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**“THE RUSSIAN BEAR DANCES UNTIL DAWN” [11]:  
THE ANIMAL METAPHOR FOR RUSSIA AND ITS REPRESENTATIVES IN GERMAN  
MEDIA (2000 — 2013)**

Has the age-old ethnic caricature for Russia turned macho? The report on one of the “hot-test, wildest, most expensive night spots” in Moscow, a club for the “nouveau riche” gives the impression, that Russian billionaires use their masculinity besides their money to treat scantily clad women as a kind of commodity for their disposal. But why does the article in a German quality newspaper catch the reader’s eye already in its headline by using this animal metaphor?

In several analyses it has been shown that the “Russian bear“ (henceforth RB) is being applied not only to the Russian empire under the czar or the Soviet Union but to “an entire culture” [19] much more so than other ethnic caricatures.

The following analysis will explore this metaphor with the help of cognitive-linguistic methods in its pragmatic context of the media texts.

The data used are from articles on Russia by the German media and mostly by the German quality press. (As a qualitative analysis is intended only a selection of articles will be used). The period covered are the years from 2000 until 2013. In a former article of mine [12] I covered this topic until 2000 and will give here a short survey of the results:

Using the structuralist method and the rows of paradigms between animals and humans established by E. Leach [20], RB, as the main metaphor for Russia, fits in the section: wild animal/alien. It moreover can be classified as an enemy in opposition to humans in a civilized world. The “collocative meaning” [Note 1] in media texts using RB transfers via association from the animal living in the wilderness shades of meaning that belong to a non-human world onto the country Russia or its representatives. One of the “associative meanings” in the theory of Leach.

Thus it can be concluded, that certain ambivalence is inherent in the metaphor RB. Russia and her respective rulers are shown by the Western media as being incomprehensible and alien. Latent in this image of RB are however features of a dangerous foe, which connects to old enemy images in historical armed clashes.

My question in the present article is: Is this age-old metaphor still valid? Has it changed in a way according to the embedding in texts written in a period of frequent political cooperation and economic interdependence?

### **Theoretical background: Imagined communities**

Can ethnic and national identities and the often stereotypical constructions of the neighbor nations remain as they are in a globalized world where even the Superpowers are dependent on each other and even meet for strategic or economic consultations? There can be no doubt though that until today nationalism is still an important political power. Leading researchers in this field like B. Anderson [1] or E. Gellner [7] have often been perplexed, not to say irritated, by the paradox of the political power of nationalisms vis-à-vis their philosophical poverty and even their incoherence. But they both claim that nationalisms cannot be reduced solely to their economic and political functions.

For them the key determinant is ethnicity, and thus nationalism should be understood primarily as a cultural and psychological phenomenon of "imagined communities" [1] that exist in symbols, rituals, and discourses. But from the perspective of their consequences for the members of these groups, the communities are real.

E. Gellner even states in «Nationalismus und Moderne» that it is «this shared culture of national myths» that holds modern anonymous and impersonal societies, with «mutually substitutable atomised individuals» [7, p. 57] together.

This concept of nationalism and community can be directly linked to Popper's philosophical theory of the three worlds: World 1, the world of physical objects, World 2 the subjective world of individual thoughts and feelings, World 3 the world of culture in its widest sense.

World 3 objects cannot exist without World 1 objects. Searle makes the point, that the move from Popper's World 1 to World 3 is a linguistic one, because once a function is imposed on a physical entity "it now symbolizes something else. This move can exist only if it is collectively represented as existing. The collective representation is public and conventional, and it requires some vehicle." [23, p. 74 – 75].

I consider Searle's argument as constitutive for the world that is built up by the media. For most of the recipients of news and reports about foreign countries the events covered are not based in their World 1 or their World 2, but in World 3; such reports are linguistically transmitted representations by mass media. These representations are undoubtedly in some way connected to World 1 objects, but in mediating between World 1 and World 3, there is the possibility of a wide

range of schematisation, oversimplification and distortion of facts. This applies all the more when discussing distant regions and cultures and their identity seen from an external perspective.

How then do German readers as recipients of German media understand the meaning of an animal metaphor like the RB? The bear in the real world, Popper's world 1, is an animal ("Russischer Bär" in German is first and foremost a butterfly). But when RB is used in a text with political or economic content it turns into a metaphor, the age-old national personification for the country Russia or for one of Russia's representatives. In the following analysis therefore I will show in which context this metaphor is used and which properties and attitudes are allocated by this context to Russia via the frequent use of the RB. I will start with short background information of the political and economic situation of Germany and Russia so the shades of meaning the metaphor RB has in the German media of this period can be better understood.

### **The time context: the period covered**

In Germany the period covered from 2000 until 2013 has been a time of relative stability in domestic politics. Chancellor Gerhard Schröder led a coalition government of the SPD and the Greens from 1998 to 2005. Following the 2005 federal election Schröder stood down as Chancellor in favour of Angela Merkel (2005 — ) of the rival Christian Democratic Union.

In Russia, Vladimir Putin's presidency lasted from 2000 until 2008 and again from 2012 onwards, interrupted only by the years when he was prime minister. Russia is the world largest producer of oil. It now has the biggest economy in Europe [14].

The relations between the Federal Republic of Germany and the Russian Federation in these years in general have been good though not without tension. Schröder placed high value on political, economic and personal relations and worked for the completion of the Nord Stream gas pipeline. The relations got strained in the turn of the first decade as Western media as well as authorities in Berlin criticized the presidential elections in Russia.

Germany and Russia have frequent exchange of visits on political, economic and cultural agenda. Russia regards Germany as its leading European partner, and is an important trading partner of Germany.

I will start my analysis with the RB standing for the whole country and then go on to Vladimir Putin who in various ways is seen as the personification of the RB during all his years as president and prime minister.

### “The Russian Bear is back”

This headline in several Western and German media was based on the fact, that surprisingly soon after the beginning of the new millennium the resurgence of Russia and connected to it the well-known metaphor was in full display of its strength. This was all the more unexpected since during the 20 years of decline combined with the liberalization by M. Gorbachev and B. Yeltsin ruling the country Western media had been showing the RB as on the retreat. The RB had been depicted as a wounded animal, sometimes as even being lame. Some examples from German newspapers in the decade before 2000 can illustrate this:

Bild 30.12. 1996 Russia and China: Lame Bear and Blind Dragon

(„Rußland&China. Lahmer Bär und blinder Drache.“)

Bild 31.08.1996 Russia’s week of fate. When the bear has no power, its claws will be pulled („Rußlands Schicksalswoche. Hat der Bär keine Kraft mehr, reißt man ihm die Krallen raus.“)

Die Welt 26.11. 1999 The Russian bear is about to get caught again in the Caucasian trap („Der russische Bär ist dabei, erneut in eine kaukasische Falle zu tappen.“)

A decade after the collapse of the Soviet — led Warsaw Pact Russia didn’t seem to be one of the big players in world politics any more. In 2001 the RB was still seen as “too poor” and “on the drip of the International Monetary Fund dominated by the US” [3] as to be able to have a role on the world stage. The “Spiegel” in the same year even asked, if the “Chinese dragon” would take the role of the RB as opponent of the United States? [10, p. 155].

But as it was well known that in Siberia there were gigantic resources of oil and gas and Germany needed those resources badly, the German government had to be cautious. And when German representatives were invited to visit the Baltic States they would accept the wish of the Baltic governments to reach full membership in the European Union. By this the German head of government would only “kick the RB a bit his shinbone”, but not go that far as to “affront him completely” [Note 2] by helping the Baltic hosts to fulfill their additional wish to enter NATO at the same time.

After a decade of catastrophic decline Russia’s oil output had started to boom again. In 2002 Russia overtook Saudi Arabia to regain its position as the world’s number one oil producer and the state corporation Gazprom was building up a monopoly on supplying a third of Europe’s gas supplies. When via these windfall profits from the oil and gas production there was also a military regeneration of the Russian forces, the Western world soon became worried. In particu-

lar the Anglo-American press uttered warnings: “Russian bear is back — and this time it’s gas powered” [29].

Germany tried to keep a balance. Chancellor Schroeder cultivated close ties with Russia in an attempt to strengthen the partnership between Moscow and Berlin. Schroeder even addressed the West’s stereotype of the RB as being outdated arguing that Europe should dispel this stereotype of Russia as an aggressive animal. Here is his argument:

“We must set aside the widespread notion that Russia is a bear just waiting to devour everyone else. This couldn’t be further from the truth. In Russia there is a growing sense that the country will only be able to truly fulfill its role in the world on equal terms with the United States if it manages to secure a comprehensive partnership with Europe. And the same applies to Europe.” (Gerhard Schroeder. *Mein Leben in der Politik*, cited on [26].

### **“Bear with Balalaika” [21, p. 86 – 90]**

Schroeder’s approach to Russia was frequently criticized by the Western press. In the same year of the publication of the chancellor’s memoirs the magazine “Der Spiegel” published an extensive survey on Russia’s image-problems in the world using the metaphor RB in its title. This title in short already shows the futility of the endeavor of an image change by order. Underlying the incompatibility of the wild animal and the Russian musical folk instrument there is the opposition of nature vs. culture.

The article starts out by reporting on the lament of Moscow’s political class about the poor reputation the Russian government has abroad as well as for its own citizens. Therefore an image-campaign on a large scale had been started by the Russian government intending to change it. Within Russia music festivals and shows had been propagated to create devotion to national traditions and symbols and develop patriotic emotions among the citizens of the Russian Federation. For foreign countries a new television station was installed with the aim of sending official state propaganda in English around the globe (“Russia Today”).

The article gives grounds for the assumption that changing the negative image of Russia in the country itself may be partly successful but in the Western world is nearly an impossible task, as the latter is being based on the century — old enemy — image of the RB. Though often distorted to a cliché, the image has its roots in observations by many travelers and observers in historic times reporting on the cruel despotism of Russia’s rulers and the submissiveness of the common Russian people.

And in present times first-hand observations of the Russian “nouveau riche” (cf. the title of the present article) with their villas, yachts and golden toilet seats, of the corruption in public life and the sleaze in jurisdiction reinforce the negative impression. A report on Russians in Turkish summer resorts in the monthly paper “Der Stern” is also cited. According to this article summer guests from Western European countries are being appalled by Russian tourists. The latter “being robustly built like T-34 tanks” [11, p. 88] and boozing excessively jostle and elbow their way through queues of international guests. Adding to these manifold forms of firsthand experience there are official statistics of international organizations like the corruption index of “Transparency International” (Russia: place 126 among 159 in total) and the index for the freedom of press by “Reporters without borders” (Russia: place 138 among 167 in total; the numbers are given for the year 2006). The article closes citing an official of the Kremlin, complaining that “we can turn and twist as we want, for the Western world we remain the Balalaika playing bears.” [11, p. 88].

Going back to Popper’s schema of the three worlds one can conclude that the journalist says he intends to deconstruct the cliché and century—old foe image of RB (as of world 3) as a biased view on Russia. But he is hindered in drawing this conclusion by manifold observations in real life (world 1). By that the article with the heading of the old metaphor RB corroborates the opposition of the in-group (we: the observers from “Western” countries) vs. the out-group (they: the observed Russians). “We” are in the civilized world” vs. “they” still live in a barbaric country and behave according to it.

### **”Image cult on the back of the bear” [13]**

Does the Western press have an inclination to stereotype Russian leaders as bears? Boris Yeltsin had been seen as “the epitome of the Russian Bear” [31]. But he was thought to be a “cuddly” and amiable bear, often shown to be drunk and rather helpless.

When Putin was elected successor to Boris Yeltsin, Western media including the German ones thought that the period of wild transition from the Soviet Union to a democratic Russia was coming to an end and the new government would be a guarantor on the way to economic development and reliable cooperation.

What was the image of the new president? Putin in the period of his first presidency was given credit for the country’s recovery from the economic crisis of the 1990s. But the cult of personality Putin and his PR agents constructed around him was soon frowned upon and more and more ridiculed. The enactment of the tough guy with rude strength in interaction with animals,

even wild bears, often triggered commentaries on the macho image with an exaggerated cult of his own body. The weekly journal “Focus” showed 77 (!) pictures under the title “Image cult on the back of the bear” [13]. The article commented in an ironic vein the “media—effective love of animals by the head of state Putin, now also caring for the fate of icebears” [13. Note 3]. Putin posing as he-man was shown in this picture attaching a tracking collar to a 230-kg polar bear and even hugging the animal afterwards. The magazine “Stern” after Putin’s separation of his wife constructed in this vein a lonely—heart—ad running: “Man with muscles and power is looking for female companion for judo evenings and trips to Siberia” [16. Note 4]. Accompanying the text was a picture of Putin with bare chest riding a big bear. The television station n—tv was making derisory remarks on the (obviously staged) picture of Putin and the bear under the headline “Mockery on Putin’s fake adventures” [28]. Several satiric internet blogs of German origin took up the topic of Putin with bear in various funny poses, like Putin waving to a bear and the bear waving back before being beaten by the heroic swimmer in ice-cold Siberian water [32].

What does the use of the metaphor RB in these contexts show? From all these texts one can conclude that the frequent use of bears in the context of commentaries on Putin’s image transmits the feature “awe-inspiring”. When Russia’s president is shown with bears in the wilderness in a way the bear is like his sparring-partner. The property of “being strong” as a feature of the bear, is even enhanced in the image of Putin. He is the one who can tame the strong animal; therefore he is even stronger than the bear. And the space and locality in which this image is created is important too. It is the wild nature of Russia’s east and north solitary Putin is the one who can fight a bear. But for Germans this is again something alien, as there are no more bears in German forests. And none of the leading politicians would ever be portrayed fighting such an animal.

### **“Strong Bear, tired Eagle”**

Putin, the Western media have to admit — German journalists mostly agree — has transformed Russia to a great power again: self-confident and wealthy, even belligerent. Russia unlike in the Boris Yeltsin era has been running its own affairs, with the assent of a large part of the population. And there’s not much Germany and the Western world can do about it anyway — Russia is now too big and too rich to push around. The end of the era of the American President Bush with its plain fiasco in the Middle East even triggered German commentaries under the title “Strong bear, tired eagle” [15]. The accompanying article in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* confronted the waning strength of American foreign politics in the world and in particular in “old Europe” to

the reawakening of Russia as a world power. And it portrayed this confrontation in a picture presenting the two leaders: Bush looking desperately with a helpless gesture of his hand vs. the action man Putin proudly showing his muscular bare chest.

### **“Chancellor Merkel in the bear cave” [27]**

With Schroeder’s successor as German chancellor, Angela Merkel the relationship between the two governments didn’t go so well any more. The commentators placed the fault on the soberness and pragmatism of Angela Merkel, who — according to a smug commentary — was not as keen on keeping up Schroeder’s buddy relationship with Putin, “driven by testosterone” [18]. When Merkel went to Moscow the title of the report was “Chancellor Merkel in the bear cave” followed by the lines “The German chancellor today was on a bear hunt – no, sorry: she visited one in a cave — Merkel meets Putin” [27. Note 5].

At another meeting on the topic of Germany’s demand for the return of treasures seized by the Red Army therefore tensions between the two heads of state were preprogrammed. And the Russian Bear at this meeting according to the commentators therefore promptly “bared its teeth” [27. Note 6] to the German chancellor.

One can conclude that the metaphor RB is used in these contexts as a personification of Vladimir Putin. The Russian leader is being shown with characteristics of the wild animal: superhuman strength, baring its teeth, living in a cave. All these expressions communicate in the way Geoffrey Leech [20] calls “collocative meaning” [Note 7] a specimen not belonging to the civilized world, but to wilderness. Angela Merkel on the other hand is characterized as part of the civilized world, as she asks that works of art are given back, which is surely not an activity of a wild animal.

### **“Trembling with fear of the Russian Bear” [8]**

Some of the more right-wing media were praising Angela Merkel’s for the supposedly “frosty relationship” to Putin [24]. The papers now speak of a “strategic alliance” rather than the “almost obscene love fest” [24] of Merkel’s predecessor and the Russian president. Even more than the chancellor the present German president, Joachim Gauck, a former East German pastor who had served as commissioner for the Stasi archives from 1990 — 2000, wants to make it a major concern of his presidency to openly address civil rights violations everywhere in the world, Russia included. At Putin’s inaugural visit to Berlin and the president’s residence, the Bellevue

Palace, in 2012, Gauck had explicitly addressed the subject of freedom of opinion in Russia and added he would like to meet representatives of civil society during his future visit to Moscow [24. Note 8]. Attendees of the meeting described the atmosphere as “rather cool” [25]. The return visit in Russia has not yet been realized for obvious reasons.

But the German president had been invited to visit the Baltic states [30], that according to the title of a report on their development and situation within their neighbors “tremble with fear of the Russian Bear” [8]. The article is accompanied by a map showing the huge extension of Russia and the commentary runs: “Russia — the largest state on earth. For many abutting nations Russia is still a neighbor one should be afraid of” [8. Note 9].

#### **“The Russian Bear stirs and growls louder and louder” [4]**

Parallel to these commentaries on Russia’s relationship with other countries there were articles on organizations of Russia’s civil society trying to get fair trials for citizens wrongfully convicted of money laundering and defalcation by the government, formerly “feeling weak and helpless” against a “corrupt judicial system [4] but now getting organized. Some commentators say it’s about time for Berlin to distance itself from “democratically deficient” Russia. But what would this mean for the economic dependence on the superpower’s raw materials?

#### **On the world stage: “The Russian Bear and the Chinese Dragon” [17]**

Moscow’s “malicious tactics” [9] were explicated in an article in “Die Welt” on the bickering about the prize of gas and the pipeline through the Ukraine. The report was mainly a report on the travel diplomacy of various representatives, but the headline “The Bear dancing on and off the air ports” [9. Note 10], was obviously hinting at Putin. The Russian head of state was depicted as the “ice-cold” strategic mastermind who would analyze and make use of the “vulnerable parts of the West” [9].

Was Russia then a reliable supplier of gas to states in Central and western European countries? For Germany the answer could be in the affirmative according to its media, as long as there was interdependence of the economy of the two states. And also China wouldn’t have any problems, as “The Russian Bear and the Chinese Dragon” [17] in questions of energy were “closing ranks against the United States” (Schulterschluss gegen die USA“ [17].

**Deconstruction: "The Myth of the Bear" [6, p. 106. NOTE 11]**

Criticism of overstraining the metaphor of the Russian Bear in German media comes from two sides. A few critical comments can be found in the new media. And interestingly enough the Germans seem to develop an independent view in criticizing their own newspapers when it comes to their reporting on Russia.

In an analysis of the German media's frequent use of the RB by the scientific political journal "Blätter für internationale Politik" the writer pokes fun of German media coverage of political, economic and social developments in Russia. Often the German journalists — according to this observer — even follow the attitudes uttered in the U.S. media within hours using the same negative approach towards the ever-dangerous RB. The bear only once had had a positive and cuddly image according to this analysis — namely when the Soviet Union was falling apart and in the transition period Russia's economy was weak and the country seemed to lose its status as world player in the nineties of last century. Then Yeltsin was "our" man in the Western press, the "good-natured Russian bear". But since the newly growing strength of Russia presents a huge challenge to Germany and other countries in the West to redefine their point of view in relationship to this neighbor country in the East, with its abundance of raw material and a society in transition even the journalists of the so-called quality papers do not face up to the task of well-balanced stories, that should provide complete facts and the relevant context in neutral prose. More often than not the press presents an over-simplistic framing of the country and its representatives around the prominent metaphor of the RB, obviously meant to install awe and fear in the readers. But this fear is not so much a naturally emergent fear German citizens have but rather a top-down manufactured one by certain power groups. The over-simplistic framing by using the RB, a metaphor of a wild animal, is seen as a rhetorical technique used to enforce a stereotype and label the society of the neighbor as something totally different to one's own chosen way of values and citizens' rights.

The good news in this context come from two studies on how Germans see Russia and the Russians, that were presented in Berlin coinciding with the exhibition "Our Russians — Our Germans" (In this representative survey, the forsa institute randomly selected 1003 people over the age of 18) [5]. Here are some of the results:

"According to the survey, the majority of German citizens (84 percent) think the current image of Russia is largely colored by prejudice. Only 10 percent believe that the predominant view of Russia is based on facts and informed opinions" [5, p. 2]. An overwhelming majority of

Germans considers the economic cooperation with Russia very important or important [5]. And almost two out of three view Russia as a reliable economic partner — quite in opposition to what some media want them to believe. Moreover, when it comes to the evaluation of the German media's reporting on Russia only a minority of just 36 percent of the population considers itself to be objectively and accurately informed (36 and 45 % respectively) [5].

The studies show that old stereotypes still linger, and the analysis of German media texts between 2000 and 2013 proved that the metaphor RB is used according to the political and economic background of Russia as being a big player on the world stage again mainly with features of strength, sometimes even those aspiring fear. This is in contrast to the presentation of the RB during the nineties of last century when Russia was seen as weak and the RB therefore had features of an amiable teddy bear.

But what about Popper's theory of the three worlds? The results of the Forsa institute's survey clearly contradict the view of the predominant influence by the media on the public. Members of a growing civil society are obviously able to deconstruct the information on the ever-present RB in the neighbor country handed down to them by the media and construct their own image of Russia.

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32. <http://lustich.de/bilder/menschen/putin—und—der—baer/> (available May 5, 2013)

### Notes

1. One of the “associative meanings” in the theory of Leach [20]
2. „Die Demonstration aber ging nur so weit, dem russischen Bären etwas ans Schienbein zu treten, ihn aber nicht gleich vor den Kopf zu stoßen“ [2].
3. „Der für seine zur Schau gestellte Tierliebe bekannte Regierungschef Putin hat eine neue Gattung entdeckt. Medienwirksam sorgt er sich nun auch um das Schicksal der Eisbären“ [13].
4. „Muskulöser Mann mit Macht sucht Gefährtin für Judo-Abende und Ausflüge in die Weiten Sibiriens“ [16].
5. „Die deutsche Bundeskanzlerin war heute auf Bärenjagd — oder nein, Entschuldigung: Sie besuchte einen in seiner Höhle. Merkel trifft Putin“ [27].
6. „...deshalb hat der Russische Bär der Kanzlerin mal die Zähne gezeigt“ [27].
7. „collocative meaning“ is one of the types of associative meaning; according to the theory of Leech it shows what is communicated through association with words which tend to occur in the environment of another word [20].
8. The visit has not yet been realized.
9. «Russland — der größte Staat der Erde. Außerdem ist das Riesenreich für viele Anrainer noch immer ein Nachbar, vor dem man sich fürchten sollte“ [8]
10. „Auf den Flughäfen tanzt wieder mal der Bär“ [9]
11. German word „Mär“ cannot be adequately translated into English.