Introduction

In 2008 Mikhail Gorbachev published an open letter to his “friends, the German journalists”;¹ in which he criticised the media coverage of events in Russia. For Gorbachev “questions and incomprehension arise, when considering WHAT and HOW Russia is written about in Germany”. He further states that he can barely get rid of the impression that this is a “targeted campaign” since all publications seem to “draw on one and the same source, which contains a handful of theses (there is no democracy in Russia; freedom of opinion is suppressed; a malicious energy policy is pursued; the power holders are drifting continuously towards dictatorship – and so on)”. “Where does this tendency come from?” he wonders. After describing positive trends in Russia, such as a reviving press and planned political reforms, he states: “if you work as a correspondent in Russia and do not see these processes, then you probably chose, to paraphrase ‘Alice in wonderland’, a life ‘behind the mirror’ full of stereotypes and clichés”. After pointing out that his letter is not an appeal to German journalists only to write positively about Russia, he concludes: “Criticism is a necessary cure. But people feel hurt [gekränkt] by unjust, tactless criticism from the outside”. Gorbachev’s reflections are not new. Several scholars (Crudopf 2000, Le 2002, MacGilchrist 2009, Morozov and Rumelili 2012, Neumann 1999, Wolff 1994) have pointed out that Russia is often represented as undemocratic, barbarian, as the other to a “Western” or “European” self. But even more interesting, the correspondents he criticizes and accuses of pursuing a “targeted campaign” agree with him. For example, MacGilchrist (2011: 213) quotes a journalist she interviewed:

I would be interested in an article which would for once describe the other Russia: politically engaged citizens, growing civil society, an independent judiciary, incorruptible civil servants, socially responsible businesspeople, etc. That would perhaps be more useful for a balanced image of Russia than the never-ending lament that Russia’s image is being destroyed by the evil West.

In a similar vein but with a different tilt, Moritz Gathmann and Stefan Scholl (2011: 78), two German freelance journalists in Russia, explain that most correspondents want to write in a more

¹ All translations of letters, interviews and newspaper articles from French or German to English are my own if not explicitly stated otherwise. I have tried to keep my translations close to the originals in order not to change tone, voice etc. even if this sometimes leads to a less elegant use of the language in English. Where it seems necessary or helpful, I provide the original German or French word in square brackets.
positive light about the country. Assuming the role of a speaker for many German correspondents in Russia by using the impersonal “one”, they explain: “[o]ne would be so glad to write about successes of the opposition, about a wave of protests against Putin’s regime, but nothing is moving.”

Gorbachev’s letter and the journalists’ statements were published before the end of 2011 – before major protests hit Russia’s capital, St. Petersburg and other large cities. Is this the chance Gathmann, Scholl and other journalists were waiting for? Do “Western” (German, French and British) newspapers paint a positive picture of Russia now that something is moving? In which way does the coverage of the protests shape the representation of Russia and the other way around? These are the main questions which guide this essay.

To answer the named questions, this essay builds upon the post-foundational political theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantalle Mouffe. While their post-Marxist theoretical framework is usually not applied to studying newspapers (but see Carpentier and DeCleen 2007, MacGilchrist 2011), in the context of this paper their approach seems especially fruitful since it allows me to connect the textual study of newspaper articles with theoretical considerations about the power, identity and legitimacy of protest movements. Further, since Laclau and Mouffe understand the social to be constructed but never fully closed – there always remains the possibility to engage in resignifying practices – the aim of this essay is not only to analyse the dominant narratives which shape the newspaper discourse about the Russian protests, but also to show which gaps and fissures exist within this mainstream discourse which might be an entry point for more emancipatory conceptions of the social.

To shed light on the dominant representation of the protests in Russia as well as on the fissures within it, this essay proceeds as follows. The second chapter provides the necessary theoretical background. Here, I give an overview of Laclau and Mouffe’s post-foundational political theory (2.1.) before touching upon the importance of media and newspapers in the construction of identities (2.2.). Then I describe how Laclau and Mouffe’s theory can be put to use in the study of newspaper articles (2.3.) and conclude the chapter by giving an overview of the analysed newspapers (2.4.). The content of the third chapter is shaped by the empirical analysis of newspaper articles. This chapter is divided into four sections, each of which deals with exactly one protest event and puts a thematic focus: first I give a general overview of the representation of the protests in “Western” newspapers (3.1.), then I consider more closely the role of the

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2 I translate the personal pronoun “man” as “one” instead of as generic “you”. This may seem clumsy but reflects the generality of these statements in a more obvious way.
“opposition” in the discourse (3.2.), identify a hegemonic liberal democratic discourse in the representation of the protests (3.3.) and close the empirical chapter showing that the Russian protests are exceptionally well received by the foreign press (3.4.). The fourth chapter discusses the empirical findings. In particular, I look at fissures within the overall hegemonic newspaper discourse (4.1.), and reflect upon the role of media organisations and journalists in the representation of the Russian protests. This leads me back to the political theory of Laclau and Mouffe and possibilities for emancipation (4.2.). The fifth and final chapter sums up the findings very briefly and inquires into the normative value of this research.