



THE NIGHT WOLVES MOTORCYCLE CLUB

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Night Wolves Motorcycle Club (NWMC) is a nationalist paramilitary biker gang financed by the Russian state (Zabyelina, 2017). The Group is active in EU and non-EU countries throughout Europe where they promote a strong right wing and pro-Russian narrative. Members of The Night Wolves have fought with pro-Russian rebels in the Ukraine, and the club maintains chapters in the Donbass and Crimea (Zabyelina, 2017). The presence of the NWMC is growing in Europe alongside other right-wing groups. The club recently expanded with a new base in Slovakia (Lawrence, 2018). Members of the group have been denied entry to and expelled from EU countries. Canadian and US governments placed sanctions on the NWMC in December 2014 for the group's support of pro-Russian rebels in Ukraine (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2014). The potential for the NWMC to foment disorder and act as a paramilitary force is a security threat to European governments and Canadian forces in the theater. This brief recommends that the NWMC be monitored for their influence on Russian minorities and nationalist groups in Eastern Europe.

PURPOSE STATEMENT

The purpose of this brief is to inform the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) of the potential security implications of the growing NWMC presence in Europe.

THE PROBLEM STATEMENT

The NWMC has been used as both a soft and hard power force by the Russian state as part of their hybrid warfare strategy to undermine Western influence in Eastern Europe (Harris, 2018, p. 2). Acting as a Russian proxy, the NWMC can create discord amongst Russian minority populations and fight along separatist groups, as seen in Ukraine (Chivvis, 2018). The Night Wolves have connections

to Russian special services and were active in recruiting for the Pro-Russian rebels in Ukraine (Lawrence, 2018). The NWMC provide security services and military training through their corporate body Wolf Holding of Security Structures (Harris, 2018). The NWMC have connections with other right-wing groups and share their Slovakian headquarters with NV Europa (Lawrence, 2018). The group's status as a civil organization makes them difficult to manage through political channels (Lawrence, 2018). The NWMC considers it part of their mission to provide a patriotic education to Russian youths (Losh, 2016). Due to the soft power influence which the NWMC provides the Russian government in Europe and the potential for the club to create and act with new separatist groups, the NWMC is, therefore, a security threat to European governments and Canadian forces abroad.

BACKGROUND AND KEY FACTS

Founded in 1989 in the Soviet Union to fight against the state, the NWMC now works for the Russian state (Zabyelina, 2017, p. 2). Between 2013 and 2015 NWMC received ~\$1 million in state funding which the group leader has confirmed (Sinelschikova, 2015). The motorcycle gang promotes a nationalist, and Orthodox Christian narrative sympathetic to Stalin, and nostalgic for the Soviet Union (Zabyelina, 2017, p. 6-7). NWMC members follow and promote the perspective that the former Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich was legitimate, and that his overthrow was due to Ukrainian fascists aided by the CIA. Consequently, club members participated in the Russian invasion of Crimea, with many also joining the pro-Russian separatists in the Donbass (Losh, 2016). The group has encountered some opposition in EU and NATO countries. The Polish government banned NWMC members from entering their country during the group's annual "victory tour" from Moscow to Berlin, and the Latvian government expelled the local chapter chief from the country (Lawrence, 2018). The NWMC report to have more than 5,000 members and branches in several European countries (Harris, 2018, p. 2). The NWMC is expanding their presence in Europe. Concerning the new NWMC base in his country, President Andrej Kiska has called the bikers' base "a serious security risk" for Slovakia (Lawrence, 2018).

The Night Wolves leader, Alexander "The Surgeon" Zaldostanov, knows President Putin personally, and the two rode together at a biker festival in 2011. In 2013 President Putin awarded a Russian Medal of Honour to Mr. Zaldostanov for his actions in Ukraine. Zaldostanov often travels to the Crimea where he

continues to promote Russian nationalism and defend the annexation (Lawrence, 2018).

KEY CONSIDERATIONS/IMPLICATIONS

Considering that the Russian government has funded the NWMC, it can be argued that they consider them an asset and may defend the group politically. Furthermore, if the NWMC is indeed active in educating youths, this may cause more difficulties in West-Russia relations as these young Russians mature. In Europe, growing NWMC activity may cause further polarization of European politics, causing difficulties for European governments. Moreover, it can also be argued that the presence of the NWMC in European countries provides the Russian government with a tool to influence politics and gather intelligence. For Canada, the NWMC may pose a danger to Canadian forces stationed in Latvia and Ukraine, as both countries have Russian minority populations, and Night Wolves chapters.

ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES TO BE CONSIDERED

Several alternative perspectives include the fact that the NWMC has provided humanitarian aid in the Donbass region and are actively working to rebuild the damaged community there. Moreover, both the Donbass region and the Crimea have large Russian populations and the NWMC has emphasized the well-being of Russian populations as a primary concern. Fundamentally, the NWMC has a focus on Christian values and believe they are a force for good.

WHAT IS NOT KNOWN

It is not known how connected the NWMC are with other groups throughout Europe and North America such as Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident (PEGIDA), the Sons of Odin or various right-wing political parties. It is also not known how much influence the NWMC has over the Russian speaking minorities in Eastern Europe. There is difficulty in determining how much weight the NWMC could add to new separatist movements in Eastern Europe. Lastly, the extent to which the NWMC's nationalistic education of Russian youths will affect future West-Russia relations is uncertain.

NEXT STEPS

Clear next steps to undertake are community impact assessments in Eastern Europe, particularly in Russian speaking communities. As well as monitor connections between NWMC and other right-wing groups in Europe.

AVAILABLE OPTIONS

Options available to address the issue are first to publicize the connection between the Night Wolves and the Russian Government more strongly. This approach rests on the assumption that if populations know that the NWMC are a tool of the Russian state, their narrative could be undermined. Second, Night Wolves activity in Europe should be monitored for further developments and intelligence should be shared among partner countries as this is a transnational issue. Third, NATO should release a joint statement about NWMC activities with pro-Russian rebels in Ukraine. Fourth, it would be proactive to provide Russian speakers with alternative media sources to Russian state media in their language. Fifth, NATO ought to continue transparency of operations to counteract Russian propaganda. Lastly, Canada should also send a clear message about the Canadian presence in Ukraine and monitor nationalist groups at home for similar trends to the NWMC.

RECOMMENDATION AND JUSTIFICATION

It is recommended that the actions of the NWMC continue to be monitored in Eastern Europe and the Baltics. It is possible the group will attempt to create dissent amongst Russian minorities. It is also recommended that NATO and other Western militaries remain as transparent as possible about their activities to avoid causing animosity or suspicion amongst populations in Eastern Europe.

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