



# White Rex, White Nationalism, and Combat Sport: The Production of a Far- Right Cultural Scene

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## Abstract

*Most of the scholarship on far-right hooliganism in Europe and Russia mentions only marginally the Russian far-right MMA gear and tournament brand White Rex (WR). A few authors have discussed WR's right-wing connections and activities. Yet both the structures that enabled WR and, now, other similar brands to exert ideological and political influence and the influence itself bear further examination. This paper presents a qualitative analysis of information from intelligence reports, social media, open media, and interviews to show how WR modeled and cultivated a professionalizing trend in several far-right combat sport tournaments. We argue that WR's entrance into the Western European far-right combat sport scene was a key development in the emergence of professionally organized, fight-focused events with explicit political messaging targeted at a far-right, primarily trans-European audience and a surrounding infrastructure of far-right organizations shaping the character of this developing scene. The business model that WR developed in Russia proved to be something the emerging European far-right combat sport scene could adopt in order to grow. Finally, we elaborate on how WR's founder, Denis Kapustin, was able to establish a Western European network that temporarily gave him influence over one of the far right's most significant cultural scenes.*

Keywords: Kapustin, White Rex, Far Right, Combat Sport, MMA, Cultural Scene

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## Introduction

In recent years, popular support for far-right parties and politicians across Europe has steadily increased. Hate crimes against immigrants and other familiar targets of right-wing violence are on the rise.<sup>1</sup> This large-scale shift seems to have emboldened elements of the far right to emerge from the cultural shadows. Since about 2013, the institutions and artifacts of a new far-right subculture have come into clearer view, offering a look at an especially troubling aspect of far-right radicalism: an explicitly far-right combat sport tournament scene—primarily MMA (mixed martial arts), kickboxing, and K-1—involving friendly, albeit violent, matches. The concern is that these fights, and the cultural scene that surrounds them, further encourage and normalize physical violence among groups already known for their hatred of certain ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities. The tournaments enjoy a kind of economic symbiosis with sportswear brands—one that has developed in conjunction with this especially bellicose far-right subculture and is primed to amplify its white-supremacist, xenophobic message with symbol-stamped sportswear that both signals in-group status and selectively antagonizes non-“Aryan” minorities and their sympathizers. The brands sponsor the events, which in turn promote the brands.

Our tracing of far-right combat sport tournaments supports the claim of Robert Claus<sup>2</sup> and other journalists that one actor in particular has been instrumental in the creation of a far-right MMA scene: Russian national Denis Kapustin, a.k.a. “Nikitin,” who was active in EU countries beginning in 2013 until his banishment from the Schengen zone in 2019.<sup>3</sup> In 2013, Kapustin brought his Russian sportswear brand, White Rex, to the Western European market with White Rex–sponsored combat sport events. In itself, Kapustin’s desire to expand his market is unremarkable. However, White Rex often features violent, white nationalist, xenophobic imagery and text. For that reason, we should be concerned that by organizing and sponsoring displays of white-nationalist violence in the form of explicitly far-right combat tournaments, such “marketing” both galvanizes radicalism within the existing culture of violent ethnonationalism and expands it. By financially promoting and supporting far-right fighters from across Europe, Kapustin has attracted white nationalists with real-life versions of their mythical “Euroethnic warrior.”<sup>4</sup> Yet it is the “coliseums” that he and others like him have erected around their modern gladiators that constitute the locus of the cultural scene. The network of tournaments provides the points of connection (*Verknüpfungspunkte*) for the construction of cultural meaning and the performance of identity, giving whoever controls the network significant influence over the cultural scene. An examination of White Rex’s role within this far-right combat sport scene will illustrate how such brands are able to move the Overton window to the right—a phenomenon Cynthia Miller-Idriss has aptly termed “extreme gone mainstream.”<sup>5</sup>

Our research draws upon existing studies of right-wing extremism, football hooliganism, networking, and identity, as well as contemporary public scholarship and investigative reporting on far-right combat sports in Europe, with a particular focus on the White Rex brand. Available research represents a range of methodological approaches, including political science, sociology, and cultural qualitative and mixed design. Given the closed and semi-secretive nature of far-right combat sport events, as well as the wariness and outright hostility of the participants, the use of participant surveying and participant observation was deemed impractical. We

1 “German Far-Right Crimes Rise,” *Deutsche Welle*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/german-far-right-crimes-rise/a-53053279>.

2 Robert Claus, *Hooligans: Eine Welt Zwischen Fußball, Gewalt Und Politik* (Göttingen: Verlag Die Werkstatt, 2017).

3 Deutscher Bundestag, “Kampfsport in der Rechtsextremen Szene,” *Drucksache 19/8316* (March 13, 2019), <https://dservet.bundestag.de/btd/19/083/1908316.pdf>.

4 Claus, *Hooligans*, 143.

5 Cynthia Miller-Idriss, *The Extreme Gone Mainstream: Commercialization and Far Right Youth Culture in Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

have relied instead on collection, conceptualization, and analysis of metadata in order to approximately reconstruct the context, the main actors' modus operandi, their strategies of networking, scene penetration, and scene integration on a trans-European scale.

To date, the phenomenon of global commercial MMA and the cultural scene(s) that surround it has received some attention in larger works such as Snowden's *Total MMA*<sup>6</sup> and Gullo's *Into the Cage*,<sup>7</sup> as well as shorter-form academic pieces such as Spencer's ethnography of MMA<sup>8</sup> and Vaccaro, Schrock, and McCabe's<sup>9</sup> psychological assessment of fighters' management of emotion. However, the influence of far-right ideology on MMA culture has been analyzed only marginally and in a limited number of scholarly works. Such pieces are mainly dedicated to the scrutiny of national and local organizations, networks, and milieus, as with Perry and Scrivens's analysis of the spike in right-wing extremism in Canada.<sup>10</sup> Recent books by Miller-Idriss and Claus deal with these themes more extensively.

Informative samples of such works with passing, yet specific, reference to MMA clothing and White Rex include Mareš and Laryš's<sup>11</sup> inquiry into Russian support and "export" of militant nationalism abroad and the international cooperation between far-right extremists; Tomczyk, Tolmachev, and DuWors's<sup>12</sup> research on contemporary white-nationalist networking between groups in the United States and Russia; and Glathe's<sup>13</sup> inquiry into Russian football-fan subculture and its connection to far-right violence.

Yet it is important to specify that as early as 2014, the role and activity of White Rex and its impact outside Russia were addressed by researchers such as Paul Jackson. In his discussion of National Action's search for a new identity, Jackson quotes the British organization's own website:

When it comes to innovation Britain can certainly learn a lot looking abroad, and this is best illustrated with examples from Russia where nationalism has been a constant aspect of the post-communist state and has since really flowered in a lot of interesting ways which are not so true or successful in the rest of mainland Europe. Principally Russian far right specializes in soft influence—there is no strong neofascist party, but there is a regime that is responsive to a culture of which NeoNazism is a part.<sup>14</sup>

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6 Jonathan Snowden, *Total MMA: Inside Ultimate Fighting* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2009).

7 Nick Gullo, *Into the Cage: A Journey through the Past, Present and Future of the UFC* (Plattsburgh, NY: Fenn-M&S, 2013).

8 Dale C. Spencer, "Habit(us), Body Techniques and Body Callusing: An Ethnography of Mixed Martial Arts," *Body & Society* 15, no. 4 (2009): 119–43, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X09347224>.

9 Christian A. Vaccaro, Douglas P. Schrock, and Janice M. McCabe, "Managing Emotional Manhood: Fighting and Fostering Fear in Mixed Martial Arts," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 74, no. 4 (2011): 414–37, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0190272511415554>.

10 Barbara Perry and Ryan Scrivens, "Uneasy Alliances: A Look at the Right-Wing Extremist Movement in Canada," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 39, no. 9 (2016): 819–41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2016.1139375>.

11 Miroslav Mareš and Martin Laryš, "The Transnational Relations of the Contemporary Russian Extreme Right," *Europe-Asia Studies* 67, no. 7 (2015): 1056–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2015.1067673>.

12 Justin Tomczyk, Ilya Tolmachev, and Lee DuWors, "Prospects for American-Russian Cooperation in Countering White Nationalism," *Stanford US-Russia Journal* 12, no. 1 (2020): 1–30, <http://ojs.stanford.edu/ojs/index.php/surfj/article/view/1743>.

13 Julia Glathe, "Football Fan Subculture in Russia: Aggressive Support, Readiness to Fight, and Far Right Links," *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 9 (2016): 1506–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2016.1244260>.

14 Paul Jackson, "#hitlerwasright: National Action and National Socialism for the 21st Century," *Journal for Deradicalization* 1 (Winter 2014/15): 107, <https://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/7/7>.

In the same section, Jackson specifically points to National Action's reception of White Rex as a strong indicator of the early direction and impact of this particular brand:

This discussion identified the aesthetic developed by the Russian clothing company White Rex, described as "a MMA sports club and clothing brand." The document praised White Rex as it "recently found the work of a fascist 'style' artist who has been responsible for their designs since." Needless to say, National Action believes that British activists should look to imitate such an approach. Drawing on these international cultural reference points, National Action also contrasted exciting visuals from abroad with the rather dull graphical style of the BNP, among other British groups criticized in such documents.<sup>15</sup>

Jackson's interest in far-right and extremist aesthetics anticipates Miller-Idriss's broader and more theoretical analysis of their "mainstreaming."<sup>16</sup>

Another important recent examination of the role and impact of White Rex and the actors behind it is Claus's *Hooligans*,<sup>17</sup> in which the author argues that the sportswear brand was instrumental in the emergence of a trans-European far-right combat sport scene. In similar fashion, Ebner's ethnography *Going Dark*<sup>18</sup> devotes some attention to Kapustin and White Rex's role in and impact on far-right festivals and networking, such as Schild & Schwert in Germany. Most of the recent interest in the growth of the far-right combat sport scene, its interconnectedness, and the specific impact of White Rex is due to the efforts of this kind of investigative journalism, as well as law enforcement reporting and civic activism monitoring. Such valuable input offers insight into the construction of the trans-European far-right combat sport scene and the evolution of the "pioneering" work of White Rex and its founder in exporting the model, professionalizing the circuit, and facilitating the emergence of an "outcast" identity beyond the borders of the Russian Federation.

Journalism regarding the structure of the company, the proliferation of its brand, and Kapustin's personality and connections has found its way into highly visible outlets such as the *Interpreter*,<sup>19</sup> the *Moscow Times*,<sup>20</sup> the *Huffington Post*,<sup>21</sup>

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15 Jackson, "#hitlerwasright."

16 Miller-Idriss, *The Extreme Gone Mainstream*.

17 Claus, *Hooligans*.

18 Julia Ebner, "Schild & Schwert: Attending a Neo-Nazi Music Festival," in *Going Dark: The Secret Social Lives of Extremists*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 193–208; [https://www.semperfidelis.ro/e107\\_files/public/1615154236\\_1287\\_FT9124\\_going\\_dark\\_the\\_secret\\_social\\_lives\\_of\\_extremists\\_by\\_julia\\_ebner\\_z-lib.org.epub.pdf](https://www.semperfidelis.ro/e107_files/public/1615154236_1287_FT9124_going_dark_the_secret_social_lives_of_extremists_by_julia_ebner_z-lib.org.epub.pdf).

19 Anton Shekhovtsov, "Russian Extreme-Right White Rex Organisation Engaged in Training British Neo-Nazi Thugs," *Interpreter*, November 10, 2014, <https://www.interpretermag.com/russian-extreme-right-white-rex-organisation-engaged-in-training-british-neo-nazi-thugs/>.

20 Robert Claus, "How a Russian Neo-Nazi Became a Role Model for German Hooligans," *Moscow Times*, November 28, 2017, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/11/28/neo-nazis-and-illegal-fights-german-and-russian-a59718>.

21 Nick Robins-Early, "Facebook Let a Notorious Russian Neo-Nazi Profit off Its Platform for Years," *HuffPost*, July 19, 2018, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/facebook-nazi-white-rex-nikitin\\_n\\_5b4f949ee4b0de86f4894b80](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/facebook-nazi-white-rex-nikitin_n_5b4f949ee4b0de86f4894b80).

*Mother Jones*,<sup>22</sup> *VICE*,<sup>23</sup> *ProPublica*,<sup>24</sup> and the *New Republic*.<sup>25</sup> It also has drawn the attention of advocacy organizations, including the Southern Poverty Law Center<sup>26</sup> and the Anti-Defamation League.<sup>27</sup>

## **The Advent of European Far-Right Combat Sport**

European far-right combat sport as such seems to have emerged in large part from the older “hooligan” scene. Hooliganism is often associated with violent right-wing football (soccer) fans, yet that relationship is more incidental than integral. As Kett-Straub has demonstrated,<sup>28</sup> most hooligans have far less interest in football matches than in fighting other hooligan groups or the police.<sup>29</sup> A hooligan who does not care for football is conceivable; a hooligan who does not care for violence is an oxymoron. Moreover, the nature of hooligan violence has evolved over time, incorporating new combat skills as instruction in various martial arts has become accessible. Thus, the incorporation of MMA into hooligan fight culture not only represents a kind of professionalization but also a kind of cultural revolution. It has effectively redefined hooligan violence in the streets as well as repositioned it as a spectator sport.

As a group, German neo-Nazis began showing large-scale interest in martial arts gyms only in 2004.<sup>30</sup> After the German reunification in 1989, amateur fights served as meeting places for a variety of groups in the former GDR, including biker gangs, hooligans, and neo-Nazis.<sup>31</sup> Such events, however, were usually localized and drew primarily an East German crowd.

By the 2010s, German MMA events were drawing noticeable popular interest from across the ideological spectrum. German counterparts to the international Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) include the German MMA Championship and We Love MMA, which launched in 2009 and 2010, respectively. New gyms were opened, and professionally-organized tournaments were marketed to an ever-broader spectatorship. These events attracted sponsors, and MMA training and tournaments became a lucrative business. However, the popularity of MMA with a broader public was tainted by the growing number of obvious neo-Nazis who sought

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22 Bryan Schatz, “The Terrifying Rise of Alt-Right Fight Clubs,” *Mother Jones*, February 1, 2018, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2018/02/the-terrifying-rise-of-alt-right-fight-clubs/>.

23 Tim Hume, “A Russian Neo-Nazi Football Hooligan Is Trying to Build an MMA Empire across Europe,” *VICE News*, July 26, 2018, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/435mjw/a-russian-neo-nazi-football-hooligan-is-trying-to-build-an-mma-empire-across-europe](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/435mjw/a-russian-neo-nazi-football-hooligan-is-trying-to-build-an-mma-empire-across-europe).

24 Adam Clay Thompson and Ali Winston, “American Hate Group Looks to Make Allies in Europe,” *ProPublica*, July 5, 2018, <https://www.propublica.org/article/robert-rundo-denis-nikitin-hooligans-europe-hate-group?token=p-voT1xf0J8rJHzc08UxDKSQrKgWJk>.

25 Michael Colborne, “The Far Right’s Secret Weapon: Fascist Fashion,” *New Republic*, February 26, 2019, <https://newrepublic.com/article/153161/far-rights-secret-weapon-fascist-fashion>.

26 Héléne Barthélemy, “Hate in Europe: July 2018,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, August 3, 2018, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/08/03/hate-europe-july-2018>.

27 “Hate beyond Borders: The Internationalization of White Supremacy,” Anti-Defamation League, accessed August 22, 2020, <https://www.adl.org/resources/reports/hate-beyond-borders-the-internationalization-of-white-supremacy>.

28 Gabriele Kett-Straub, “Hooliganismus in Deutschland: Phänomenologie, Abgrenzung zu den ‘Ultras’, Dritortauseinandersetzung, Erklärungsansätze und Prävention,” *Neue Kriminalpolitik*, 24, no. 3 (2012): 98–106.

29 Deutscher Bundestag, “Gewalt Beim Fussball,” *Drucksache 17/8051*, December 2, 2011, <http://dipbt.bundestag.de/doc/btd/17/080/1708051.pdf>.

30 Runter von der Matte, “Neonazi-Vernetzung in der Kampfsport-Szene,” *Antifaschistisches Infoblatt*, October 31, 2017, [https://www.antifainfoblatt.de/artikel/neonazi-vernetzung-der-kampfsport-szene#footnote3\\_9quot516](https://www.antifainfoblatt.de/artikel/neonazi-vernetzung-der-kampfsport-szene#footnote3_9quot516).

31 “Fight Club Sachsen,” *Antifaschistisches Infoblatt*, December 9, 2005, <https://www.antifainfoblatt.de/artikel/fight-club-sachsen>.

to compete in professional combat events. NGOs began to research and expose the far-right affiliations of such fighters, and this in turn prompted organizers to ban them from competition. As a result, events organized by known neo-Nazis, such as the Imperium Fighting Championship (2014–16), imposed an “apolitical” atmosphere in order to appeal to more moderate (and larger) crowds and to avoid incidents with law enforcement.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, gyms like La Familia in Halle, Saxony-Anhalt and Bushido Sportcenter in Leipzig, Saxony, allowed fighters with deep ties to the far right to join their teams while striving to maintain an apolitical public image.<sup>33</sup> Thus, when even politically sympathetic event organizers were reluctant to publicly embrace fighters’ far-right convictions, those fighters unwilling to make concessions (like covering neo-Nazi tattoos during tournaments) had nowhere to turn.<sup>34</sup> “We didn’t feel at home,” Alexander Deptolla, a neo-Nazi fight organizer from Dortmund, responded in 2019 when an interviewer asked why he had created Kampf der Nibelungen (KdN), Germany’s first explicitly far-right international combat sport festival, in 2013.<sup>35</sup> Deptolla compared then-available options, such as Imperium, with life in a German city in which there are “more foreigners than Germans.” He complained that before KdN, all of the events were open to fighters of “foreign descent.” Notably, Deptolla’s subsequent enthusiastic participation in Kapustin’s transnational tournament network indicates that by “foreign descent” he was referring specifically to Muslim and non-European fighters and not to other white Europeans. What had been missing, he felt, were professional tournaments organized by white nationalists, for white nationalists—something that did not exist in Western Europe before 2013.

Things changed in May 2013, when Tana delle Tigri (Tigers’ Den), an annual day of hatecore (Nazi punk) concerts organized by the Italian far-right party CasaPound in Rome, included an “international fight contest” for the first time.<sup>36</sup> The fight was sponsored by Kapustin’s White Rex.<sup>37</sup> Another significant development that year was the noticeable improvement in the organization of the event, including professional-quality posters and promotional videos. It was only a few months later, in September, that Deptolla and his neo-Nazi network held their first Ring der Nibelungen (later Kampf der Nibelungen) in a rented venue in Rhineland-Palatinate about fifty kilometers south of Cologne.<sup>38</sup> Unlike hooligan field brawls (*Ackerkämpfe*), these two tournaments were staged in boxing rings and octagon cages at commercial venues; and, in contrast to “apolitical” fighting events, both the fighters and the attendees were unquestionably involved with the far right.<sup>39</sup> Similar events were held

32 “MMA-Veranstalter Positionieren Sich Rechts,” *Antifaschistisches Infoblatt*, December 27, 2017, <https://www.antifainfoblatt.de/artikel/mma-veranstalter-positionieren-sich-rechts>.

33 Robert Claus, “Der extrem rechte Kampfsportboom,” *Belltower News*, January 24, 2019, <https://www.belltower.news/rechtsextremer-lifestyle-der-extrem-rechte-kampfsportboom-80543/>; “Gegen Neonazis im Kampfsport’ legt Quellen zur Kritik an La Familia offen,” *Halle Spektrum*, April 26, 2018, <https://hallespektrum.de/nachrichten/sport/gegen-neonazis-im-kampfsport-legt-quellen-zur-kritik-an-la-familia-offen/314133/>.

34 Tremonia Blog, Rechter Kampfsport: Zu Besuch beim Kampf der Nibelungen, Tremonia Podcast, YouTube, October 23, 2015, 21:14, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Wps2VAU4mI&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Wps2VAU4mI&feature=emb_title).

35 Sanny Kujath, “Interview mit Alexander Deptolla,” *Junge Revolution*, November 29, 2019, YouTube video now private, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=991pZ18BEWo>.

36 Tana delle Tigri began as a music festival in 2009, but only hosted fights beginning in 2013. It has been defunct since 2015.

37 CasaPound and White Rex, Tana Delle Tigri 5, Event poster, May 31, 2013, <https://www.label56.com/wp-content/uploads/WhiteRexRome-575x812.jpg>.

38 Landtag Brandenburg, “Welche Gefahren gehen von den Kämpfern der ‘NS Straight Edge’-Bewegung aus?” *Drucksache 6/7864*, December 27, 2017, <https://kleineanfragen.de/brandenburg/6/7864-welche-gefahren-gehen-von-den-kaempfern-der-ns-straight-edge-bewegung-aus.txt>.

39 Hools TV, “Mass Hooligans Fight Russia, Poland, Sweden, Germany, Ukraine,” January 2, 2018, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/HoolsTV/videos/mass-hooligans-fight-russiapolandswedengermanyukraine/1948737928710958/>.

the following year in France (Duh Voina, later called Day of Glory) and Greece (Pro Patria Fest). Duh Voina (Russian for “Spirit of the Warrior”), launched by Kapustin in Russia in 2011, was White Rex’s first amateur fight series. Duh Voina 2014 was a collaboration between White Rex and the newly founded French MMA sportswear brand Pride France (2014). Although Kapustin’s involvement with Pro Patria in 2014 is unclear, video footage of the White Rex logo on the following year’s event poster (May) and on the octagon itself (December) confirms that, by 2015, he had established a trans-European circuit of professional or semi-professional, openly far-right combat sport tournaments.<sup>40</sup>

### **A Far-Right Combat Sport Network**

The involvement of Kapustin and the sponsorship of White Rex are a conspicuous common thread in the earliest iterations of these openly far-right events. Kapustin’s personal history accounts for why that would be. Sometime after moving to Germany in 2001, he attached himself to the local Cologne hooligan scene. Subsequently, he identified Russian demand for far-right branded clothing and began reselling Thor Steinar clothing during periodic trips to Russia.<sup>41</sup> By 2008 (allegedly on August 14), Kapustin had founded his own White Rex brand, which he initially marketed in Russia.<sup>42</sup> In 2011, two years before the advent of far-right tournaments in Western Europe, he gained popularity and publicity for White Rex in Russia’s far-right hooligan scene with the first Duh Voina.<sup>43</sup> He claims that events in the series attracted as many as 2,000 attendees.<sup>44</sup>

In 2013, Kapustin and his Russian team attended the original Ring der Nibelungen, with Kapustin even entering the ring.<sup>45</sup> Significantly, fight cards from the event included the names of international fighters as well as the German names of fighters from the host country. From the beginning of what we can now call a far-right MMA tournament circuit, it seems to have been common for sponsoring brands to send delegations of their own fighters to the festivals hosted by other brands. As early as 2013, Tana Delle Tigri—the first White Rex event outside Russia—was marketed as “The Largest Pan-European Martial Arts Selection.”<sup>46</sup> Connecting European far-right actors was apparently one of White Rex’s goals from the beginning. There is no question that the brand promotes far-right ideas. Kapustin has said so openly and often. The logo incorporates the “black sun,” a neo-Nazi symbol. Additionally, White Rex events have featured far-right hatecore bands, and fighters supported by the brand maintain close ties with far-right extremist groups.<sup>47</sup>

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40 Propatria Fight Club, “Propatria Fest Vol. II: Aftervideo,” December 9, 2015, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xjeKd9JysY0>; Propatria Fight Club, “Propatria Fest Vol. III: Spirit of Our Ancestors (Το Πνεύμα Των Προγόνων Μαζ)-Aftervideo,” YouTube, January 6, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5M1sEBtUrkM>.

41 Jörg Diehl, Max Holscher, Roman Lehberger, and Ansgar Siemens, “Rechtsextremer Kampfsportler: Der Neonazi-Krieger aus Moskau,” *Spiegel Online*, February 14, 2019, <https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/justiz/rechtsextremer-kampfsportler-der-neonazi-krieger-aus-moskau-a-1253163.html>.

42 The alleged founding date of White Rex seems specious or at least opportunistic. The number fourteen is a reference to the Fourteen Words: “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children.” The two eights are a numerical reference to two times the eighth letter of the alphabet: HH, as in “Heil Hitler.”

43 The White Rex events included both professional (“White Rex Pro”) and amateur (“Jungsturm League”) fights (Runter von der Matte, 2017).

44 Tremonia Blog, “Rechter Kampfsport.”

45 Tobias Hoff, “Die Extreme Rechte und Kampfsport,” *Gegenpol*, September 2018, [http://www.vielfalt-mediathek.de/data/expertise\\_rex\\_und\\_kampfsport\\_vielfalt\\_mediathek.pdf](http://www.vielfalt-mediathek.de/data/expertise_rex_und_kampfsport_vielfalt_mediathek.pdf).

46 CasaPound and White Rex, Tana Delle Tigri 5, event poster, May 31, 2013, <https://www.label56.com/wp-content/uploads/WhiteRexRome-575x812.jpg>.

47 “What Is White Rex?” Antifascist Action in the Czech Republic, August 3, 2015, <https://www.antifa.cz/content/what-white-rex>.

Far-right combat sport tournaments are now attended by ideologically sympathetic fighters and spectators from across Europe. Fighters from Germany, France, Greece, Italy, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, Ukraine, and Russia seem to be the most active, but combatants from Poland, Latvia, Sweden, and Brazil are also documented. Force et Honneur and Day of Glory (both organized by Pride France in French and Swiss venues), KdN, Tiwaz, Tana Delle Tigri, and Pro Patria represent the most consistent core of the circuit. Similar festivals have been held in Poland, Hungary, and Ukraine, though this group appears to be explicitly unrelated and even unwelcoming to the former group, which includes White Rex. Tournaments promote and sponsor one another with advertising and support each other by sending delegations of fighters. For example, Pro Patria Fest 2019 was sponsored by KdN, which was itself mentioned in the promotional materials for a Pride France event that was scheduled for June 2020, but was subsequently canceled because of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>48</sup> Pride France appears on the posters of several European far-right fighting events as well. The effect is a trans-European far-right combat sport network with selective affiliations. Claus has conceptualized this circuit as the “KdN network.”<sup>49</sup>

By stoking extremist sentiment with his far-right fights, Kapustin was able to grow the markets for both his ideas and his clothing brand. Where the organizers of Imperium had viewed the ideologies of the fighters and some audience members as a liability, Kapustin saw a unique business opportunity. Thus, when White Rex officially sponsored Tana Delle Tigri’s fight night in 2013, marking the first such international event in Western Europe, it was as much Kapustin’s expansion into European political extremism as it was White Rex’s expansion into a European sportswear market.

### European Far-Right Combat Sport as Cultural Scene

The network of tournaments provides the infrastructure—the physical space—both for in-person gatherings of online communities and for national and international points of connection (*Verknüpfungspunkte*) for localized groups. It is supported by a market for far-right sportswear, far-right music, and even far-right “motivational speakers.”<sup>50</sup> Taken together, these elements comprise what a Deutscher Bundestag intelligence report has described as the “right-wing world of experiences” (*rechte Erlebniswelt*).<sup>51</sup> In conceptualizing this world of experiences as a “cultural scene,” we draw upon Will Straw’s description. According to Straw, “scenes” can be understood as all of the following:

as collectivities marked by some form of proximity; as spaces of assembly engaged in pulling together the varieties of cultural phenomena; as workplaces engaged (explicitly or implicitly) in the transformation of materials; as ethical worlds shaped by the working out and maintenance of behavioural protocols; as spaces of traversal and preservation through which cultural energies and practices pass at particular speeds and as spaces

48 Product page, <https://www.2y14u.com/product-page/ticket-6-juin-2020>, accessed March 15, 2020. All mention of this event has since been removed from their website and their Facebook page, and we could not locate any cached copies of previous mentions of it.

49 Robert Claus, Zoom, October, 16 2020.

50 Robert Claus, *Ihr Kampf: Wie Europas Extreme Rechte für den Umsturz Trainiert*, (Bielefeld: Verlag Die Werkstatt, 2020).

51 Deutscher Bundestag, “Kampfsport in der Rechtsextremen Szene,” *Drucksache 19/9406* (April 12, 2019): 1-3, <https://dipbt.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/19/094/1909406.pdf>.



of mediation which regulate the visibility and invisibility of cultural life and the extent of its intelligibility to others.<sup>52</sup>

Defining the cultural life of far-right combat sports as a “scene”—a term that has typically been applied to the study of popular music—has the advantage of accounting for the decentralized and even sporadic physical-geographical realizations of that cultural life. Just as music fans travel to concert venues to be among the like-minded and to partake in the spectacle, so too do fans of far-right combat sport. This framework also forces an examination of the relationship between combat sport and far-right music in any of its “spaces of assembly.” Certainly, a concept of “scene” that includes both the sport and the music has its advantages. Indeed, such events are often combined. Yet even as such a framework encompasses both music and combat sport within its “space of traversal and preservation,” it also obscures the respective speeds at which those “cultural energies and practices pass.” As a case-in-point, music (Nazi punk) was once the unquestionable center of the largest far-right cultural gatherings, and, while the increasing popularity of far-right combat sport may be changing that, it remains difficult to determine their relative influence within a shared space.

The impact of European far-right combat sport networks on the formation and evolution of far-right cultural scenes is not yet thoroughly established as a subject of scholarly inquiry, although Claus’s investigative books *Hooligans* (2017a) and *Ihr Kampf* (2020) have certainly drawn attention to the subject, and Miller-Idriss devotes a chapter of *Hate in the Homeland* (2020) to it as well. One reason for the relative scarcity of academic research on the subject, no doubt, is that far-right combat sport tournaments are a fairly recent phenomenon. Another reason is the inaccessibility of the subject(s) to researchers, some of whom already receive hate mail and threats in response to previous publications. Legal restrictions on hate speech constrain the free self-representation of the brands, the fighters, and the fans outside of closed-door events, the most significant of which seem to be the tournaments. Analysis of the scene as a cultural phenomenon is thus limited to those parts of it that are publicly perceptible.

Rather than focusing on the specific culture of the largely inaccessible parts of the scene itself, we take the scene’s significance as a cultural scene as our point of departure and focus instead on the implications of the extensive influence that a small network of tournament organizers and sportswear brands exert on that growing scene. We therefore differentiate the cultural scene that has developed around far-right combat sport from similar groups and scenes less affected by the network, such as genuinely apolitical MMA fighters, football hooligans, or circles within the European far right with no particular interest in fighting. Tournaments appear to be the primary spaces that the far-right combat sport scene has created for performing and affirming identities as well as producing new cultural meanings.

Scholars such as Miller-Idriss have shown that, perhaps contrary to expectation, members of far-right groups often avoid overt markers of far-right identity out of concern for ridicule or even harassment.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, Claus and Ebner have shown that such marginalization in public life heightens the attractiveness of

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52 Will Straw, “Some Things a Scene Might Be Postface,” *Cultural Studies* 29, no. 3 (2015): 477.

53 Miller-Idriss, *Extreme Gone Mainstream*, 42.

walled-garden experiences.<sup>54</sup> The promise of an ideological community can motivate people to spend a lot of money and travel far from home.<sup>55</sup> As these events are largely closed to the public, attendees are freer to display hate symbols and perform ethnonationalist identities than they would be otherwise. Thus, we can understand Kapustin's influence on the Western European far-right combat sport scene as significant because (1) he provided the (financial) infrastructure for the development of a cultural scene—ready-made spaces for the production and performance of far-right identities that could not comfortably be produced and performed elsewhere because of social restrictions, and (2) he transformed a collection of individual tournaments—sites of this type of cultural production and performance—into a transnational cultural “scene.” That accomplishment is all the more significant because this particular transnational cultural scene involves the production and performance of “nationalist” identities—a transnational European ethnonationalism.

We recognize five defining features of the network's intersection with the scene. Far-right combat sport tournaments are: (1) professionally organized, (2) fight-focused events with (3) explicitly political messaging targeted at a (4) far-right, (5) mostly trans-European audience. This relatively narrow definition helps us distinguish European far-right combat sports events from related or similar events.

The fact that these events are professionally organized sets them apart mainly from hooligan brawls outside football stadiums or at “third locations” (*Drittorte*, e.g., fields outside of town) after games.<sup>56</sup> While the planning and organization of both may be somewhat secretive, the events we consider here are closer to mainstream tournaments in the infrastructure they provide. Unlike hooligan field brawls (*Ackerkämpfe*), where there is no infrastructure to accommodate an audience and its needs, far-right fighting events are organized for the purpose of being watched. Fighters compete one-on-one in an octagon, with seating arranged around the cage. As with other commercial events, interested brands advertise and sponsor the events; organizers sign rental contracts with the venues; and ideologically sympathetic vendors provide food, beverages, and souvenirs. The addition of spectatorship fundamentally distinguishes far-right combat sport tournaments from brawls fought in fields and outside football stadiums, in terms of both the inclusion of noncombatant participants and the scope of the production of cultural meaning within the accompanying scene.

The focus on combat sport thus sets far-right fighting events apart from far-right seminars and concerts, even though some members of the former are also known to be among the attendees, performers, and speakers at the latter.<sup>57</sup> Certainly, far-right tournaments, concerts, and seminars can be conceptualized as parts of a larger unified scene as well as distinct but often overlapping scenes. Yet the advantages of examining the tournament scene separately include, on the one hand, the resulting perceptibility of its relatively recent emergence as a distinct cultural phenomenon and its association with physical violence, and on the other, the distinctness of the network of sportswear brands that supports it.

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54 Robert Claus, “Der extrem rechte Kampfsportboom,” *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*, November 5, 2018. <https://www.bpb.de/politik/extremismus/rechtsextremismus/279552/der-extrem-rechte-kampfsportboom>; Ebner, “Schild & Schwert,” 193–208.

55 Ebner, “Schild & Schwert,” 193–208.

56 Claus, *Hooligans*, 14.

57 “6,000-Strong Neo-Nazi Music Festival Sparks Call for Ban on Far-Right Gigs,” *Local*, July 17, 2017, <https://www.thelocal.de/20170717/6000-strong-neo-nazi-music-festival-sparks-call-for-ban-on-far-right-gigs>. Concerning Kapustin's activities as a sort of motivational speaker, see Diehl et al. 2019.

The third and fourth criteria, “explicitly political messaging” and a “far-right audience,” are included to make clear the political nature of these events. Claus distinguishes three basic approaches to far-right participation in fighting events.<sup>58</sup> Some MMA events, like the international Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) and the German promotion, We Love MMA (Group 1), regularly deny access to fighters with neo-Nazi and extremist backgrounds and publicly condemn their political views.<sup>59</sup> When farright fighters are excluded from official matches, some of them seek events that are indifferent to having neo-Nazis among the competitors (Group 2). At the Imperium Fighting Championship, for example, which was held in Leipzig by the known far-right fighter Benjamin “The Hooligan” Brinsa from 2014 to 2016, far-right fighters were welcome, but overt expressions of their political views were not.<sup>60</sup>

Fearing protests against the presence of neo-Nazis, the organizers of these events bill them as strictly apolitical and argue that opinions expressed outside the ring have no bearing on the fight (Imperium Fighting Championship 2016). Such events are also officially classified as “apolitical” by the German government (Deutscher Bundestag 2019b). Because events in this second group self-consciously impose and project an apolitical atmosphere, we do not regard them as a culturally essential part of the European far-right combat sport scene even though they regularly play host to some members of it.

It is the last group (Group 3) with which we are primarily concerned. This group consists of events with unapologetic far-right white “euroethnic” messaging that attract exclusively far-right fighters and audiences. KdN, for example, states that it does not want to be part of the same “rotting political system” as events where an avowal to the free democratic order is supposedly necessary in order to compete.<sup>61</sup> Similar rhetoric is used by organizers of other explicitly far-right tournaments, such as France’s Day of Glory, which will be discussed further below. We regard events like these as a productive cultural “scene” because they create a shared experience among participants—the “right-wing world of experiences” mentioned in the Deutscher Bundestag report.<sup>62</sup>

The fifth criterion, a trans-European audience, is included to point out that, unlike the pre-2013 events, this new kind of far-right combat sport tournament draws sponsors, fighters, and attendees from all over Europe. Most of the significant brands also sponsor events outside their home country, and all of the current tournaments send delegations of fighters to their foreign counterparts. Kapustin’s White Rex even sponsored more than one team, sometimes combining members for particular occasions. At Tana Delle Tigri 2014, for example, members of the White Rex Czech team fought alongside White Rex Russia.<sup>63</sup>

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58 Claus, “Der extrem rechte Kampfsportboom.”

59 Claus, *Hooligans*, 154.

60 Sarah Ulrich, “Rechte Szene in Wurzeln bei Leipzig: Rechts der Mulde,” *Taz*, August 26, 2019, <https://taz.de/Rechte-Szene-in-Wurzeln-bei-Leipzig/15620552/>.

61 Kampf der Nibelungen. n.d. “Boxen—K1—MMA.” Accessed August 17, 2020. <https://www.kampf-der-nibelungen.com/start/>.

62 Deutscher Bundestag, “Kampfsport in der Rechtsextremen Szene.”

63 MMA Café, “Tana Delle Tigri VI—White Rex Roma 2014—Venerdì 30 Maggio,” MMA Café (blog), March 28, 2014, <http://mmacaferadio.blogspot.com/2014/05/tana-delle-tigri-vi-white-rex-roma-2014.html>.

## White Rex within a European Far-Right Combat Sport Network

Through White Rex, Kapustin actively shifted the paradigm of European combat sport, creating not just a single white nationalist tournament like Deptolla's first Kampf der Nibelungen, but a network of such tournaments. Now White Rex serves as a model of tournament involvement for other sportswear brands within the network including Black Legion Wear, Greifvogel, Pride France, and KdN. As organizers of a festival or sponsors of a team, they exert considerable control over tournaments—the primary gathering spaces of a cultural scene. Like White Rex, they are both part of the scene and significant influencers of it—all the more so now that White Rex has been absent since 2019. Kapustin has been a subject of an official Schengen area-wide entry ban since spring of 2019 after a request from the North Rhine-Westphalian authorities on the basis of his participation in “efforts directed against free, democratic social order”<sup>64</sup> and due to his significant contribution to the process of professionalization of the right-wing extremist martial arts scene.<sup>65</sup> The highly restrictive measures requested by the provincial authorities are also significant, as entry bans on such grounds are usually reserved for a specific type of convicted criminals or persons deemed to be a serious threat to national security.

Kapustin's involvement in the creation of a trans-European network of far-right combat sport tournaments was both financially and ideologically entrepreneurial. He identified a market base in fighters and fans who felt alienated and ostracized by the “apolitical” policies of existing tournaments. The network he created provided the physical spaces for performance and affirmation of far-right identities, as well as the creation of new cultural meanings—the tournaments, for example, are places both to buy far-right identity-marking shirts and places to wear them.<sup>66</sup> Kapustin himself has stated that this was an extension of the strategy that he first used in Russia, where he launched Duh Voina primarily to promote clothing sales. According to Kapustin, this remains White Rex's main line of business: “I do it to popularize my brand and to take the fight to a new level. We don't need to be beating up Tajiks in the street or cutting blacks in hostels; we need to be making ourselves stronger and healthier.”<sup>67</sup> By the time Kapustin organized the fight at Tana delle Tigri 2013 in Rome, he was an experienced manager, having already organized eighteen tournaments in Russia.<sup>68</sup>

The interconnectedness of the individual far-right events allowed Kapustin—and now others—to shape and shepherd the transnational European far right because the cultural production of this scene is not entirely organic or egalitarian, but rather overwhelmingly top down. The events (fights, music, concessions, etc.) that constitute the narrative and performative identity-forming mythos (e.g., white supremacy, “white genocide,” and a coming race war) are professionally organized and staged in a way that benefits the network of organizers, providing a market—the larger the

64 Florian Flade and Reiko Pinkert, Behörden untersagen rechtsradikalem Hooligan die Einreise, Süddeutsche Zeitung, August 28, 2019, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/rechtstextremismus-hooligan-kampfsport-neonazi-1.4579344>

65 Der Spiegel, “Neonazi-Kampfsportler Erhält Einreiseverbot Für Schengenraum - Denis Nikitin - DER SPIEGEL - Politik,” August 29, 2019, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/neonazi-kampfsportler-erhaelt-einreiseverbot-fuer-schengenraum-denis-nikitin-a-1284334.html>.

66 Ebner, “Schild & Schwert,” 193–208; Runter von der Matte, “Rückblick und Auswertung des Kampfsportturniers ‘Kampf der Nibelungen’ auf dem Neonazi-Festival ‘Schild & Schwert’ am 21.04.2018,” May 14, 2018, <https://runtervondermatte.noblogs.org/rueckblick-und-auswertung-des-kampfsportturniers-kampf-der-nibelungen-auf-dem-neonazi-festival-schild-schwert-am-21-04-2018/>

67 Venonat, “Big Interview with Denis Nikitin,” *Troublemakers*, May 9, 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170513082003/www.troublemakers.com.ua/2017/05/09/bolshoe-intervyu-s-denisom-nikitinym-white-rex-ckk>.

68 CasaPound and White Rex, Tana Delle Tigri 5.

better—for ethnonationalist ideas, experiences, and merchandise. It is nothing less than the commoditization of identity curated and sold to far-right consumers through aesthetics, branding, and community. Attendees who support their favorite fighters by purchasing the curated messages of the brands that sponsor them are thus not so much co-producers of culture and cultural identity with the brands that control the far-right and ethnonationalist mythopoesis, yet they are no less performers of it through their consumption. Bottom-up participation in this cultural scene thus involves paying the network organizers for the privilege of performing one or more preapproved far-right subcultural identities (French, neo-pagan, vegan, etc.), all of which have been coordinated by the network in other respects—e.g., towards anti-immigrant violence.

### **White Rex as Entrepreneurial Model**

With its size and professionalism, White Rex sets the standard for other far-right fights even when it is not directly involved. One of the organizers of Tiwaz—Kampf der freien Männer (Tiwaz—Fight of the Free Men) referred to his “Russian comrades from White Rex” as “pioneers and trendsetters of the fighting movement.”<sup>69</sup> Deptolla claims White Rex as his inspiration for creating KdN and admits to having attended Duh Voina prior to starting his own festival.<sup>70</sup> It was there that he first came into contact with Kapustin. Not surprisingly, subsequent far-right sportswear brands and tournaments have not only embraced White Rex as a benchmark of aesthetic and financial success but also adopted its business model. Like White Rex, Tomasz Szkatulski’s Pride France began as a sportswear brand and expanded into staging fight tournaments. And while Deptolla’s KdN began as a fight festival and only later added a clothing line, it too has adopted White Rex’s two-part model. Also, like White Rex, the two brands actively participate in the broader network by sponsoring each other as well as other events like Pro Patria Fest and Tiwaz with advertisement sponsorships and delegations of fighters.

Some similarities to the White Rex business model are even apparent in brands that have not (yet) hosted their own tournaments. For example, the far-right recording labels OPOS Records and Rebel Records have expanded into the combat sport scene with the introduction of Greifvogel Wear and Black Legion Wear, respectively.<sup>71</sup> To the extent that they are divorced from the music produced by their parent companies, the new clothing brands are mostly markers of far-right identity through the use of design imagery and the allusions of the names—what Miller-Idriss has described as “game playing” and noted as a mainstay of the performance of far-right identities among the target demographic of such brands. Moreover, the two brands have sponsored every recent far-right combat sport tournament and—like KdN and Pride France—send teams of fighters to competitions as brand ambassadors.

White Rex’s events remain a high-water mark within the network despite others’ efforts to copy its strategies, including its clandestine organization of events. Pride France’s Day of Glory (June 6–7, 2014), and Force et Honneur (June 10, 2016) were planned surreptitiously, and the tickets for the tournament, scheduled for June 2020 and subsequently canceled, did not include a location. KdN was held in secret locations for the first five years but was publicly advertised and registered with local authorities as a political event in 2018, when White Rex first co-organized it. This

69 Der III. Weg, “Im Gespräch mit TIWAZ,” Revolution auf Sendung #016, Podcast, February 14, 2019, <https://www.spreaker.com/user/revolutionaufsendung/revolution-auf-sendung-016-14-februar-20>.

70 Kujath, “Interview with Alexander Deptolla.”

71 Deutscher Bundestag, “Kampfsport in der Rechtsextremen Szene.”

official registration, however, allowed authorities to prohibit the event in 2019 as a “danger to public safety,” suggesting that White Rex’s success as an organizer of openly far-right events in Russia might in part be attributable to the country’s regulatory circumstances and indicating obstacles to the adaptation of its business model to other legislatures.<sup>72</sup> By contrast, according to Kapustin, White Rex events in Russia have not been broken up or bothered by law enforcement in recent years.<sup>73</sup>

Whether entirely copyable or not, for the time being, White Rex continues to be the accepted model for brand success: streetwear and fighting gear brands with explicitly far-right messaging, marketed to a far-right combat sport-oriented clientele through event sponsorship and brand ambassadors. The company’s role within the network has given it significant sway over the scene’s discourse and culture—if White Rex represents a standard for quality and a model for success, then its message and goals become the message and goals of the scene. And Kapustin has been very clear that professionalization of his events is a step toward reaching a broader public in order to mainstream the scene’s political identity and “white ideas.”<sup>74</sup>

Before the travel ban, Kapustin was active in spreading his “white ideas” in Western Europe. Through presentations and combat lessons for various extremist groups, intellectual networks, and political parties, he was able to establish an extensive network. In 2013, he gave a talk entitled “White Rex: The Warrior Spirit of Russia’s Street Activists” at the right-wing IONA London Forum, supposedly promoting his idea of activism and change through combat.<sup>75</sup> In 2017, he conducted combat training sessions for members of the far-right Swiss Nationalist Party (PNOS) and the National Democratic Party of Germany, as well as for the neo-Nazi activist group Aktionsblog Rostock.<sup>76</sup> That same year, he delivered a speech at Germany’s largest annual hatecore festival in Themar.<sup>77</sup> In 2018, Kapustin appears to have met with two influential American far-right nationalists in Kyiv, Ukraine.<sup>78</sup> One of them was Robert Rundo, founder of the Rise Above Movement, which touts itself as the “premier MMA club of the Alt-Right” and offers a line of ethnonationalist sportswear: The Right Brand.<sup>79</sup> The other was white nationalist author and editor of Counter-Currents Publishing, Greg Johnson. No single individual has been more active in promoting the scene than Kapustin was between 2013 and 2019.

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72 Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, “Erstmalgiges Verbot einer Veranstaltung des bedeutendsten rechtsextremistischen Kampfsportformats ‘Kampf der Nibelungen’ (KDN) unter Mitwirkung des BfV,” *Aktuelles—Zur Sache* (blog), October 30, 2019, <https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/de/aktuelles/zur-sache/zs-2019-003-erstmaliges-verbot-einer-veranstaltung-des-kampfsportformats-kampf-der-nibelungen>.

73 Tremonia Blog, “Rechter Kampfsport: Zu Besuch beim Kampf der Nibelungen.”

74 Venonat, “Big Interview with Denis Nikitin.”

75 Anton Shekhovtsov, “Russian Extreme Right White Rex Organisation Engaged in Training of British Neo-Nazi Thugs,” *Blog*, November 10, 2014, <http://anton-shekhovtsov.blogspot.com/2014/11/russian-extreme-right-white-rex.html>.

76 David Janzen, “‘White Rex’—Kampfsporttraining mit russischem Neonazi,” *Störungsmelder* (blog), *Zeit Online*, November 23, 2017, [https://blog.zeit.de/stoerungsmelder/2017/11/23/white-rex-kampfsporttraining-mit-russischem-neonazi\\_25081](https://blog.zeit.de/stoerungsmelder/2017/11/23/white-rex-kampfsporttraining-mit-russischem-neonazi_25081); PNOS-Partei der Eidgenossen, “PNOS—Russischer Kulturtag,” YouTube, February 17, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DRhnNoLzPUE: ak964>, “[HRO] Rostocker Beteiligung bei neonazistischem Kampfsportseminar,” *Antifa Kollektiv 964* (blog), June 28, 2017, <https://ak964.blackblogs.org/2017/06/28/hro-rostocker-beteiligung-bei-neonazistischem-kampfsportseminar/>.

77 Diehl et al., “Rechtsextremer Kampfsportler: Der Neonazi-Krieger aus Moskau.”

78 Christopher Miller, “Azov, Ukraine’s Most Prominent Ultranationalist Group, Sets Its Sights On U.S., Europe,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, November 14, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/azov-ukraine-s-most-prominent-ultranationalist-group-sets-its-sights-on-u-s-europe/29600564.html>.

79 Karim Zidan, “‘Keep the Flame Alive’: The Revival of a US Based Neo-Nazi Fight Club,” *Bloody Elbow* (blog), *SB Nation*, November 6, 2019, <https://www.bloodyelbow.com/2019/11/6/20950190/alt-right-neo-nazi-fight-club-ram-rise-above-movement-charlottesville-mma-politics-feature>.

## **White Rex as Facilitator**

While White Rex certainly promoted a “warrior spirit” throughout Europe and inspired the creation of events and brands through its position as a business model, most European far-right combat sport events eventually received substantial support in the form of sponsorship through White Rex. Based on what we know from attendee accounts, images, and videos, we have some ideas of which contributions White Rex made to events that might have saved their organizers money. Kapustin’s admission that his own tournaments were primarily vehicles for generating publicity for White Rex indicates that he saw the success of far-right fighting in Europe as beneficial for his business interests as well as for the promotion of his ideology.

In some instances, White Rex gave crew members “White Rex Crew” shirts. At Force et Honneur 2017, it provided ring referees in White Rex attire. That event also featured referees from the straight-edge group PPDM—Father Frost Mode (Po Programme Dedushki Moroza), presumably also brought in as part of White Rex’s business network.<sup>80</sup> KdN 2018 featured women in White Rex bikinis who held up signs to announce the winners.<sup>81</sup> Such examples illustrate that White Rex’s involvement in the organization of an event could lower production costs whether or not Kapustin’s brand ever provided direct financial sponsorship, which seems likely but cannot be conclusively demonstrated.

A comparison of KdN’s promotional materials from 2018—the only year White Rex officially sponsored the fight—with those from 2017 and 2019 strongly suggests that White Rex at least provided marketing support in the form of posters and other branded visual materials.<sup>82</sup> There were changes in the font, colors, and symbolism that clearly reflect White Rex’s aesthetic. The warrior figure usually affiliated with White Rex promotional material is prominently featured on the 2018 poster, but it incorporates KdN’s logo and has a black metallic backdrop that makes the poster much less colorful than in previous years. The promotional T-shirts that year were similarly altered.<sup>83</sup> The dominance of White Rex’s aesthetic in the 2018 visual materials represents an investment of White Rex’s symbolic capital, but also a degree of control. Miller-Idriss points out that such details are far from trivial in far-right discourse.<sup>84</sup> The following year’s event was planned without White Rex’s involvement, and the changes were reversed.

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80 Pride France, “Force & Honneur,” YouTube, July 19, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iwvfNjnoVns>.

81 Kampf der Nibelungen, “Kampf der Nibelungen 2018,” YouTube, November 16, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXsADBVsBYM>.

82 Kampf der Nibelungen, Kampf der Nibelungen, Event poster, October 1, 2016, [https://www.bnr.de/files/imagecache/artikel\\_bild/bilder/Bildschirmfoto%202016-09-19%20um%2015.37.54.png](https://www.bnr.de/files/imagecache/artikel_bild/bilder/Bildschirmfoto%202016-09-19%20um%2015.37.54.png); Kampf der Nibelungen; Event poster, October 14, 2017, [https://encrypted-tbn0.gstatic.com/images?q=tbn%3AANd9GcTViJKn\\_j6cCk3bo\\_LjcSbzFCJHOKfmHu4il7ioQ4WB9tHBoARH&usqp=CAU](https://encrypted-tbn0.gstatic.com/images?q=tbn%3AANd9GcTViJKn_j6cCk3bo_LjcSbzFCJHOKfmHu4il7ioQ4WB9tHBoARH&usqp=CAU). See also, KdN, “Hello Fighters. You Are Looking for an Opportunity to Challenge Yourself with Like Minded?” Facebook, August 7, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/kampfdernibelungen/posts/891189401244142>.

83 Robert Claus, “Kampfsport-Netzwerk,” Der Rechte Rand, May 2019, <https://www.der-rechte-rand.de/archive/5039/international-hooligans-kampfsport-netzwerk/>; See especially <https://pbs.twimg.com/media/Dl9sLtXcAAoXLZ.jpg>; [https://www.der-rechte-rand.de/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Seite\\_16-17\\_SP\\_WR-1024x683.jpg](https://www.der-rechte-rand.de/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Seite_16-17_SP_WR-1024x683.jpg).

84 Miller-Idriss, *The Extreme Gone Mainstream*, 57.

## Brand as Identity

White Rex is more than a brand for Kapustin. “We promote a lifestyle,” he says, and this lifestyle is one of honor, strength, and “white ideas.”<sup>85</sup> This suggests that partnering with organizations like KdN and Pride France is not just about the bottom line; supporting the formation of a trans-European far-right cultural scene is also in keeping with Kapustin’s political and ideological agenda. By providing a model for new organizations and contributing to its development, Kapustin has also played a substantial role in the formation of a transnational white nationalist identity shareable—and now demonstrably shared—by far-right extremists across Europe. While we should be careful not to give him too much credit since much of the scene’s shared identity has developed out of existing national far-right identities, his push for transnational cooperation between far-right fighters has played a pivotal role in aligning these ideas. Kapustin organized a network that provided spaces and occasions for the development of a far-right cultural scene—one in which the network strongly influences cultural production and identity formation.

A collection of interviews from inside KdN 2015 conveys a sense of this new trans-European identity and of the role of fighting for those who subscribe to it. Several interviewees assert that the white man in the streets of Europe is in danger of being attacked by an enemy. The white European must strengthen himself physically and mentally because he will eventually face this enemy in combat outside of regulated event settings. Another interviewee stresses the necessity of having the best fighters from “our European ranks” contend at events like KdN, so that not just “German tribes,” but also French and Hungarians can “compete with their white brothers.”<sup>86</sup>

Existing extremist views become intertwined with new identities as fighting or warrior Europeans. Fear of weakness or failure and resentment at societal rejection fuels the desire to fight. Kapustin, in his interview, draws connections to fighting as a ritual of masculinity, lamenting the perception that, unlike Nordic cultures in the past, Europe has no ritual to define the transition between boyhood and manhood, making German boys victims for foreigners who might harm them. One of the interviewees stresses that many fighters have experienced being expelled from an event for expressing political views or showcasing their tattoos, while rockers and members of “foreign criminal clans” were allowed to compete.<sup>87</sup>

The network of brands and tournaments curates a particular transnational racism and xenophobia and markets it within the scene as a wearable identity. Black Legion Wear offers shirts that read “Black Legion—Defenders of Europe,” and Pride France sells flags emblazoned with calls to “preserve the European homeland.”<sup>88</sup> White Rex sells hoodies and sweatshirts with prints of muscular blonde, white men wearing White Rex shirts chasing cartoonish figures in beards and turbans, captioned “Angry Europeans—White Rex against tolerance.”<sup>89</sup>

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85 Venonat, “Big Interview with Denis Nikitin,” Question 13.

86 Tremonia Blog, “Rechter Kampfsport: Zu Besuch beim Kampf der Nibelungen.”

87 Ibid.

88 “Black Legion: Defenders of Europe,” Black Legion, Division East, accessed August 20, 2020, <https://www.blacklegionwear.com/p/t-shirt-bl-defenders-of-europe-schwarz>; 2YT4U, “Drapeau ‘Respect Nature,’” Product page, accessed August 20, 2020. <https://www.2yt4u.com/product-page/drapeau-respect-nature>.

89 Karim Zidan, “Fascism in MMA: How White Rex, with Ties to Neo-Nazi Ideologies, Thrived as an MMA Promotion and Clothing Brand,” Bloody Elbow (blog), SB Nation, October 12, 2017, <https://www.bloodyelbow.com/2017/10/12/16350612/white-rex-fascist-neo-nazi-groups-thrive-mma-promotions-clothing-brands-karim-zidan-mma-feature>.



Through their branded identity, skinheads, straight-edgers, hooligans, and others share a common narrative of what they fight for. Far-right brand identity seems to act as a sort of “big tent” for a variety of smaller far-right scenes. The European far right is united behind a common goal: defending Europe and its culture against the perceived danger of immigration, specifically from Muslim countries.<sup>90</sup> In the White Rex model, the already tenuous line between brand loyalty and cult mentality is even fainter. Defining this identity for the European far-right combat sport tournament scene is in line with Kapustin’s goal of creating a whole new way of life through White Rex. Even in his absence, the scene he helped create remains his greatest sphere of influence as a sort of collective identity.

### **The European Far-Right Combat Sport Scene after White Rex**

Since Kapustin’s ban from the Schengen Area in 2019, White Rex has neither held nor officially sponsored any events outside Ukraine. On the surface, banning Kapustin seems to have successfully removed White Rex as an active part of the European far-right combat sport scene—at least for the time being. Yet even without its direct involvement, the network of far-right sportswear brands continues to promote and shape the tournament scene. This has led some commentators to speculate about a power vacuum in a network that exerts a great deal of influence over European far-right culture. In *Ihr Kampf*, Claus describes the scene as belonging to KdN.<sup>91</sup> Things change quickly. Currently that tournament is also sidelined pending legislative action, thanks in large part to the public attention Claus and others have brought to the scene. Taxonomical challenges aside, we share with Claus the concern that the Hydra’s head (or heads) will continue to regrow.<sup>92</sup>

No single actor within the far-right combat sport tournament network seems able to assume the role that Kapustin occupied as its definitive head from 2013 to 2019. Alexander Deptolla of KdN and Tomasz Szkatulski of Pride France seem the likeliest contenders; both closely model their operations on White Rex. Even so, no Western European actors even approach the popularity White Rex achieved in Russia. Because of the high quality of White Rex’s productions, Duh Voina events were eventually broadcast on Russian TV. By comparison, a recent fitness campaign by KdN on an online channel seems awkwardly amateurish.<sup>93</sup> Where White Rex was successful enough to offer different leagues for amateurs and professional fighters in Russia, KdN had to cancel a tournament at Schild & Schwert because of a lack of fighters. None of the remaining actors within the network seems able to market a lifestyle to those interested in the sport on the scale that White Rex did.

Yet this does not mean that the European far-right combat sport scene or the network behind it is less potent without White Rex. The network may have lost its chief architect, but there is currently no indication that it is disappearing. It remains active in the organization of events, which provide the physical spaces for the development of the aforementioned “right-wing world of experiences.” Both KdN and Pro Patria

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90 Pavel Brunssen, Peter Römer, and Robert Claus, “Defenders of European Culture’: ‘Refugee Crisis,’ Football Hooliganism, and the Right-Wing Shift in Europe,” in *Football, Politics and Identity*, ed. James Carr, Martin J. Power, Stephen Millar, and Daniel Parnell (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2021), 108–125; <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003002628-8>.

91 Robert Claus, “Kampfsport für weiße Europäer’—Der ‘Kampf der Nibelungen und sein Netzwerk,’” in *Ihr Kampf*, (Bielefeld: Verlag Die Werkstatt, 2020), 55–75; <https://www.bpb.de/politik/extremismus/rechtsextremismus/279552/der-extrem-rechte-kampfsportboom>.

92 Brunssen et al., “Defenders of European Culture’,” 108–125.

93 Kampf der Nibelungen, “Trainingseinheit Teil 1 / #KDNbleibtstabil,” YouTube, March 24, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TAnrUD\\_Kf4c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TAnrUD_Kf4c).

continued to plan their 2019 events, and Pride France would have held its June 2020 event but for the pandemic. According to the Deutscher Bundestag report,<sup>94</sup> this network might not be available for incorporation into right-wing activist structures, but it is on call for demonstrations. The report even described the scene following KdN's public advertisement of a seminar in self-defense and techniques of street fighting as "increasingly bold" (7). Thus, the change caused by White Rex's forced exit from the network is primarily organizational, not cultural. White Rex's level of production quality and visibility remain aspirational, but ambivalently so. Public visibility may have helped Kapustin spread his "white ideas," but in the end, it also likely led both to the suppression of KdN and to his own expulsion. If anything, the fact that the state may no longer allow the network actors to organize KdN will be cause for them to become more creative in planning their events, potentially retreating, at least partially, to the cultural shadows. The scene is a little less centralized without White Rex, but it isn't dead.

Meanwhile, in Kiev, Kapustin is active in the Azov Battalion, a right-wing volunteer militia founded in 2014 and incorporated into the Ukrainian National Guard that same year. Reports suggest that he now acts as its "ambassador-at-large" (in which capacity he presumably met Rundo and Johnson in Kyiv) and organizes events at Azov's "Reconquista Club," which is described as a combination restaurant, fight club, and sports center.<sup>95</sup> White Rex's online shop has officially changed owners, operating out of Switzerland since 2017.<sup>96</sup> It likely remains a source of revenue for the network—possibly even for Kapustin himself.

## Conclusion

The rise in ideologically-motivated violent crimes committed by members of the far right demands a careful look at developments in European far-right subcultures. Thus, growing interest in martial arts as both lifestyle and spectacle among members of the far right is reason for concern. Important and revealing contributions have already been made, yet the trend warrants still more scholarly attention. This paper represents only a part of the analysis that is called for.

We have introduced the concept of a combat sport tournament "scene" in order to focus on a certain subset of the European far right that shows increasing interest in martial arts as well as to highlight the relationship of the scene to the network that shapes it. We have laid out broadly the parameters by which we define an event as a far-right combat sport tournament and that distinguish those events from other, related events, such as hooligan fights or apolitical MMA events. Such definitions are necessary tools but, like all tools, can and should be replaced if better ones become available.

In reconstructing the development of the far-right combat sport tournament network, we were also able to reveal the *instrumentality* of Russian national Denis Kapustin to the penetration and cultivation of the cultural scene through the influence of his brand, White Rex. By promoting White Rex with white nationalism and violence at early tournaments in several European countries, Kapustin became a central influence on the identity that this scene offers its members through association with the brand. Kapustin's formula appears to have been emulated by other neo-

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94 Deutscher Bundestag, "Kampfsport in der Rechtsextremen Szene."

95 Christopher Miller, "Azov, Ukraine's Most Prominent Ultranationalist Group."

96 It is now managed by "Fighttex AG," which is owned by Florian Gerber of the Swiss Nationalist Party (PNOS). See: PNOS, "PNOS—Russischer Kulturtag," 2:18.

Nazi clothing companies including, notably, the Ukrainian Sva Stone/Perun, whose explicit white nationalist branding facilitates identity signaling for its “main customer: young sporty Ukrainians and Europeans, who prefer high-quality cloths [sic.] of European production in casual style with an appropriate ideologic [sic.] context.”<sup>97</sup> The rise of brands like Sva Stone, with its “WhiteOn” clothing line and its “Idu na vy” boxing gloves (the phrase is a medieval declaration of war), underscores how a better understanding of the spectacle of violence as part of a far-right dispositif will be crucial for determining the recruiting, radicalizing, and financing potential of an increasingly marketable trans-European far-right combat sport cultural scene even after White Rex and Kapustin.

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<sup>97</sup> “About US,” Sva Stone, accessed November 10, 2021, [https://svastone.com/en/about\\_us](https://svastone.com/en/about_us).