to handle the AfD would be through slide-tackles ("AfD weggrätschen").⁵⁸ Both examples show supporters strongly resisting the presence of right-wing parties and sympathizers inside and outside their stadiums. Most notable, however, is how 2022 UEFA Europa League winner Eintracht Frankfurt set off a larger debate and, subsequently, a legal response by the AfD, after club president Peter Fischer formally articulated the sentiments of his club's supporters in the stands who called for the exclusion of members affiliated with the AfD. According to Fischer, club statutes "do not align with support for the party,"⁵⁹ highlighting that even in an institutional context – within the 50+1 context of

⁵⁶ Arne Koch, "The Paradoxical Reality of Racism: German Soccer and the Irreversibility of Multiculturalism," *Soccer & Society* 24, no. 2 (2022): 139–157, doi: 10.1080/14660970.2022.2042266.

⁵⁷ Isabel Roldán, "St. Pauli wear their hearts on the shirt in anti-Nazi fan vote," *AS.com*, December 2, 2020, https://en.as.com/en/2020/12/08/soccer/1607438452_281439.html.

⁵⁸ "Unvereinbar," *vfbfueralle.de* (blog), October 28, 2018, <http://www.vfbfueralle.de/?m=201810>. For an overview of the club management's subsequent discussion of the supporters' game day displays, see Hauke Richters, "Ärger beim VfB Oldenburg. Anti-AfD-Plakate von Fans sorgen für Streit," *Nordwest-Zeitung*, December 7, 2018, https://www.nwzonline.de/fussball/oldenburg-aerger-beim-vfb-oldenburg-anti-afd-plakate-von-fans-sorgen-fuer-streit_a_50,3,1806500368.html.

⁵⁹ Klaus Vetter, "AfD und der Fußball. Wie die Bundesliga-Klubs mit rechts außen umgehen," *Der Tagesspiegel*, October 20, 2018, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/sport/afd-und-der-fussball-wie-die-bundesliga-klubs-mit-rechts-aussen-umgehen/23204716.html>. Fischer, in general, has a track record of strongly backing his club's supporters as he was also among the first club presidents to side with fans and speak out against Monday games. See "Eintracht-Präsident Fischer will Montagsspiele abschaffen."

German soccer always connected to fan stakeholders – political and ethical questions rise to the fore.

Among clubs' willingness to act – against a political party and in support of a club's fan base – Frankfurt's headline-making policy discussion stands out. And while a membership ban has thus far not been adopted by other clubs, fan groups across Germany vocally supported a hands-on approach to fighting the ideology of the AfD and others *inside* stadiums, in contrast to the unwillingness of politicians *outside* stadiums to ban the party. The latter reluctance is notable given that the AfD has been under surveillance by the *Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz* (Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution) for documented extremist aspirations.⁶⁰ In some instances, fans' resistance to a far-right presence has drawn so much attention that the leadership of clubs like Oldenburg and 5th division side Stuttgarter Kickers felt they needed to position themselves publicly at odds with their fans. While club supporters insistently protested the AfD on game days and social media, some boardrooms instead favored political neutrality and noted in official club releases that their statutes demanded impartiality. As Kickers chairman Rainer Lorz observed: "The AfD is not a banned party, you have to tolerate that."⁶¹ As clubs attempted to stay clear of what they deemed political hot topics, claims of neutrality and allusions to the German constitution were not uncommon. Former RB Leipzig coach Ralf Rangnick once fittingly asserted that soccer ought to stay away from political positions, even though representatives of other clubs like Dortmund, Hertha BSC Berlin, and Mainz 05 regularly choose the opposite path and insert their clubs directly into political debates surrounding their arenas.⁶² It is striking that while consensus so far appears to be not to remove members for their AfD affiliation – an endeavor now more difficult than just a few years ago, with the party securing more than 30% of the vote in some German state elections and polling at 20% for the 2025 Federal Elections⁶³ – most Bundesliga club managements nonetheless responded affirmatively in an exchange with

⁶⁰ "Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz darf AfD und JA als Verdachtsfall beobachten – Bekanntgabe der Urteilsgründe," Oberverwaltungsgericht für das Land Nordrhein-Westfalen, July 2, 2024, https://www.ovg.nrw.de/behoerde/presse/pressemitteilungen/33_240702/index.php.

⁶¹ Joachim Klumpp, "Steffen Ernle sorgt für Unruhe. Kickers zwischen Aufstieg und AfD," *Stuttgarter Nachrichten*, May 7, 2019, <https://www.stuttgarter-nachrichten.de/inhalt.steffen-ernle-sorgt-fuer-unruhe-kickers-zwischen-aufstieg-und-afd.dc5eed2c-a48b-4c74-812c-3ad6266e105c.html>.

⁶² Johannes Kopp, "Fußballvereine gegen die AfD. Die Liga bekennt sich," *taz*, September 29, 2018, <https://taz.de/Fussballvereine-gegen-die-AfD/!5536434/>.

⁶³ "Forschungsgruppe Wahlen. Wenn am nächsten Sonntag Bundestagswahl wäre...," *Wahlrecht.de*, December 20, 2024, <https://www.wahlrecht.de/umfragen/politbarometer.htm>.

the Berlin-based newspaper *taz* and expressed their disapproval of the AfD's extremist positions.⁶⁴ This affirmation by club leadership directly reflects and amplifies the political ethics of fans in the stands, despite policy hesitancy or concerns about legal action against the clubs.

This notable disapproval, however, does not mean to suggest that all soccer fans unite in resistance to the AfD or a general rejection of right-wing political parties or groups. There remain ideological differences between fan and ultra groups across Germany. As the debate about Wamangituka's identity has already documented, social media discussions in the context of the Frankfurt policy suggest the opposite, likely stemming from the growing popularity of the AfD. Of course, social media activity can never be seen as fully representative – let alone be definitively identified as fan activity, given the extent to which social media posts often appear with false profiles. At a minimum, though, some social media content props up the AfD and repeats the defense of constitutional rights to political freedom, like the stance taken by TSG Hoffenheim president Peter Hofmann, who has reiterated the AfD's democratically elected position.⁶⁵ It is possible that this hesitation all but reaffirms fundamental democratic ideals. Admittedly cynical, but quite possible, it seems a more pragmatic, even economic calculation on the part of the various “politically and religiously neutral” Bundesliga clubs, as Peter Fischer has intimated on a different occasion. Fischer suspects that behind clubs' restraint lie “interests that prevent a clear political stance: soccer is an unbelievably finance-driven business. There are investors, multinational corporations, and sponsors that say: 13 percent of voters (an AfD-election result) buy cars from VW. 13 percent drink Red Bull, 13 percent now and then take an aspirin.”⁶⁶ With thinly veiled swipes at 50+1 outliers Wolfsburg, Leipzig, and Leverkusen, Fischer's jab is equally directed against corporate club structures and interests in favor of a fan-as-prosumer-driven soccer culture. Yet, it remains an open question whether it is truly an ethical impetus that Frankfurt's club management shares with its fans, and whether those values drive the club to take the lead in combatting the influence of right-wing politics. One

⁶⁴ Ibid. See also “Kein Vereinsverbot für Partei-Mitglieder. Union-Chef Zingler: ‘AfD eine Katastrophe’ – Kein Verbot für Fans,” *Westdeutsche Zeitung*, August 23, 2019, https://www.wz.de/sport/fussball/bundesliga/union-chef-zingler-afd-eine-katastrophe-kein-verbot-fuer-fans_aid-45271333.

⁶⁵ “There won't be Nazis at Eintracht Frankfurt” – German club ban far-right voters,” *When Saturday Comes*, April 6, 2018, <https://www.wsc.co.uk/stories/there-won-t-be-nazis-at-eintracht-frankfurt-german-club-ban-far-right-voters/>.

⁶⁶ “Nazis raus” schlägt Wellen,” *Die Welt*, March 5, 2018, https://www.welt.de/print/welt_kompakt/print_sport/article174191149/Nazis-raus-schlaegt-Wellen.html.

cannot ignore the possibility that these actions are instead efforts to reimagine the club as a ‘cool’ brand of non-conformity and resistance, not unlike St. Pauli.⁶⁷ The overwhelmingly positive press for Frankfurt in the months leading up to their Europa League title might suggest that branding as “Fan-nah” [close to its fans] and a “true soccer club” might be near and dear to the club. Even then, it must represent at least in part a commercial (corporate) move of fashioning Frankfurt into a more marketable product and a club that is no longer seen as having a problem with a right-wing fan base.⁶⁸

Indeed, image control, as well as branding and sponsoring, connect to a final example of how German soccer fandom realizes its impact as an important player in political debates. The influence of money from Gulf States and other oil-producing countries on clubs around the world, as well as on the decision-making of soccer associations from the Premier League to FIFA, has, over the last few years, also stirred up the involvement of fans and club members of record Bundesliga champion Bayern Munich.⁶⁹ With increasing attention to decade-old partnerships and funding deals with Qatar-based companies, particularly the sponsorship by state-owned Qatar Airways and the club’s annual winter training camps in Doha, Bayern fan groups have repeatedly displayed their disapproval. Notably, at the final Bundesliga home game of 2019, Bayern ultras unfurled a large banner in front of their section, the *Südkurve*, condemning the scheduled winter escape: “And again human rights fly away with Kefala Airways!”⁷⁰ Chants and banners in the *Südkurve* publicly drew attention to their club’s state-airline sponsorship and activities in a country that continues to be cited for perpetrating human rights violations, most notably through the continued abusive migrant worker system known as *Kefala*.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Kassimeris, “The Politics and Culture of FC St. Pauli,” 180.

⁶⁸ Rafael Buschmann, “Neo-Nazis and Hooligans Find Common Ground,” *Der Spiegel*, November 15, 2013, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/violent-right-wing-extremists-team-up-with-football-hooligans-a-933896.html>.

⁶⁹ Salma Thani and Tom Heenan, “The Ball May Be Round but Football Is Becoming Increasingly Arabic: Oil Money and the Rise of the New Football Order,” *Soccer & Society* 18, no. 7 (2016): 1012–1026, doi: 10.1080/14660970.2015.1133416.

⁷⁰ “Bayern für Katar-Trainingslager in Kritik: ‘Menschenrechte fliegen davon,’” *Der Standard*, January 1, 2020, <https://www.derstandard.de/story/2000112823607/bayern-fuer-katar-trainingslager-in-kritik-menschenrechte-fliegen-davon>.

⁷¹ Justin, “FC Bayern and Qatar: a critical examination,” *miasanrot* (blog), February 11, 2011, <https://miasanrot.com/fc-bayern-and-qatar-a-critical-examination/#fc-bayern-is-a-global-player-and-not-a-football-club-from-munich>. Attacks on LGBTQ+ people, abuse of foreign workers, and other human right violations were also at the heart of the *Boycott Qatar* movement led by German ultras across Germany in the lead up to and during the 2022 FIFA World Cup. As a response to and rejection of sportswashing, this movement exhibited a lot of similarities to the Bayern fans’

Bayern fans brought up different objections as to why their club should immediately halt its business relations with Qatar Airways, ranging from human rights violations to a more romantic sense that corporate priorities move Bayern too far from its roots as a traditional soccer club toward being a global player.⁷² These objections, taken together, show that supporter displays were motivated by a combined feeling of traditionalist nostalgia (as “tradition keepers”) and a distinct ethical self-understanding. Across the entire German soccer landscape, supporters – inside and outside their stadiums – have shared expectations for their clubs to lead by exemplary behavior, as a 2021 survey about corporate social responsibility in professional soccer reveals. Almost 70% of all surveyed fans, for example, assign the highest importance to the specific category of “discrimination, racism, and human rights” compared to a noticeably smaller number of only 49% who deem their clubs’ *general* ethical-moral actions, as such a more nebulous concept, as most important.⁷³ Both numbers nevertheless speak to supporters’ expectations for their clubs to exhibit ethical-moral actions. These numbers correlate to CSR survey findings that show the degree to which fans across Germany value that their favorite clubs orient their policies based on supporter interests. Here, 58.4% of all surveyed fans assign the highest importance to their club’s acceptance of supporter input, that is, stakeowner input.⁷⁴

Such involvement took concrete form in Bayern supporters’ criticism of their club when a sizeable group of fans, led by Michael Ott, confronted club leadership at the annual general meeting in 2021, leaving behind their stadium protest with Bayern ultras’ display of banners targeting then-CEO Oliver Kahn and President Herbert Hainer. On those banners, Kahn and Hainer were depicted laundering bloody garments on behalf of the FC Bayern AG (subtitled “For money, we will launder everything!”). By the membership meeting, however, supporters’ visual disapproval turned to chants, switched venues, and evolved into official forms of demonstration and aspirations for participation. At the annual general meeting, provocative chants like “We are Bayern and you are not ... We are the fans you do not want” now constituted another form of expression in the democratic participation of these members – albeit still a threatening one,

rejection of Qatar Airways regarding political organization and an ethical stance, but with its focus on world soccer, it is beyond the scope of this article.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Axel Faix et al., *CSR im Profi-Fußball – Der ideale Club*, October 24, 2021 (preprint), 12–13, doi: 10.13140/RG.2.2.19827.86564.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 11.

highlighting the rift between fans as stakeowners and club leadership.⁷⁵ At least, that is how fans/members had envisioned it. Instead, when 77.8% of the 800 Bayern Munich members in attendance voted for their club to align itself with “internationally acknowledged human rights,” the entire club leadership simply voted down their motion, decrying it as illegal.⁷⁶ Moreover, Ott was denied the opportunity to share members’ concerns when he was barred from addressing the gathering. Fans’ objections ultimately failed, as club leadership noted that it was not within members’ purview to give input on financial decisions. The board’s exertion of power may have won out at this moment. Yet, the supporters’ message was important and heard across the soccer world and beyond. Bayern supporters strongly objected to their club’s ethically questionable financial alliances and continued to do so.

Without a doubt, Bayern fans’ objections – fundamentally representing attacks on the financial privileges of a powerful organization – were cast themselves from a position of privilege. Their protests differed considerably from similar actions by supporters of other, less financially secure German clubs. Protests by FC Augsburg supporters, for example, come to mind, as they successfully forced their club to cancel a lucrative pre-season fixture with Qatari side Al-Duhail SC in July 2022. Citing the Qatari team’s proximity to the ruling family and its disregard for values including “diversity, tolerance, and freedom of opinion,” the Augsburg supporter alliance Ulrich-Biesinger-Tribüne e.V. not only pressured managing director Stefan Reuter to find a different pre-season opponent (fellow Bundesliga side Schalke 04) but also to declare that the club needed to “set this example” (“dieses Zeichen setzen”).⁷⁷ For Munich supporters, in contrast, pressure against their club comes, after all, with the knowledge that a side like Bayern, with an annual revenue of more than \$640 million (2021), could comfortably forgo what others would consider a lucrative sponsorship contract of \$20 million annually (let us call this fans’ *financial privilege*). In the end, Munich would still have the means to dominate the Bundesliga, whereas Dortmund, as its closest financial and sporting competitor, generates only half as much with about \$320 million – signifying also an *athletic privilege* given

⁷⁵ Matt Pearson, “Qatar rift at Bayern Munich escalating,” *Deutsche Welle*, November 26, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/bayern-munich-qatar-rift-between-fans-and-bosses-escalating/a-59946950>.

⁷⁶ “Bayern Munich AGM Ends in Tumult Over Club’s Qatar Sponsorship,” *Sports Illustrated*, November 26, 2021, <https://www.si.com/soccer/2021/11/26/bayern-munich-agm-qatar-sponsorship>.

⁷⁷ “Nach Fanprotesten – FC Augsburg sagt Test gegen Katar-Klub ab,” *Der Spiegel*, July 15, 2022, <https://www.spiegel.de/sport/fussball/nach-fan-protesten-fc-augsburg-sagt-test-gegen-katar-klub-ab-a-ff0fc69e-7b33-44d9-ae42-0fb6e6993d74>.

the ability to attract higher quality talents to Bayern.⁷⁸ Whether it is this double privilege or a true ethical impetus that continues to motivate Bayern supporters to push its club toward a commitment to human rights, the issue represents for Bayern fans a red line they are unwilling to cross. It is a line that Ott again underscored on behalf of Munich supporters at a roundtable with club leadership in early July 2022: “If this [the deaths of many in Qatar] hasn’t produced a red line for a sponsoring partnership, will there ever be a red line for FC Bayern?”⁷⁹ Even if change was not inevitable, as has been suggested to ensure supporter participation in the future,⁸⁰ political and public relations pressure remained ever-present and continued to be of interest as much to the fan base as the media. Bayern’s financial privilege made it only seem plausible that the lower share of revenues from fan game attendance would result in reduced leverage compared to fan groups of smaller clubs (cf. Augsburg example). With it, the status quo would be left untouched. The completely unexpected announcement by Bayern Munich and Qatar Airways in June 2023 that the sides had mutually agreed to end their long partnership therefore caught most people off guard. An exemplar of sportswashing make-believe,⁸¹ the club’s public statement unsurprisingly omitted any mention of supporter groups’ objections to Qatari money: “Both partners have actively promoted an exchange between cultures. It has always been the goal of FC Bayern and Qatar Airways to connect people through football, including women’s football. Trusting, open exchanges have created friendships that will continue.”⁸² Still, Michael Ott knew to go on the record and underscore what helped lead to the club’s decision: “It was completely unexpected, but it’s all the better for it! Many thanks to all supporters who have rallied against the sponsorship. Together we are strong!”⁸³

⁷⁸ “Bayern Munich revenue by stream from 2008/09 to 2020/21,” *Statista*, June 21, 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/250856/revenue-of-bayern-munich-by-stream/>; “Sales of Borussia Dortmund from 2008/09 to 2020/21,” *Statista*, May 25, 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/283045/revenue-of-borussia-dortmund/>.

⁷⁹ “Runder Tisch zu Katar. ‘Wo gibt es dann noch eine rote Linie für den FC Bayern?’,” *Der Spiegel*, July 4, 2022, <https://www.spiegel.de/sport/fussball/runder-tisch-zum-katar-sponsoring-des-fc-bayern-muenchen-mit-oliver-kahn-und-kritikern-a-7edf820d-6d5b-46f6-8073-41e04f10d6b8>.

⁸⁰ Sandy Adam, Sebastian B. Bauers, and Gregor Hovemann, “Inevitable Need for Change – Identifying and Removing Barriers to Supporter Participation in German Professional Football,” *Sport in Society* 23, no. 5 (2020): 938–958, doi: 10.1080/17430437.2019.1596082.

⁸¹ Kyle Fruh, Alfred Archer, and Jake Wojtowicz, “Sportswashing: Complicity and Corruption,” *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy* 17, no. 1 (2022): 101–118, doi: 10.1080/17511321.2022.2107697.

⁸² Matt Ford and Matt Pearson, “Bayern Munich end Qatar deal after fan pressure,” *Deutsche Welle*, June 28, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/football-bayern-munich-end-qatar-deal-after-fan-pressure/a-63418536>.

⁸³ Ibid.

Power Politics and the Reality of Fan Influence

The tone deafness and unwillingness by Bayern Munich management to engage members, their subsequent promise of non-binding surveys about what fans might want to see happen, and ultimately even the termination of their sponsorship together suggest that German clubs are, at a minimum, intimately mindful of their fans' influence. Even a club as financially powerful as Munich recognizes the impact that organized fans can have, if not immediately on club policies, then over time on the reputation of the club via incessant displays of their objections and demands. Crucially, these demands are expressed at once in the vernacular of the stadiums and the culture industrial arenas. The examples discussed in this article show some commonalities and allow us to conclude that if fans' expressions for change or action do not clash with their clubs' priorities – as in the example of Frankfurt's evolving understanding and projection as a progressive club or Hamburg and Stuttgart's self-representation as seemingly open-minded and inclusive organizations – then supporter protest and input are not just broadly welcomed. This type of supporter involvement, especially apparent in institutional contexts of club management, can be seen as something that club leadership more than just accepts, but actually solicits. Some clubs utilize their fans' ethical leadership as a way of performing some kind of deferral of its power to the will of its fans *qua* stakeholders. In stark contrast to such a conveniently symbiotic power relationship, this article also considered examples in which fans' political expressions instead depart from club management's interests. Often a result of corporate and financial interest (see Munich, Leipzig, but also smaller organizations like Oldenburg), the power relation at work emphasizes a perceived chasm between fans and management.⁸⁴ The persistent expression of fans' political ethics in some instances, however, has shown not only the efficacy of protest inside and outside stadiums but also that, as members and stakeholders, fans have exposed the perceived chasm as much narrower. Nevertheless, the willingness of clubs still to go against or silence fans' expressed wishes, even when they are presented by a democratic majority in

⁸⁴ It is important to note that there are also examples of clashes with club management that are not caused by corporate interests and situated on the other end of the political spectrum. An example is third league side FC Hansa Rostock, where club management has tried for years to stem right-wing elements dominating its fan base. For Rostock's management response in one case, see "Nach Ausschreitungen beim FC St. Pauli: Hansa Rostock greift durch," *NDR*, March 5, 2023, <https://www.ndr.de/sport/fussball/Nach-Ausschreitungen-beim-FC-St-Pauli-Hansa-Rostock-greift-durch,hansa11146.html>.

a club like Bayern Munich, is important even if fans, in the end, come out on top. This stance lets us anticipate more moments of future conflict and disagreement. Exactly what these political clashes might look like, however, may be harder to predict. Difficulties in forecasting the future notwithstanding, Bayern pundits among the ultras have already begun to ponder some scenarios as they worry about their club's vision: "Headwinds [for Oliver Kahn] would be considerable. Perhaps he is already working on [...] completely different goals and visions. Even if they could be unpleasant for quite a few supporters."⁸⁵ So long as fans are confronted by management with undesired visions for their clubs, equally undesired political expression by large portions of the fan base will continue to be a part of arenas everywhere. Their resistance will persist despite clubs, for example, already requiring prior approval of banners or punishing fans for certain songs and chants or issuing stadium bans for some others. Even if the "critical football fan" may in fact be in the minority, as Numerato concludes perhaps too pessimistically,⁸⁶ fans' voices and constant engagement inside and outside Germany's stadiums are ever-present and, as we have shown, impactful in different ways. Fans' political presence and with it their distinct sense of shared ethics fill German stadiums more than ever; short of banning vocal fans from stadiums, censoring them on social media, and removing their club membership, management across different parts of Germany will continue to feel that presence.

⁸⁵ Georg, "Wohin führt Oliver Kahn den FC Bayern," *miasanrot* (blog), July 7, 2022, <https://miasanrot.de/wohin-fuehrt-oliver-kahn-den-fc-bayern/>.

⁸⁶ Numerato, *Football Fans, Activism and Social Change*, 152.