



## **The Night Wolves Motorcycle Club's Influence on Kinetic Activity in Host Populations**

*Disclaimer: this briefing note contains summaries of open sources and does not represent the views of the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.*

### **Purpose Statement**

The presence of the Night Wolves Motorcycle Club (NWMC) increases the likelihood of kinetic activity amongst host populations, particularly in Soviet states containing significant foreign Russian populations (Harris, 2018). The NWMC conducts paramilitary trainings, motorcycle pilgrimages celebrating the Russian Orthodox Church, anti-NATO rallies and protests, all with the goal of amplifying political and social wedge issues, to undermine the majority (Harris, 2018; Tabor, 2015; Zabyelina, 2017). In this way, the NWMC acts as a proxy to the Russian state, mobilizing Kremlin support. To combat the NWMC's influence, Canada and NATO might consider strengthening cooperative relationships between local, legitimate expatriate communities and intelligence officers (Galeotti, 2017). This could be done through community policing, as well as through the recruitment of local informants (Galeotti, 2017).

### **Problem Statement**

The increased kinetic activity influenced by the presence of the NWMC, could present a security threat to Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) personnel deployed to Central and Eastern Europe, in support of reassurance operations (Lauder, 2018). The NWMC contains an extended network of assets across Europe, through their chapters and tactical military training facilities, which could be used to leverage support against Western forces (see Appendix A) (Harris, 2018; Lauder, 2018). This network

could also be leveraged by Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), military intelligence (GRU), and the Federal Security Service (FSB) for intelligence collection, source identification and recruitment (Galeotti, 2017; Lauder, 2018).

### **Background & Key Facts**

The NWMC declared to be the first independent motorcycle club in Russia in 1989 (Zabyelina, 2017). Founded and lead by Alexander Zaldostanov, the NWMC embraces Orthodox Christian beliefs, and propagates ultranationalist ideals (Zabyelina, 2017). Zaldostanov asserts that their goal is to fight against American democracy, and unite Russian compatriots and lands in post-Soviet states (Zabyelina, 2017). He refers to the annexation of Crimea as one of the first steps towards realizing this mission (Zabyelina, 2017).

The NWMC contains approximately 5,000 members domestically, with chapters in nearly all major Russian cities (Harris, 2018; Zabyelina, 2017). The club claims to have over sixty-five chapters in over ten countries, including Belarus, Bulgaria, Germany, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, and the Ukraine (Harris, 2018; Lauder, 2018; Zabyelina, 2017).

The NWMC contains corporate entities, as well as subsequent umbrella companies and NGO's (Harris, 2018; Zabyelina, 2017). These are utilized to provide opportunities for legitimate social engagement with the public, law enforcement and political parties, in an effort for the NWMC to appear legitimized as a genuine business or political entity (Harris, 2018). These organizations also function as a 'covert' connection between the club and the Kremlin, as they have received numerous multi-million-ruble government grants for different social projects (see Appendix A: v, vi) (Harris, 2018).

These organizations also function as forms of soft and hard power for Russia. The NWMC's youth NGO Night Wolves MANO, works as a soft propaganda campaign aimed at a young demographic, promoting anti-Western views and pro-Russian nationalism domestically, as well

as in Crimea (see Appendix A: v) (Harris, 2018; Zabyelina, 2017). The NWMC, furthermore, contains security companies offering tactical military training, martial arts training, and other security services in Russia, and abroad (see Appendix A: iv) (Harris, 2018).

The NWMC's past activities in the Ukraine highlight how this club has been able to agitate domestic politics and increase ties to the Kremlin (Harris, 2018). A function of the NWMC during the conflict in South-Eastern Ukraine and the Crimean Peninsula, was to prepare the ground for separatism, and mobilize citizens around a pro-Russian agenda (Lutsevych, 2016). The NWMC did this by fighting alongside Russian militants, mobilizing civilians to prevent the movement of Ukrainian military forces, recruiting them into local "self defense" units, and transporting resources to rebel factions in Donbas (Lutsevych, 2016, p.37; Zabyelina, 2017). Zaldostanov also directly aided Russian militants in the Ukraine, by setting up roadblocks in Sevastopol; storming the Ukrainian Naval Forces Headquarters, and confiscating their weapons; and was also accused by the Ukrainian Security Service (USS) of financing the 'republics' of Donetsk and Lugansk (see Appendix B: ii) (Lutsevych, 2016; Tabor, 2015; Zabyelina, 2017).

The NWMC is beginning to extend its influence across Europe, as well as into the U.S and Australia, where it contains ties with local motorcycle clubs (see Appendix B: i) (Harris, 2018). The NWMC has recently established a Slovakian base, which the Russian Government is calling the "European headquarters" of the club (Peter, 2018, p.1). Slovak President Kiska regards the club's base as a "serious security risk" for the country, given their role in the Ukrainian conflict, and the view of the NWMC as being a Russian proxy (Peter, 2018, p.1).

### **Key Considerations & Implications**

The NWMC provided a legitimating tool in Crimea, and could do so in other Russian diasporas across Europe, through their propaganda and paramilitary action (Harris, 2018).

The NWMC represents a trend by the Russian Government to outsource activities to non-state actors, which are traditionally conducted by state intelligence and defence actors (Lauder, 2018). Some of these activities can include intelligence collection, propaganda dissemination, agitation and provocation, combat operations, and tailored violence including intimidation, as well as targeted assassination (Lauder, 2018).

The NWMC will likely continue to be utilized by Putin as a hybrid, non-linear warfare (NLW) tactic, to shape the information environment in targeted locations, destabilize contested environments and help establish the covert origins of conflict (Harris, 2018; Lauder, 2018).

Empowering nonstate actors allows the Russian Government to rely on social networks of influence to promote their ideological agenda through associations, as well as decentralizes political and military involvement, which as seen in Crimea, can afford Russia ambiguity and deniability (Harris, 2018). This non-state networking model, therefore, ensures that Putin's intent is ambiguous and that messages are inconsistent, preventing a unified response from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (Harris, 2018).

Russian-based organized crime (RBOC) tends to establish itself at trafficking nodes and in expatriate communities, therefore, these locations should be high priority areas for law enforcement efforts (Galeotti, 2017).

### **Alternative Perspectives to be Considered**

The NWMC's activities could arguably be indicative of a trend towards the politicization of biker organizations, which could impact the activities of their Western counterparts (Zabyelina, 2017). The cross-over between American outlaw motorcycle gangs and white supremacists, for example, has been recognized as a trend in the U.S (Zabyelina, 2017). Such alliances could expand recruitment, and lead to an increase in criminal activity regarding illicit trade and hate crime (Galeotti, 2017).

There exist some legitimate actors within the Russian police and judiciary (Galeotti, 2017). Increased efforts to maintain and expand cooperation with Russian counterparts, via renewed cop-to-cop contact, particularly at a local level, may therefore, be beneficial in combating RBOC group's influence on populations and growth (Galeotti, 2017).

Western forces may consider careful treatment of expatriate communities, to avoid any heavy-handed policing and stereotyping, so as not to drive these communities into the arms of RBOC groups (Galeotti, 2017).

### **What Is Not Known**

If the NWMC will continue to spread its bases and chapters to other parts of Europe or North America.

If the Slovakian NWMC base indicates future Russian political, or military intentions for Slovakia.

If the NWMC has tangible connections to similar motorcycle clubs in Canada, or any intentions of influencing the Canadian population.

### **Next Steps**

Increased academic research, monitoring, and intelligence gathering of the NWMC, their expanding chapters, activities, and influence over foreign Russian populations, and how this impacts Canadian and NATO personnel.

Particular attention may be considered to focus on NWMC's activities in Slovakia, Germany, Australia, and the U.S.

### **Available Options**

Potential increase in CAF and/or NATO personnel to Central and Eastern Europe to monitor NWMC activity; an increased pro-NATO and EU presence in Slovakia could particularly aid in countering anti-Western narratives likely to increase due to the establishment of NWMC's new base (Peter, 2018).

To gauge any Canadian ties to this organization, research and intelligence could be gathered on any similar clubs operating in Canada, such as the Rock Machine Motorcycle Club, and the Hells Angels, which contain Russian chapters and may be exposed to the NWMC's politics (see Appendix B: i).

### **Recommendations**

Increased Western resources, used to make meaningful inroads into expatriate communities, via community policing, and local informant recruitment, may aid in combating Russia's nationalist political campaign, and NLW tactics, by establishing community resilience against the influence of proxies such as NWMC (Galeotti, 2017; Jacoby, 2016).

## References

- Galeotti, M. (2017). Crimintern: How the Kremlin Uses Russia's Criminal Networks in Europe. Policy Brief No.208. *European Council on Foreign Relations*. Retrieved from [https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR208\\_-\\_CRIMINTERM\\_HOW\\_RUSSIAN\\_ORGANISED\\_CRIME\\_OPERATES\\_IN\\_EUROPE02.pdf](https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR208_-_CRIMINTERM_HOW_RUSSIAN_ORGANISED_CRIME_OPERATES_IN_EUROPE02.pdf)
- Harris, K. (2018). Russia's Fifth Column: The influence of Night Wolves Motorcycle Club. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 01-29. DOI: 10.1080/1057610X.2018.1455373
- Jacoby, T.A. (2016). How the War Was 'One': Countering Violent Extremism and the Social Dimensions of Counter-Terrorism in Canada. *Journal for Deradicalization*, 272-304.
- Lauder, M.A. (2018). 'Wolves of the Russian Spring': An Examination of the Night Wolves as a Proxy for the Russian Government. *Canadian Military Journal*, 18(3), 1-16. Retrieved from <http://www.journal.forces.gc.ca/vol18/no3/page5-eng.asp>
- Lutsevych, O. (2016). Agents of the Russian World: proxy groups in the contested neighbourhood. *Chatham House*. Retrieved from <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/publications/research/2016-04-14-agents-russian-world-lutsevych.pdf>
- Peter, L. (2018, July 31). Slovakia alarmed by pro-Putin Night Wolves bikers' base. *BBC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45019133>
- Tabor, D. (2015, October 8). Putin's Angels: Inside Russia's Most Infamous Motorcycle Club. *Rolling Stone*. Retrieved from <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/putins-angels-inside-russias-most-infamous-motorcycle-club-56360/>
- Zabyelina, Y. (2017). Russia's Night Wolves Motorcycle Club: From 1%ers to political activists. *Trends in Organized Crime*, Trends in Organized Crime.

### APPENDIX A: Wolf Holding of Security Structures, and Related NWMC Daughter Companies

- i. The NWMC's corporate entity, the Wolf Holding of Security Structures (WHSS), provides martial arts and tactical military courses to foreign military, law enforcement, and Russian-speaking compatriots from European and Asian States (Harris, 2018; Zabyelina, 2017).

ii. While there are numerous companies under the umbrella of the WHSS, its core business offers detective services such as the use of lie detectors, armed and unarmed protection of premises, transport, as well as property fortification through installation of monitoring and tracking systems (Harris, 2018; Zabyelina, 2017).

iii. The WHSS contains bases in Russia and the Ukraine, and allegedly collaborated with NWMC leader Zaldostanov, to organize the self-defence of Sevastopol (Harris, 2018). U.S. government reports have further indicated that WHSS provides martial arts and military training to pro-Russian fighters in Eastern Ukraine (Harris, 2018). The company was included in U.S. sanctions in June 2017 for “having materially assisted, sponsored, or provided financial, material, or technological support for, or goods or services to or in support of, the Night Wolves” (Harris, 2018, p.10).

iv. Daughter companies of WHSS include: International Alliance of Assault Forces (Assault Alliance); Wolf International Centre for Special Training, which provides security training in Russia and abroad, including training in the martial art style Sistema (specialized for Russian special services), use of weapons, psychological warfare, and technical training for survival in conflict zones, as well as training for security personnel; and the NWMC also established a non-commercial, youth NGO “Night Wolves MANO” (Harris, 2018, p.4; Zabyelina, 2017).

v. The NWMC have been monetarily supported by the Russian Government via grants to their NGO: Night Wolves MANO (Harris, 2018). MANO hosts annual Kremlin-funded holiday shows for children in Sevastopol in Crimea, and in Moscow, which attract over 4,000 children (Harris, 2018). These shows appeal to younger audiences by using lasers, pyrotechnics, and other special effects (Harris, 2018; Zabyelina, 2017). Examples of propaganda-esque show content include a 2013 performance, involving a character resembling the Statue of Liberty, who kidnaps the snow princess Snegurochka, after which the NWMC save the princess and give the audience “an alternative to foreign domination” (Harris, 2018, p.5).

Following Crimea’s annexation, the show presented the Maidan Revolution as a neo-nazi coup, masterminded by the West, which justified Russia’s interference (Harris, 2018). The NGO lists its main activities as performing

arts for youth between 18 and 30 years old, however, the company acknowledges their involvement in the motorcycle and automobile industry, tourism and accommodation, hospitality, entertainment industry, as well as cultural institutions such as libraries and archives (Harris, 2018).

vi. The NWMC has also received funding from the Russian Government via the NWMC-affiliated NGO Russian Motorcyclists (Zabyelina, 2017). Here, the Kremlin has supplied generous grants for biker shows in Sevastopol, as well as to support the military education of youth in Russia and abroad (Zabyelina, 2017).

### **APPENDIX B: NWMC's Chapters and Extending Influence**

i. A Florida-based ex-patriot law enforcement and military motorcycle club, the Spetsnaz Motorcycle Club, contains members, majority of whom emigrated from the former USSR, who have ties to Russian security officials (Harris, 2018). This group has also sought official recognition from the NWMC (Harris, 2018). Further North American and Australian motorcycle clubs, which have Russian chapters include: Rock Machine MC (which has six Canadian chapters), Commancheros MC, Bandidos MC, Hells Angels MC, Outlaws MC, and rebels MC (Harris, 2018).

Video footage showcases how Moscow-based NWMC members were well received by Russian diasporas in Sydney and Melbourne in February and May of 2017, for the delivery of monuments from the Trinity Lavra of St. Sergius monastery (as cited in Harris, 2018):

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nqz\\_NM46rHW](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nqz_NM46rHW)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qg4emmpsHHg>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mw9AEKrPTqk>

ii. The Ukrainian Security Service (USS) has accused Zaldostanov of financing the 'republics' of Donetsk and Lugansk, and that the NWMC was closely associated with Russia's Special Services (RSS) (Harris, 2018; Peter, 2018). Canada, as well as the U.S have also recognized the NWMC's relationship with RSS, and their involvement in recruiting fighters for the

Lugansk and Kharkiv frontlines, for which both countries have applied sanctions against the club for (Harris, 2018; Peter, 2018; Tabor, 2015).



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

© CASIS, 2018

Published by the Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare and Simon Fraser University, Volume 1, Issue 2.

Available from: <https://jicw.org/>