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**MASTER'S PROGRAMS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
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Football as Political Communication Tool for German Supporters: How the Story of St. Pauli and Union Berlin Goes International

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Football is the most popular sport in the world, involving many people, from players, club officials, federation administrators in each country, the media, and also supporters consisting of various backgrounds. In some countries, even football also involves politicians and political parties. Because it involves many people and also many media, it is not uncommon that many people intend to convey their political messages through football so that they can be seen by the public. Germany is one of the countries that experiences this, with a background and political history that is quite strong in society and German football, which is quite famous in the world. Many football supporters in Germany try to convey various political messages to the public; they assume that football is a powerful medium to convey various political messages that they have. Starting from left-wing politics, right-wing nationalism, to various socio-political ideologies. By using political communication methods, this article tries to analyse the correlation between politics and football supporters in Germany and how the political message can go across the globe. This article was written using descriptive analysis and concluded that although German society has a dark history of politics, this does not prevent German football supporters from conveying their political messages through football, while on the other hand, the media helps to spread those messages across the globe.

Keywords: German Football, Political Message, Political Tool, Globalization

Football began to gain popularity in Germany in the late 19th century. The first football clubs were founded in major cities such as BFCgermania, which originated from the city

of Arsinghausen in Lower Saxony; after that, big city football, such as in Berlin and Hamburg, also began to form many football clubs. Football At that time, it was played in the winter of 1881/82; there was no sports field of its own, so BFC Germania initially used Tempelhofer Feld (which would later be built into the famous Tempelhof Airport). (Germania, 2024).

In 1900, the German Football Association (Deutscher Fußball-Bund, DFB) was formed, and from then on, football flourished throughout the country. The Bundesliga was founded in 1963 as Germany's professional football league. This decision changed the landscape of German football, allowing clubs to compete at the highest level and producing talented players who went on to make their mark on the international stage.

Germany is a country renowned for its contributions to science, technology, and its complex political history. It is also widely recognized for its advanced football culture, which has produced several prominent clubs, players, managers, and even innovative football management systems. One example is Bayern Munich (Globaldata, 2024) , a club that has won six European titles and developed legendary players who became World Cup winners, such as Franz Beckenbauer, Thomas Müller, Bastian Schweinsteiger, and Philipp Lahm. Another example is Borussia Dortmund, known for producing World Cup winners like Mario Götze and Mats Hummels, as well as nurturing world-class managers such as Jürgen Klopp, who introduced innovations like the 'footbonaut,' a machine used to enhance players' passing skills (Mag, 2016).

Football is the most popular sport in Germany. The DFB is the national governing body for football in Germany, overseeing 6.6 million members across more than 26,000 football clubs. The German national football team has won the World Cup four times: in 1954, 1974, 1990, and 2014. According to *SportsBusiness*, a sports media outlet, between 2010 and 2012, the German football league, or Bundesliga, was ranked the top football league in the world in terms of average attendance across all sports in Germany, recording an average of 45,134 supporters per match (SportBusiness, 2010).

In general, the characteristics of German football fans are similar to those of football fans in other countries. Their behavior ranges from extreme fanaticism to political activism, involvement in social movements, or simply viewing football as a form of entertainment or family activity.

Germany has played a central role in world history. During World War II, alongside Italy and Japan, Germany was considered one of the 'Axis Powers' or 'bad guys' in history. At the time, Germany adhered to an extreme right-wing political

ideology, Nazism, which culminated in the atrocities of the Holocaust under Adolf Hitler's dictatorship. Today, Germany is a democratic country with a diverse range of political views, spanning Green politics, Social Democracy, and the resurgence of right-wing politics represented by the Alternative für Deutschland party/movement.

With such a range of political perspectives in society and the widespread popularity of football, it is unsurprising that Germany has a variety of politically active football supporters. These supporters use football as a platform to communicate and convey their political messages to a broader audience.

Overview of Germany

Germany has a complex and often dark history. The rise of the Nazi Party and Adolf Hitler in the early 1930s had a devastating impact on Germany's political life and several neighboring countries. Hitler's policies ultimately led to World War II, one of the deadliest conflicts in human history. This era left a profound scar on German history and the global community. In addition to these historical events, Germany underwent significant demographic changes following its re-establishment after World War II. Around the 1970s, Germany invited *gastarbeiter* (foreign workers), primarily from Turkey, to meet labor demands. Many of these workers eventually settled in Germany, establishing families and contributing to the country's population diversity. However, this shift has also led to debates over immigration, with some perceiving it as a security concern. These historical and demographic factors continue to shape German society and its political landscape.

The majority of German citizens tend to approach sensitive historical topics with caution, viewing them as sources of collective suffering. However, this sensitivity often takes on a different tone when expressed through football. For many German football fans, the sport serves as "free media," a platform for expressing political views—even on sensitive matters.

Politics, in simple terms, is a way for humans to interact, share power, and organize collective life. It involves decision-making, policy creation, and the pursuit of shared interests. It is virtually impossible for any citizen, including those in Germany, to remain completely detached from politics. Football, both in Germany and beyond, often serves as a medium for conveying various messages, ranging from social to political issues, to a broader audience.

The opening article of the German Constitution guarantees the dignity of every individual, freedom of personal development, equality before the law, and freedom of belief and conviction. It ensures equal rights for men and women and prohibits discrimination based on gender, descent, race, language, origin, faith, religion, or political beliefs. It also grants everyone the right to freely express their opinions through speech, writing, or images. These constitutional principles have inspired actions by the German national football team, such as their silent protest against Qatar's LGBTQ+ ban during the 2022 World Cup. Germany, widely regarded as one of the most LGBTQ+-friendly countries globally, legalized same-sex marriage on October 1, 2017, following the Bundestag's approval of full marital and adoption rights for same-sex couples in June of that year (DW, 2017). In early 2024, the German Football Federation (DFB) officially launched a movement to combat racism and discrimination among fans and amateur players.

Economically, Germany's backbone lies in its export-oriented industrial sector. The country is the world's leading producer of high-tech industrial equipment, including iron, steel, coal, cement, chemicals, automotive machinery, and renewable energy technology such as wind turbines and solar panels. The industrial sector accounts for 29.1% of Germany's GDP. Of the world's 500 largest companies, 37 are headquartered in Germany. In a nation with advanced industry and technology, football serves as a vital outlet for leisure and emotional expression. It is the most popular spectator sport in Germany, with tens of thousands of fans attending matches weekly. Bundesliga tickets, while in high demand, are significantly cheaper than tickets for the English Premier League. Football is also widely played and enjoyed by children in schools and through thousands of amateur leagues. Prominent teams like Bayern München and Borussia Dortmund are central to Germany's football culture (Expatrio, 2024). Watching football provides an escape from daily routines and a space for personal expression (Perdana, 2021).

German society is diverse and shaped by various political ideologies. As a federal democracy, Germany has strong political parties, an independent judiciary, and robust regional and local governments. The constitutional framework carefully outlines the allocation of power and the election process, ensuring that any changes to this framework are made with careful consideration of their broader implications.

Political participation is a hallmark of German democracy, enabling citizens to engage in elections and policymaking. Higher levels of political participation typically

indicate a healthy democracy, while low participation may suggest apathy or distrust toward the government system.

With Germany's relatively open political system, people use various mediums, including football, to express their political views. Football stadiums and matches have become platforms for voicing political issues. Two German football teams stand out as examples of this phenomenon. St. Pauli, with its idealism and commitment to social issues, represents "punk football," while Union Berlin embodies solidarity and community-driven club management. Even during times of financial crisis, such as when Union Berlin faced near bankruptcy, fans displayed extraordinary dedication by raising 1.5 million euros (approximately Rp 24.2 billion) to save the club (Butler, 2023).

How Football Clubs Gains Their Identities?

One of the most important aspects of studying football as a medium to convey political messages is that a club and its fans need to have a clear identity, which is then communicated through various meanings associated with the club. The first and foremost aspect of a football club's identity is its local and regional affiliation. This connection provides a unique selling point, attracts supporters, and allows fans to identify closely with the club (Gómez-Bantel, 2016).

Most football clubs around the world are rooted in their regional identity. For example, some of the biggest football clubs globally include their city names, such as Real Madrid, AC Milan, Liverpool FC, FC Barcelona, and Ajax Amsterdam—each among the top five clubs with the most UEFA Champions League trophies, the most prestigious European club competition. Similarly, FC St. Pauli, named after the St. Pauli district in Hamburg, and Union Berlin, named after Germany's capital city, Berlin, exemplify this practice. Identifying a football club with its place of origin is a common tradition across sports worldwide.

The second key element of a football club's identity is its ideology. Though abstract, ideology serves as a valuable conceptual framework that reflects how different social groups think, feel, and act. It embodies a set of political beliefs, ideas, and values about how society should function and improve (Spaaij & Viñas, 2013). For some, ideology becomes a guiding principle and even a way of life.

In football, ideology does not directly impact the game itself—a Marxist ideology will not make a left winger run faster, nor will Capitalism make a right winger dribble more skillfully. Instead, ideology reflects a football club's societal role. For instance, FC

Barcelona is renowned for its connection to Catalan nationalism, symbolizing the Catalan people and their identity. This link was solidified during Francisco Franco's dictatorship when FC Barcelona matches became a refuge for Catalans to express their dissent against the regime, cementing the club's identity as a bastion of Catalan culture (Minder, 2017). This identity remains integral to FC Barcelona to this day.

Ideology plays a vital role in modern football. The sport's immense popularity, with an audience of five billion people globally (FIFA, 2024), has made it more than just a game. Football reflects societal dynamics and often mirrors political tensions. For instance, Simon Kuper (2006, pp. 4–18) titled one chapter of his book *Soccer Against the Enemy* as "Soccer is War," discussing the rivalry between Holland and Germany in the 1988 European Cup semifinals. Holland's 2-1 victory over Germany was celebrated as symbolic revenge for World War II. Similarly, rivalries such as Celtic vs. Rangers in Scotland—steeped in political and religious undertones (Silawati, 2022)—and Boca Juniors vs. River Plate in Argentina, which reflects class divisions, illustrate football's deep societal connections (LFYC, 2024).

Pascal Boniface (2002) argued that football reflects contemporary global dynamics, representing a country's geopolitical position through its achievements on the field. Indonesian philosopher Sindhunata (2002, pp. 38–40) also highlighted how rivalries like those between Holland and England evoke emotional weight, sometimes exceeding the impact of historical conflicts. From a Baudrillardian perspective, football has become a simulacrum, a hyperreal phenomenon transcending its original purpose (Sugito, 2016).

German football exemplifies this phenomenon. Known for its passionate fans and high-quality play, the Bundesliga is widely regarded as one of the world's best leagues. The German football culture emphasizes discipline, teamwork, and hard work, fostering a strong collective mentality both on and off the field. This emphasis on unity and collaboration has contributed significantly to Germany's success in major tournaments like the World Cup and European Championship (Academy, 2024).

From a fan's perspective, football serves as a powerful medium for forming and expressing individual and collective identities. It represents cultural affiliations or countercultural stances, shaping how fans relate to themselves and others (García-López, 2024). For clubs like St. Pauli and Union Berlin, fan identity is deeply intertwined with their origins and societal context. Understanding the history and ideologies of these clubs

is crucial to comprehending how football can transcend its role as a sport and become a vehicle for social and political expression.

St. Pauli, the Punk Rockstar of the *Fußball*

St. Pauli is a football club based in Hamburg, Northern Germany. Its journey began in 1907 when football was played as part of the gymnastics club Hamburg St. Pauli Turnverein 1862. At that time, football in St. Pauli was not part of an organized competition. In 1910, the football players joined the North German Football Association. They played their first league game in 1911 and, in 1924, broke away from the gymnastics club to form FC St. Pauli (FC St. Pauli, 2024).

In the 1930s, Germany underwent a significant political shift as the National Socialist Workers' Party (NSDAP), better known as the Nazis, rose to power. By June 1933, under the leadership of the Deutsch Fußball-Bund (DFB), Jewish individuals were forced to leave all sports clubs. Although St. Pauli was compelled to expel Jewish players, they initially refused to align with Nazi ideology. St. Pauli became one of the few clubs that rejected the Nazi government's policies during the early 1930s, opposing right-wing ideology, racism, and anything that threatened peace among people. However, under political pressure, St. Pauli ultimately joined the Nazi system in 1937 for the sake of the club's survival. This decision, though reluctant, was led by club president Wilhelm Koch (Dev, 2017). Over time, St. Pauli evolved to embody progressive values, such as anarchism, libertarianism, and socialism, representing the lower classes in Hamburg, Germany, and beyond.

After World War II, the club experienced ups and downs in German football. Although they were promoted to the Bundesliga, Germany's top division, in 1977, they were relegated the following year. St. Pauli's journey in the Bundesliga never reached the heights of clubs like Bayern Munich, Borussia Dortmund, or even their regional rival Hamburg SV. However, in the 1980s, the club began to stand out by cultivating a distinctive subculture among its supporters, which later gained global recognition. By 2024-2025, St. Pauli made their long-awaited return to the Bundesliga (Bundesliga, 2024).

What made St. Pauli a global cult club was its unwavering stance against racism and fascism. While some European football clubs have notorious associations with fascist ideologies, such as Lazio's Ultras group "Irriducibili," known for racist banners and chants, St. Pauli stands in stark contrast. St. Pauli has embraced a punk ideology

rooted in mutual aid, anti-consumerism, and human rights (Avery-Natale, 2016). This progressive ethos has endeared the club to fans worldwide.

St. Pauli's fans have also driven key initiatives, such as renaming their stadium Millerntor Stadion to distance it from its former name, Wilhelm Koch Stadion, after the Nazi-affiliated president. The stadium became the first professional football ground in Europe to adopt a strict code of conduct prohibiting racist, fascist, sexist, or homophobic comments. This code later became a model for other clubs in Germany (Haasen, 2018).

Economically, St. Pauli cannot compete with giants like Bayern Munich or RB Leipzig, but the club prides itself on its idealism and community involvement. St. Pauli rejects private ownership and involves fans in every decision. This commitment to collective action aligns with the punk philosophy of "Do It Yourself" (DIY). In 2004, when the club faced financial crisis and near-bankruptcy, fans—ranging from bar owners to local sex workers—raised prices on goods and services, contributing the surplus to save the club (Ilham, 2022).

The humanist side of punk ideology is also reflected in St. Pauli's supporters, who are predominantly left-wing, anti-fascist, anti-racist, and anti-sexist. The St. Pauli Ultras frequently organize political campaigns, fundraise for the less fortunate, and even host events like the FIFA World Cup for nations unrecognized by FIFA. The club's fans have become emblematic of the global "Against Modern Football" (AMF) movement, advocating for the preservation of football's community roots against its commercialization (Zaimakis, 2023).

The club's unofficial skull and crossbones logo symbolizes solidarity with the working class, despite its origins in pirate imagery. St. Pauli supporters, largely from Hamburg's working-class neighborhoods, see the logo as a defiant symbol of their identity. Despite the club's modest achievements, fans prioritize independence and sustainability over quick success funded by capitalist ventures.

St. Pauli's embrace of progressive values, such as anarchism and socialism, has made it a global symbol of political football. Its unique ethos and dedicated fanbase solidify its reputation as one of the most politically connected football clubs in the world.

Worker's United: The Union berlin

Originally founded in 1906 as FC Olympia Oberschöneweide, the club has changed its name up to ten times. After a series of dissolutions and reforms following World War II,

the name 1. FC Union Berlin was officially adopted in January 1966 when trade union federation leader Herbert Warnke proposed the formation of a club for Berlin's workers.

FC Union Berlin may not be a club with a long history of competing in the German Bundesliga or achieving impressive accolades. In fact, they had not appeared in Germany's top league since Berlin's unification in 1990 (FC Union Berlin, 2024).

Last September, in a historic match—Union's first Bundesliga game—the supporters remained silent for the first 15 minutes. This protest was staged against the ownership model of their opponent, RB Leipzig, which is owned by the Austrian energy drink company Red Bull. The action was led by Union's oldest ultras group, Wuhlesyndikat. The fans take pride in the fact that their club has survived without reliance on a single corporate sponsor like RB Leipzig. In 2009, Union even severed ties with its main sponsor, ISP (International Sport Promotion), because its manager had a decade-long history as a Stasi operative. Remarkably, everyone working at the club, from president Dirk Zingler to the ticketing staff, is a dedicated Union Berlin supporter. This commitment reflects the working-class communitarian values of family, solidarity, and mutual cooperation that are consistently upheld by all elements of the club. In contrast, their neighbors at Hertha Berlin are majority-owned by a private firm, 777 Partners, which holds a 64.7% stake (Bresaola, 2023).

Such dedication has made Union Berlin a cult club in Europe, similar to St. Pauli. As Roos Menkhorst (2024) observed, Union Berlin is a quintessential working-class club, representing the town of Köpenick in Berlin, a working-class neighborhood. When Union wins, local bars often celebrate by serving free beer to customers. The club even celebrates Christmas with its fans, as 22,000 supporters gather in the stadium to sing Christmas carols.

This special relationship between Union Berlin and its supporters is a rare phenomenon in world football. As football clubs increasingly become privatized, many lose the passion-based connection that once defined fandom. Union Berlin's management system, however, serves as a form of political communication—if not a statement—embodying their labor union-inspired values.

Union Berlin demonstrates that political communication in football does not have to take the form of performative actions; it can simply be reflected in how a club is managed. This unique management model is not exclusive to Union Berlin. Athletic Bilbao in Spain also operates under a socio system, where the club's ownership and management are in the hands of its fans.

Football, Globalization, Ideology, and Media

As football continues to grow in popularity worldwide—thanks to advancements in information technology—international football fans now consume the sport in much broader ways. Before the advent of the internet, fans could only watch football on terrestrial television, and matches were usually broadcast live or occasionally delayed if the broadcaster decided to air them later. Some fans could record games to watch later, but such technology was not widely available, especially in Southeast Asian countries like Indonesia. Today, football can be watched repeatedly on free video-sharing platforms such as YouTube and Dailymotion. These platforms allow people to rewatch matches while also enjoying commentary from both local and international analysts, amateur and professional alike (Marcelo Pires & Vítor Santos, 2018).

Another interesting development brought by the internet is the accessibility of lower-league matches, which can now be enjoyed globally. In the 1990s, before the internet, lower-league teams were only featured on television—internationally—when they played against major teams in local cup competitions like the DFB Pokal or the FA Cup. Today, these matches are readily available online and can be watched anytime.

The internet has also enabled fans to explore other aspects of football beyond the matches themselves. For example, streaming platforms like Netflix offer a wide array of football documentaries that cover the sport from multiple angles, including the matches, players, incidents, and even the experiences of captains and fans. These documentaries highlight how elements beyond the game itself have become significant for football fans worldwide.

Choudry (2018) explored how social media, a significant part of the internet, has transformed football. Social media allows football journalists to share their content widely, engage audiences, and receive global feedback. It has also empowered football fans to voice their opinions on a global scale, spreading their ideologies far and wide. In the cases of FC St. Pauli and Union Berlin, their fans already held strong ideological beliefs, but the internet and social media helped amplify their messages—consciously or unconsciously—to a much wider audience.

FC St. Pauli has achieved the status of a "cult club," celebrated by international and local media alike. Outlets such as England's *BBC* (Poole, 2020), the United States' *Vice* (Magee, 2017), Indonesia's *Panditfootball* (Aprialdi, 2015), and *Detik.com* (Aprialdi, 2023) have all highlighted the club's unique appeal. These media platforms consistently

praise St. Pauli for its passionate fans and steadfast values, reinvented in the 1980s, which include anti-fascism, anti-homophobia, and anti-sexism. The club is also commended for its anti-modern football stance, often described as being "more about football than business."

The uniqueness of FC St. Pauli is further underscored by its foreign players, including Australians Jackson Irvine and Connor Metcalfe. In a short documentary by *10Football*, Irvine—the captain of the Australian national team—shared that he joined St. Pauli partly because his girlfriend advised him to "join that cult club." When St. Pauli contacted him in 2021, Irvine immediately accepted the offer. Both Irvine and Metcalfe have noted that St. Pauli's fans hold strong idealistic beliefs and stand firmly by them (10Football, 2024). This demonstrates how football fans' ideologies can influence even foreign players to become part of their club.

Meanwhile, FC Union Berlin possesses qualities that set it apart from most football clubs worldwide. The club is entirely fan-owned, a rare phenomenon in modern football. The Israeli-based sports media *Playingfor90* described Union Berlin as a mythical club and a "disruptor of modern football" (Stewart, 2023). Operating with a minimal budget and 100% fan ownership, Union Berlin successfully qualified for the 2023/2024 UEFA Champions League, Europe's most prestigious club competition.

Basro (2023), writing for *CNN Indonesia*, also highlighted Union Berlin's uniqueness, describing it as a club that prioritizes its fans above all else, unlike many modern football clubs that treat supporters as mere customers. Basro drew comparisons between Union Berlin and other fan-centric clubs in Europe and Indonesia, such as FC United of Manchester, AFC Wimbledon, AFC Liverpool, Bohemian FC in Great Britain, and Indonesian clubs like Tribun Kultur FC, Urbanside FC, Kalibrug FC, Rainfall FC, and Port City Wanderers.

These cross-national media perspectives illustrate that the ideologies of both FC St. Pauli and FC Union Berlin are not only unique but also transcendental, reaching audiences worldwide. The advancement of information technology has played a crucial role in elevating football into more than just a game. It has transformed the sport into an international platform where clubs and fans alike can promote their ideologies and influence others across borders.

Conclusion

As the most popular sport in the country, football has been a significant part of German society. Football clubs in Germany are a representation of their people and, therefore, also reflect the political views of the population. On a global level, football itself has become a symbol of the various parties behind the teams playing on the field.

In this paper, we use Germany's FC St. Pauli and Union Berlin as examples of how political ideologies can emerge from these clubs. In the case of FC St. Pauli, their anti-fascist and anti-racist ideology has inspired fans and media worldwide, helping them achieve cult status in global football. Meanwhile, Union Berlin has reached mythical status by surviving in a fan-supported economic environment.

On the other hand, football has become more than just a game. The growing influence of aspects outside the game, such as the ideologies of fans and clubs, is worth discussing. In this context, several international and local media outlets outside Germany frequently write positively about FC St. Pauli and Union Berlin, highlighting how the political messages conveyed by these clubs can serve as a positive inspiration for other football clubs around the world.

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