



Yellow Vests, Right-Wing Extremism and the Threat to Canadian Democracy

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Purpose Statement

This briefing note explores the potential threat posed by the Yellow Vest Canada movement (YVC) being arguably infiltrated and co-opted by right-wing extremist (RWE) groups, and the possible escalation this may cause. The YVC has the potential to evolve from a peaceful movement into a national security threat. Yellow Vesters have become increasingly characterized by their death threats against Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, clashes with counter-protesters, and the movement's growing support from local RWE groups, seeking to utilize the YVC as a means for expanding their supporter base and normalizing extremist rhetoric. In the event of the adoption of YVC by RWE groups, there is the potential for extremist narratives to be pushed into the normative political sphere and turn the YVC movement into a Violent Transnational Social Movement (VTSM).

Security Problem

What is it? The number of supporters in the YVC movement has grown to 100,000 supporters on Facebook and culminated into protests across 52 cities in Canada, in one month (See Appendix 3). These YVC protests claim to be motivated by a multitude of issues ranging from the potential loss of state sovereignty, to concerns over a lack of economic development. However, there has also been increasing evidence of

nationalist and anti-immigrant rhetoric within the movement (Metcalf, 2018).

Why? The YVC movement provides an opportunity for RWE groups, such as the Three Percenters and Soldiers of Odin, to broaden their audience and normalize extremist views. In some instances, the YVC movement could be seen to have been co-opted by RWE groups given the growing participation of these groups in organizing and attending protests. (See Appendix 1 and 2). With the YVC movement attempting to mirror the French Gilets Jaunes movement, there is the possibility that this movement could be transformed into a VTSM. The emergence of VTSMs could pose significant challenges to Canada given the relative lack of understanding and ability to identify fifth-generation warfare.

What is the sense of urgency? It is possible that the YVC movement could be used by extremist groups as those mentioned above, in an attempt to increase their support and sympathizer base, perhaps in preparation for the upcoming 2019 federal election. They may desire to push for electing officials who espouse ideologically-similar views to their own, in an attempt to normalize their extremist perspectives.

Key Events

The first key event is the beginning of the Gilets Jaunes protests in France, which began on November 18, 2018. While these protests first consisted of barricades and roadblocks, they have evolved into violent demonstrations that have led to clashes with state authorities, damaged public and private property, and injured hundreds of civilians and police officers (Williamson, 2018). These Gilets Jaune protests established the framework for the YVC movement.

The second key event is the discovery of death threats by the Canadian Anti-Hate Network published on Yellow Vest Facebook pages (Anti-Racist Canada, 2018). Posts on these pages contain death threats to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau as well as physical threats to counter-protestors.

The third key event is the escalation to violence at a YVC rally in Edmonton, Alberta on December 15, 2018 that saw clashes between Yellow Vest protesters and counter-protesters.(Laing & Clancy, 2018). This rally demonstrates the violent potential for the YVC movement in Canada.

Background

The YVC movement is directly inspired by the Gilets Jaunes movement in France. Beginning as a non-partisan protest against projected 2019 increases to fuel taxes, the goals of Gilets Jaunes movement have expanded to include a wide range of working and middle class economic and political grievances (Williamson, 2018). This movement has been characterized by street blockades, violent rallies and clashes with state authorities. Members of this movement have been identified by a uniform simply comprised of yellow motorist vests, easily accessible due to French laws requiring all motorists to possess yellow vests in their vehicles in case of emergencies (Williamson, 2018). While this movement began with a petition created by Priscillia Ludosky, this movement so far has been seen to contain no recognised leadership, no formal hierarchy and no organizational structure. This lack of organizational structure and wide range of demands has allowed for an extremely broad base of supporters across the political spectrum as well as the rapid spread of this movement across France. This movement was created and has been perpetuated through social media platforms alone (Williamson, 2018).

As with its tactics and organizational traits, the YVC movement shares a similar motivation with the Gilet Jaunes movement in ensuring one's "well-fare" and well-being in the face of inequality yet the definition of this concept varies significantly between both movements. The French Gilets Jaunes have largely demanded for lower fuel taxes, higher wages, higher standards of living, and education reforms. The Canadian movement, while predicated on welfare, has a different notion than that

of the French. For YVCs, there are segments which espouse anti-immigrant rhetoric as it relates to the UN Compact on Migration, anti-statist remarks, and anti-government slogans. The only thing that unites the two movements is protest and the omnipresent yellow vest.

The YVC movement unofficially began on November 24th, 2018 with the Rally Against UN Migrant Compact in Toronto organized by Faith Goldy and attended by members of ID Canada, an “identitarian” group which promotes an ethno-nationalist Canadian identity. (Anti-Racist Canada, 2018). While attendees at this rally did not wear yellow vest uniforms, this rally established the motivation for the YVC protests that emerged on the weekend of December 8th in major cities across Canada. The following weekend of December 15th, these YVC protests further expanded into a total fifty-two cities, all of which were organized on social media platforms (See Appendix 3).

There is no discernable leader in the Canadian movement. However, there have been key organizers such as Tyson Hunt, former leader of the Edmonton chapter of the Soldiers of Odin, and Kazz Nowlin, III% National Commanding Officer, who have spoken at events, created Facebook posts, and rallied supporters to their cause (See Appendix 1). They have been arguably successful partly because of their persistence and ability to organize over social media. Most notably, there are Facebook groups such as Okanagan Yellow Vests associated with the YVC movement that have been known to associate with the III%, a right-wing militia group that espouses anti-immigrant rhetoric (Anti-Racist Canada, 2018).

Implications

The first implication of the expansion of the YVC movement is that the movement is arguably vulnerable to right-wing extremist groups looking to further their supporter base by co-opting the movement in order to create a more palatable image for public consumption. By adopting the Yellow Vest movement, RWE groups can potentially reach a different

audience. By reaching a broader audience through the YVC movement, RWE groups can, potentially, increase their political influence and their ability to disseminate ideological messaging. It could also be seen as an opportunity to veil their identity in a nationalist-populist, anti-globalist movement calling for a strengthening of Canadian sovereignty.

As for the second implication, the YVC movement could be potentially used to influence the upcoming 2019 Federal Election. While there is a lack of defined demands, the YVC movement has arguably taken an anti-Trudeau position given the posters seen at protests and on various social media platforms which has culminated in death threats (Bell, 2019). Given the arguably partisan nature of the YVC movement, there is a possibility that the YVC movement has the potential to be used as a platform for politically-motivated actors to promote their own agenda.

The third implication is the YVC movement's definition of "well-fare". The YVC movement is predicated on the "well-fare" of the people, a concept which for them is rooted in various notions of economic security, prosperity, and the protection of "Canadian culture". Therefore, the movement is polycentric. Although the movement is comprised of a multitude of values and identities, the movement lacks a centralized leadership and organizational structure with events being organized on an ad-hoc basis. As such, if the movement turns violent, the decentralized nature of the movement may create significant challenges for Canadian law enforcement. However, the movement is also reticulate, which means that different leaders do not need to be in contact, nor do they have to cooperate. Their modus operandi is to copy one another, thus creating advocacy networks for their followers. They might share their messaging, but each segment of the movement acts independently without any direction from a central authority figure.

What is not Known

It is not known whether the Canadian movement has the same lobbying power as the French Gilets Jaunes movement. Both movements have

demands, but only the French have been able to sway public opinion thus far.

It is not known whether the added support of known right-wing extremist groups will legitimize or de-legitimize the movement. Efforts to sanitize the usually inappropriate rhetoric coming from these groups have so far been successful, as multiple Facebook groups have grown exponentially over the last weeks and days.

Next Steps

Some of the leaders of different YVC groups have been planning to protest every weekend for the foreseeable future. There are protests planned for the coming weeks all over the country, in at least fifty-two cities. Therefore, these groups should be monitored in order to assess their potential for violence and level of threat to key individuals or groups.

Although there have been Facebook posts detailing the locations, times, and manners in which protests are held, the precise number of protesters is still unknown. Therefore, the response from law enforcement officials will be indicative of how active and strong the movement is; and whether a future exists for the YVC movement.

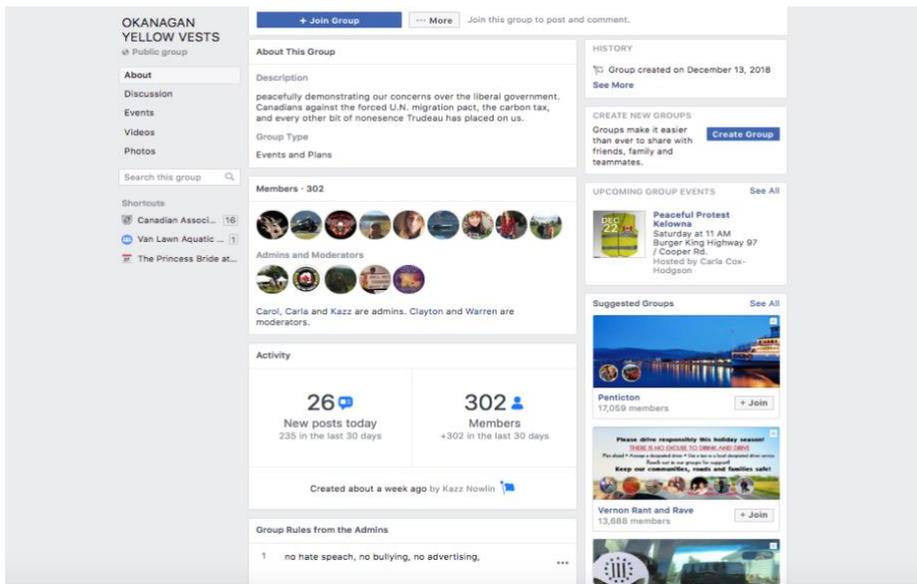
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Appendix 1: RWE Support for Yellow Vest Protests

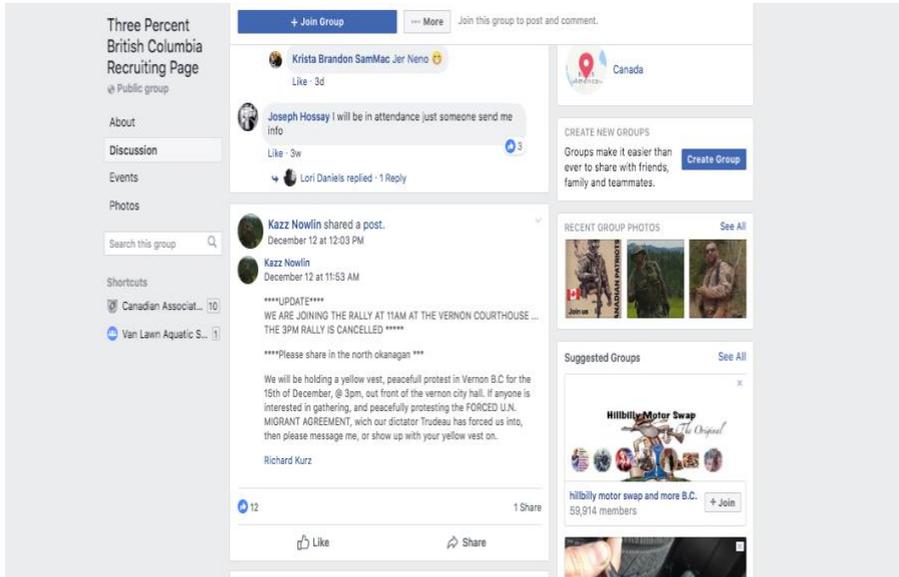


Screen grab from Soldiers of Odin - Vancouver Island Facebook page



Screen grab from Okanagan Yellow Vests Facebook page.

Photo shows how many members the group has gained in a week. Kazz Nowlin, III% National Commanding Officer is the group creator, providing a direct link to the III%.



Screen grab from Three Percent British Columbia Recruiting Facebook Group.

CBC Video of the Yellow Vest Protest in Edmonton on December 15, 2018. Wolves of Odin members were present and can be seen to have been involved in the fighting.

Appendix 2: RWE Presence at Yellow Vest Protests



Screen grab taken on December 20, 2018, from CityNews Edmonton, Yellow Vest Rally clashes with counter protestors in Edmonton. Video posted Dec 15, 2018 16:16 PM.

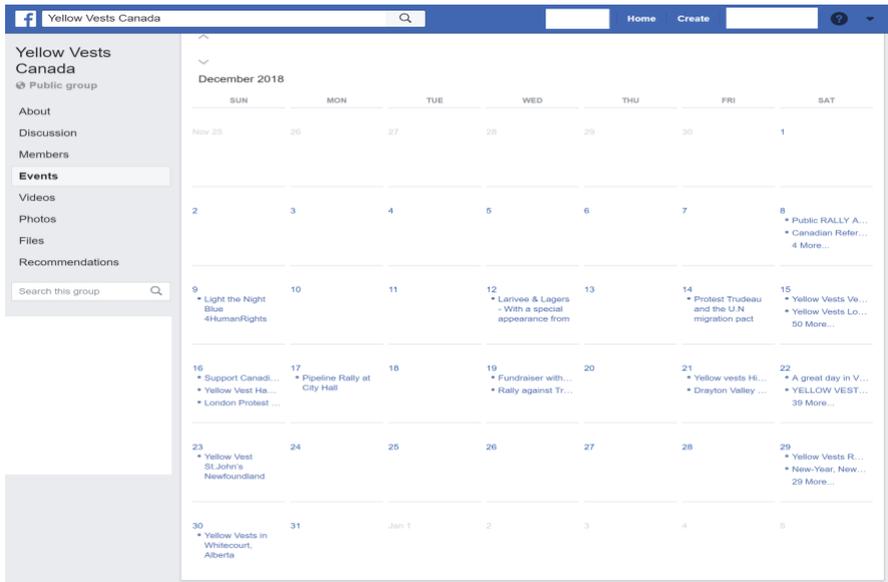
This screengrab shows Tyson Hunt, former leader of the Edmonton chapter of the Soldiers of Odin and alleged leader of the Wolves of Odin Canadian Infidels, wearing a leather vest with what can be seen as extremist symbols and imagery as well as a Wolves of Odin Canadian Infidels toque. (<https://anti-racistcanada.blogspot.com/2018/10/a-closer-look-at-what-caused-edmonton.html>)



Screen grab taken on December 20, 2018. CBC Video of the Yellow Vest Protest in Edmonton on December 15, 2018.

Wolves of Odin members were present and can be seen to have been involved in the fighting.

Appendix 3: Yellow Vest Canada Facebook Group Event Calendar



Screen grab from Yellow Vests Canada Facebook Group Event Calendar. Source:

https://www.facebook.com/groups/565213087274651/events/?source=4&action_history=null&filter=calendar