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*Russia's Night Wolves, Migrating Memory and  
Europe's Eastern Frontier*

**Abstract**

The article examines the controversy triggered by the “Victory Tour” of Russia’s high-profile biker organization, the Night Wolves, to mark the 70th anniversary of the Soviet Union’s defeat of Nazi Germany. The tour provoked important questions about the relationship between European borders and the politics of World War II commemoration. The article argues that the international public discourse around the Night Wolves illuminates how state borders are being transformed both as hard, territorialized borders and as “soft,” symbolic boundaries. The analysis compares how print and online media in Russia, Poland, and Germany framed the Night Wolves’ tour across Europe. It emphasizes the construction of borders as a narrative project and maps the symbolic boundary-drawing strategies mobilized by various actors. It shows how cross-border commemorative tours can serve as a tool of transnational memory politics that shapes the very meaning and salience of state borders and regional divisions.

*Keywords:* Borders; Memory Politics; Transnational memory; Nationalism; Eastern Europe

*Introduction*

ON APRIL 27, 2015 a group of about two dozen Russian bikers were stopped at the border check point in Brest/Terespol between Poland and Belarus. Despite having valid visas to the European Union, they were denied entry to Poland and hence to the European Union. Polish

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*European Journal of Sociology*, 62, 1 (2021), pp. 71–103—0003-9756/21/0000-900\$07.50per art + \$0.10 per page

© *European Journal of Sociology* 2021. doi: [10.1017/S0003975621000047](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975621000047)

authorities argued that the decision was “not political”; it was motivated simply by the lack of “proper documentation” regarding the details of the bikers’ trip. As a result, the bikers, members of Russia’s largest motorcycle club, the Night Wolves (*Ночные волки*) could not continue their “Victory Tour,” a commemorative trip from Moscow to Berlin to mark the 70th anniversary of Victory Day (May 9), the end of World War II and the Soviet Union’s defeat of Nazi Germany. This incident marked the beginning of an international controversy that reverberated through large swathes of Europe, especially countries along the planned route such as Poland, Germany, and Russia.

The Night Wolves’ “Victory Tour” divided European public opinion, raising important questions about the relationship between European borders and the Europe-wide politics of World War II commemoration. It also unfolded at a time when European borders were under increasing strain due to multiple factors: internal and external migration pressures, and a pending Brexit. These developments have in fact induced the most significant reordering of borders in Europe since the last major wave of European Union enlargement in 2004. The international public debate around the Night Wolves highlights important aspects of this process, as it helps to understand how European borders are being transformed both as hard, territorialized borders and as “soft,” symbolic boundaries both within and outside the European Union. Our research focuses on the symbolic struggles over the borders and boundaries that delineate Europe, especially its unsettled Eastern frontier, in order to provide insight into the more general dynamics that underlie the reconfiguration of borders, and thereby the territorialization of cultural differences.

The analysis is based on a systematic comparison of print and online news media in Russia, Poland, and Germany, which were the key countries affected by the tour and in which significant border disputes over the entry of the bikers ensued. Our attention to news media relies on the premise that media is not merely a space of passive representation but rather a site of struggle for controlling narratives about events [Schudson 2011; Wagner-Pacifici 1986]. We compare and contrast the ways in which media in different countries framed and explained the Night Wolves’ tour across Europe, centering on the construction of borders as a narrative project and mapping the symbolic boundary drawing strategies mobilized by various actors. Our research shows that the Russian bikers’ commemorative rally was met by strong resistance from German and Polish media. In the context of rising nationalism and geopolitical tensions, the bikers’ physical movement over historically

contested borders deeply politicized the rally. Polish media considered the tour integral to the tactical repertoire of Russia's contemporary "hybrid war" while German sources saw it as a way of instrumentalizing World War II for Russian propaganda. Russians accused the European Union of applying double moral standards when refusing entry to the bikers who carried valid visas.

Our study examines memory politics from a transnational perspective, focusing on "travelling memory" and thereby moving beyond nation-state centered perspectives [Assmann 2014; Erll 2011; Wimmer and Schiller 2002]. The case study of the Night Wolves' Victory Tour demonstrates how memory politics can be mobilized through a transnational strategy of cross-border tours and is closely intertwined with the reconfiguration of symbolic and territorial boundaries [Lamont and Molnár 2002]. In addition, by concentrating on the Night Wolves—an ambiguous non-governmental organization—the analysis sheds light on the role of illiberal civic groups in shaping new forms of nationalism and disseminating political propaganda.

The paper begins by developing an analytical framework that combines theoretical insights from literatures on transnational mnemonic practices, borders and boundaries, and civil society to analyze how memory politics travels across borders and why this matters. It also includes a detailed description of the sources, data and methods of our analysis. The paper proceeds to offer a short history of the Night Wolves as a non-governmental organization, its relationship to the Russian government, and its aims with the anniversary Victory Tour from Moscow to Berlin. The remaining sections of the paper systematically compare the news coverage of the Victory Tour in Poland, Germany and Russia while also drawing on the Night Wolves' own account of the rally to tease out the narrative frames that delineate Europe's Eastern frontier.

### *The Politics of Migrating Memory*

May 9, Victory Day, is undoubtedly Russia's leading holiday in commemorating World War II, or the Great Patriotic War, as Russians call it.<sup>1</sup> It is an iconic event and the ongoing commemoration of World War II "serves as a morality tale of suffering and redemption and a

<sup>1</sup> The end of World War II is commemorated on May 8 in Germany because the signing of Nazi Germany's unconditional

surrender took place on the evening of May 8, which was already May 9 in Russia. May 8 was an important but ambivalent holiday

foundation myth” for the Russian nation [Wood 2011].<sup>2</sup> It remains the last major holiday that has not been compromised by its celebration in the Communist period and continues to evoke and cement national unity. It also affirms the greatness of Russia and its importance for European history while emphasizing a continuity with Soviet history and the unity of the Soviet population. As Serguei Oushakine notes, memories of wartime suffering in Russia constitute “a performative rather than a descriptive device,” eliciting a fundamentally emotional response and a collective sense of belonging [Oushakine 2009: 84].

However, remembering World War II and the defeat of Nazi Germany is not merely a Russian but a more expansive supra-national affair that involves post-Soviet and European societies, among others. Yet, while a broad consensus has gradually developed in Europe, and especially within the European Union, over a cosmopolitan memory of the Holocaust [Galai 2019; Kucia 2016; Levy and Sznajder 2002], the memory of World War II remains fragmented and fraught with political tensions among nations [Assmann 2014; Mälksoo 2009; Siddi 2017; Sierp 2014; Zubrzycki and Woźny 2020]. World War II memories have indeed become a discursive battlefield that amplifies tensions about current affairs, especially between Russia and post-communist countries in Eastern Europe [Siddi 2017].

The physical traces of the movement of the Russian Army in World War II—for instance, in the form of Soviet war memorials—are scattered across Europe [Gabowitsch 2017]. Not surprisingly, the meanings of these sites as well as local and national mnemonic practices around them have been diverse and contested [Troebst 2005].<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Russian and local understandings of these sites have often been at odds with each other. When non-governmental groups, such as the Night Wolves, emerge whose mission calls for regularly visiting memorial sites and tending to the graves of fallen Soviet soldiers beyond the borders of Russia, they expose these cross-border tensions and discrepancies.

The Night Wolves are also far from being a uniquely Russian phenomenon. They exemplify a larger trend of mnemonic movements that emerge in contested borderlands. The Ukrainian “Bandera cyclists,” for instance, frequent South Eastern Poland following in the footsteps of

throughout the history of the Federal Republic of Germany [see OLICK 1999]. In Poland the same celebrations were held on May 9 until 2015 when the government decided to change the date to May 8, so as not to celebrate on the same day as Russia.

<sup>2</sup> On the sacralization of the Great Patriotic War in Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia, see TUMARKIN 1994.

<sup>3</sup> On contested memories in Eastern Europe more broadly, see BERNHARD and KUBIK 2014.

Stepan Bandera, the controversial leader and chief ideologue of Ukrainian nationalism and ardent supporter of fascism, provoking Polish border guards [Wojakowski 2014]. Polish bikers of the annual Katyń rally pass through Western Ukraine, which they simply consider *Kresy*, “Poland’s Eastern Borderlands.” Similarly, the “Goyim Riders,” a Hungarian biker group, tour through Transylvania (Romania) and Slovakia in areas that belonged to Hungary before World War I to symbolically reclaim these territories as part of Hungary [Molnár 2016].

Mobility and circulation are intrinsic to the activities of these organizations and, as we will show, they can also be employed as political strategies, especially when they involve movement across national borders. These groups literally become transnational agents of memory: they set memory in motion, continually transporting it across and beyond territorial and social borders. Moreover, spatial circulation invokes memory politics in the context of rising nationalism and geopolitical conflicts, due in large part to the contested nature and history of the borders that these groups traverse. They also draw attention to the infrastructural aspects of mobility including vehicles, roads and routes as mobile sites of power and contestation that have been largely overlooked in the study of border controversies and transnational memory politics [Walters 2015].

Research into memory politics turned its attention to the spatial and physical aspects of cultural memory, inspired largely by Pierre Nora’s encyclopedic *Les Lieux de Mémoire* [Nora 1996-1998]. His “sites of memory” approach emphasized how memory is connected to objects, materials, and physical and tangible locations (e.g., museums, archives, memorials, flags, or even a color like the red of leftist politics). Nevertheless, this scholarship is still dominated by a nation-centered perspective, assuming that memory, ethnicity, territory and the nation state are isomorphic and neglecting the history of colonialism, disputed borders, multiethnic areas, or the place of immigrant and diaspora communities in shaping mnemonic practices [Brown 2005; Pisano and Simonyi 2016].

The transnational turn in the study of memory politics has brought a sharp break with the nation-state framework to stress the multidirectionality and mobility of mnemonic practices [e.g., Assmann 2014; Palmberger and Tošić 2016; Rothberg 2009; Wüstenberg 2019]. Nomads, migrants, refugees, diaspora members, and exiled populations emerged as key “mnemonic actors” who mobilize representations of the past through the local and global circulation of commemorative practices. As Astrid Erll argues, studying “travelling memory” through reconstructing its routes exposes the incongruity between territory, nation

and culture, and calls attention to the “border-transcending dimensions of remembering and forgetting” [Erl 2011: 15].

Research on mnemonic movements, however, has centered chiefly on the transnational circulation of ideas, representations and conceptual frames rather than on spatial practices that involve actual physical movement.<sup>4</sup> Even less attention has been given to how mnemonic agents, including the Night Wolves, turn to spatial practices such as cross-border commemorative tours as a deliberate strategy to politicize collective memory in tense geopolitical contexts.

The circulation of symbols across time and space can be enlisted to challenge existing territorial borders and symbolic boundaries. Mnemonic practices that cross borders are in fact often directed at redrawing boundaries. Klaus Eder distinguishes between “hard” and “soft” borders, the former denoting “institutionalized borders written down in legal text” and the latter being “encoded in other types of texts indicating a pre-institutional social reality, the reality of images of what Europe is and who are the Europeans and who are not” [Eder 2006: 256].<sup>5</sup> Soft borders, i.e. boundaries, often reproduce and naturalize the social fact of hard borders. But these symbolic forms can also become part of political struggles over hard borders, especially when institutional borders come under pressure, as we saw during the migration crisis in 2015 or the Brexit vote in 2016 and its mighty repercussions.

The opening of political struggles over borders and the ensuing destabilization renders the discursive construction of boundaries all the more important. Contemporary discourses on the borders of Europe are also shaped by the path dependency of historically constructed mental maps, most importantly a north-south and east-west axis of cultural demarcation [Bottici and Challand 2013; Eder 2006]. The imaginary of the East-West divide can be traced back to antiquity while the North-South axis emerged in the late medieval and early modern period. This was followed by the rise of a moderate middle region between the northern and southern extremes before “the return of a strongly normative East-West divide” in the 18th and 19th centuries [Mishkova and Trencsényi 2017: 3]. Narrative projects of boundary construction and

<sup>4</sup> A notable exception is a special issue collection edited by WHITE and BUCHHEIM 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Eder’s distinction between hard and soft borders mirrors Lamont and Molnár’s general distinction between social and symbolic boundaries. Social boundaries are “objectified

forms of social differences” while “symbolic boundaries are conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space” [LAMONT and MOLNÁR 2002: 168].

transgression have similarly been entangled with memories of war and conflict, producing emotionally charged narratives.

The East-West axis, a persistent structural trope of European division, is intimately tied to the experience of the Eastern border as a “frontier” [Brown 2005]. Defining the limits of these Eastern borderlands has always been coupled with discourses of othering [Schenk 2017; Wolff 1994]. The East is commonly represented by Russia and is associated with a sense of threat [Neumann 1999]. Russia has been treated as one of Europe’s others<sup>6</sup>, an ambiguous place on Europe’s border, hovering between Asia and Europe [Bassin 1991; Neumann 1999; Wolff 1994]. In turn, representations of Europe are also linked to the idea of the Russian other. The case of the Night Wolves’ anniversary—and since 2015 annually recurring—commemorative tour is therefore an important narrative project of boundary transgression, occurring in a broader context in which various European borders are reproduced and challenged in increasingly pressing ways.

Finally, the Night Wolves are interesting as carriers of commemorative practices and boundary narratives because they are not overtly political and governmental agents but representatives of the “civil” sphere. Scholars of transnational memory politics have chiefly examined civil society actors to show how grassroots activism contributes to the vitality of democratic institutionalism and fosters reconciliation [e.g., Schwelling 2012; Wüstenberg 2017]. But, despite recognizing the heterogeneous political character of civil society, little attention has been paid to the mnemonic agency of civic actors who are not necessarily pursuing democratic goals.

The Night Wolves, no doubt, defy easy categorization as a non-governmental organization. The biker group’s direct links to elite governmental circles in Russia have received ample public attention but, in legal terms, they are a civil society organization. They are simultaneously quasi-independent from and quasi-dependent on the Russian government. The group emerged as part of a countercultural wave in the 1980s inspired by biker culture in the United States and had a peculiar trajectory as an organization, as we elaborate later. The bikers’ assumed and actual relationship to Russia’s official politics, however, always haunts the group and colors the reception of their activities. But exactly for this reason, the group reflects a major transformation in civil society-government relations that is currently taking place in many countries, especially in Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans, most

<sup>6</sup> Some of the others being Turkey [Neumann 1999] or the Balkans [Todorova 1997].

prominently in Turkey. Some argue that this reconfiguration can actually be situated within a global trend of “backlash against democracy promotion” through NGOS supported predominantly by the United States [Carothers 2006].

The existence of a civil society, funded and molded by North American and Western European agencies, was widely accepted and understood as necessary in facilitating the democratization process in Russia and other post-communist countries throughout the 1990s [Aksartova 2005]. But, starting in Russia in the early 2000s, the perception of western involvement in civil society changed decisively: it increasingly became seen as a form of foreign interference. As a countermove, governments began introducing measures to reclaim the civil sphere and promote a new “vision of civil society coupled to state sovereignty” [Hemment 2012: 235]. This entailed putting in place restrictions on existing—and especially foreign funded—NGOs; establishing government-run and controlled organizations; and providing more support for civic groups whose mission was in line with the government’s new mandate for civil society to foster national interests [Hemment 2012; Molnár 2016]. The example of the Night Wolves offers insight into this larger recoupling process that ties civic organizations to the state and to reaffirmations of national sovereignty.

### *Data and Methods*

Our analysis draws on two main sources of data. The first source, which constitutes the basis of our comparative analysis, comprises primarily national daily newspapers, key weekly news magazines, and online news portals in Poland, Germany and Russia. In each country we gathered all the articles that dealt with the Night Wolves’ anniversary victory tour in 2015 in every major national newspaper and weekly news magazines. This way we collected and analyzed 421 articles in 18 newspapers in Poland, 324 articles in 19 newspapers in Germany, and 230 articles in 14 newspapers in Russia.

We decided to focus on mainstream news media for three principal reasons. First, the newspapers in question are still the main sources of news consumption in the examined countries and have the largest readership. Exclusively online news portals (e.g., Huffington Post, BuzzFeed or Breitbart news) are not as common in Poland and Germany as they are in the United States. Instead, readers’ Internet-based news consumption



is dominated by the online platforms of print newspapers, which have all been notably expanded in the last ten years [Newman, Levy and Nielsen 2015]. In Russia, where mainstream media is under tighter government control and press freedom is more constrained, online news portals do play a relatively more significant role. Therefore, we added the most important online news portal [*slon.ru*, renamed *republic.ru* in 2016] to the list of key news sources. Second, we included major national newspapers from each country to cover the full political spectrum in that country, allowing us to discern differences in the representation of the Night Wolves' victory tour depending on the political orientation of the news source.<sup>7</sup> A full list of newspapers is available upon request. Third, the highly standardized format of traditional newspapers ensures the comparability of our data across the three countries.

The second data source includes two online platforms that have been crucial to the self-presentation of the Night Wolves: the group's social networking site on *vkontakte*, the Russian equivalent of Facebook, and their diary of the 2015 victory tour on *LiveJournal*, a popular Russian language blog platform. We analyzed these sources while also incorporating published interviews with group members and visual material from the group's website. We complemented our data with information from online organizational and government websites and secondary print sources, particularly in reconstructing the history of the Night Wolves.<sup>8</sup>

The content analysis of the news articles and online sources relied on an inductive, open reading and coding strategy in accordance with a grounded theory approach [Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2014]. We read the coverage in each national press separately, searching for the dominant themes that framed the cross-country rally of Russian bikers. We compared the list of themes that emerged from the analysis of the national presses and identified the most prominent categories across the cases: the aims of the victory tour; the identity and intentions of the Night Wolves; and conflicts over border crossings. We then went back to the articles to deepen the content analysis around these themes. In each case, we read the articles in the original language and all translations are our own.

While we were attentive to variation in interpretive frames among media sources within each country, our analysis concentrates on the main

<sup>7</sup> There are no significant overlaps in the ownership of the examined media outlets across these countries that could potentially influence reporting.

<sup>8</sup> Ethnographic observations from the Night Wolves 2017 tour at the Soviet War Memorial in Treptower Park, Berlin, the final destination of the tour, also supplement the analysis.

cross-country differences in making sense of the Night Wolves' victory tour from Moscow to Berlin, as these differences proved to be most salient.

*The Night Wolves: More than a Biker Group*

The origins of Russia's largest and best-known motorcycle club can be traced back to the early 1980s, to the gradually loosening political climate in Russia that brought about perestroika and the eventual demise of the USSR. The group started off as a loose, informal gathering of Western rock music, heavy metal, and American biker culture enthusiasts who rode around Moscow in their Soviet era Dnepr, Jawa and Vokshod motorcycles, frequented illegal rock concerts, provided security for bands and ran protection rackets.<sup>9</sup> In the mid-1980s, Alexander Zaldostanov, a young dental surgeon joined the group and soon became its charismatic leader, calling himself "the surgeon." Throughout the 1980s, the Night Wolves were an anti-Soviet, anti-communist, pro-freedom, and by association pro-American fringe subculture.<sup>10</sup>

Under Zaldostanov's leadership, the Night Wolves developed into a more formal organization. They were officially registered as a civil society organization—a sports club—on May 31, 1989 under the name "Night Wolves Motorcycle Club Russia." In 1992, Zaldostanov opened the rock club, Sexton, in Moscow's Mnyovniki district, modeled on his old hang-out in West Berlin where he was first exposed to biker culture. From the mid-1990s, they were also engaged in various commercial activities, including a tattoo parlor, a "Wolf Wear" clothing line, a motorcycle engineering and manufacturing company called "Wolf Engineering," in addition to operating a bike shop and continuing to provide security services to various businesses in Moscow [Tabor 2015].

The organization evolved from a loose gathering of anti-communist, anti-authority rebels to a pro-government political militia whose mission now centers on promoting Russian patriotism [Harris 2020; Laruelle 2019; Zabyelina 2017]. Although the Night Wolves initially identified with so-called outlaw, "one-percenter bikers" like Hells Angels, Bandidos MC or Outlaws MS, since the 2000s they have increasingly

<sup>9</sup> "Nochnye Volki. Istoriya" [<http://www.nightwolves.ru/nw/about/history.php>, accessed December 8, 2020].

<sup>10</sup> There is, however, little academic research on them, as the study of post-Soviet subcultures focuses on youth cultures, see PILKINGTON 1994.

distanced themselves from Western motorcycle subcultures. They have recently argued that the “romantic delusion” of their outlaw culture was propagated mainly by Western journalists.<sup>11</sup>

The Night Wolves had first come into contact with the Kremlin while trying to lobby for government support for their patriotic bike shows [Pomerantsev 2013]. The bike shows—a curious blend of bike stunts, Slavic fairytales, patriotic pageantry and pyrotechnics—began in the 1990s with the so-called “Mad Max Shows” in Kaliningrad, Russia. Since 2013 their activity has also involved youth education, especially the anti-Western New Year Patriotic Children Spectacle generously supported by a governmental grant. The shows highlight their uncanny ability to combine seemingly incompatible cultural and ideological motifs: Orthodox faith with Stalin’s cult, anti-American values with the devotion to Western music and Harley-Davidson motorcycles.

Widespread rumors about direct political links between the Kremlin and the Night Wolves were substantiated in a report published in 2015 by Alexei Navalny, a prominent Russian anti-corruption activist. The report traced more than 56 million rubles (approximately USD 1.1 million) that were channeled to the Night Wolves in the form of various governmental grants.<sup>12</sup> Through an elaborate network of interlinked organizations, the Night Wolves managed to gather state financial support for a wide range of activities: the above mentioned children’s spectacle, the production of patriotic videos, international bike shows in Sevastopol, the organization of bike rallies called “Roads of Friendship,” and even various research projects investigating the role of biker culture in Russian traditions, spirituality and patriotism.<sup>13</sup> The Night Wolves have always vehemently denied the political character of the organization, stressing that the club is “not a political party but a civic association. It works with veterans and prisoners. It supports monasteries. The club is not interested in politics—that’s for political parties. We are working in the civic sphere”.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, the Night Wolves have been widely criticized both abroad and by Russian anti-government activists for their involvement in the violent Ukrainian conflict and for organizing an Anti-Maidan movement which aims to block any kind of anti-government protests

<sup>11</sup> [http://vk.com/topic-3519447\\_31521614](http://vk.com/topic-3519447_31521614).

<sup>12</sup> “Biudzhethnye dengi “Nochnykh Volkov:” v etoi kosmetichke grantov na 56 mln rub” [<https://navalny.com/p/4228/>, accessed December 8, 2020].

<sup>13</sup> The list of various government grants received by Night Wolves and associated organizations can be found at: <https://grants.oprf.ru/grants>, accessed November 10, 2016.

<sup>14</sup> <http://nightwolves.ru/nw/gallery/2325>.

[Parfitt 2015]. And indeed, club members were present at the referendum on the Russian annexation of Crimea in Sevastopol and received a medal (“For the Return of Crimea”) from Putin for helping to suppress “riots” on the peninsula. The Night Wolves were also involved in developing an “All-Russian Patriotic Youth Center” in Crimea that offers youth training in operating rifles, heavy weaponry, wrestling, water sports, running and patriotic education.<sup>15</sup> As a result of the Night Wolves’ role in Ukraine, Zaldostanov has been placed on an international sanctions list in the US (since December 2014) and in Canada (since 2015).

Despite all the controversy surrounding the group, membership grew steadily over the years, reaching approximately 5,000 today. The Night Wolves opened chapters in forty cities in Russia and in several Eastern European and Balkan countries including Bulgaria, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia and Ukraine.

Bikers present themselves on their social media platforms as the largest and most powerful biker club in Russia. They see themselves as a club of patriots that will be able to unite all Russian and Slavic societies through “selfless motorcycling fraternity.”<sup>16</sup> The increasing importance of commemorations of the Great Patriotic War bolsters the Night Wolves’ self-image as true Russian patriots. They also frequently portray themselves on their *vkontakte* site with World War II veterans and participate in major state commemorations. In 2012 they organized a “Great Patriotic War” themed show in Sevastopol and, in 2013, the first bike rally, entitled “We won’t abandon our cities” in Volgograd. Zaldostanov consequently referred to the city by its old name—Stalingrad—underscoring the strong Soviet and particularly Stalinist nostalgia of the group.<sup>17</sup>

The so-called “Victory Tour,” which we analyze in the following sections, is one of their signature activities. It is organized annually and involves a motorcycle convoy travelling across Europe from Moscow to Berlin in the footsteps of the Soviet Army during World War II, as shown on their map in Figure 1. The “2015 Victory Tour” was the very first of these tours, a special anniversary rally to mark the 70th jubilee of Russia’s victory over Nazi Germany. The Night Wolves documented the tour on their *LiveJournal* blog site. Between April 26 and May 9, they created 160 posts related to the rally while using their *vkontakte* and Facebook

<sup>15</sup> See a description and images of the camp on the Night Wolves website, <http://nightwolves.ru/rm/news/4088/>, accessed December 8, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.nightwolves.ru/nw/about/about.php>, accessed March 10, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Stalingrad was also a key battle site in World War II.

sites to disseminate additional material. This first tour also marked the beginning of the Night Wolves' expanding use of social media for publicity, which has gradually shifted from *LiveJournal* to *vkontakte*.

In their account, they claim that the Victory Tour was inspired by the example of Nadezhda Kirillova, a World War II veteran they met in 2006, who rode to Berlin on an M-72 motorcycle with the Ural Volunteer Tank Corps.<sup>18</sup> The tour was to be dedicated to the memory of World War II veterans and the sacrifices of Red Army soldiers. This is why the principal proposed stops along the route included cemeteries of Red Army soldiers, Soviet war memorials, and World War II memorial complexes. Club members would visit these places, lay flowers and pay their respects. Drawing on the experience of the first tour, the Night Wolves also set up the "Routes of Victory Project" in 2016, which was entrusted with the preparations for the annual victory tours.<sup>19</sup> Besides reporting on the tours and related activities (youth events, visits to memorials), the site also includes the official anthem of the group as well as a webshop with victory tour-themed souvenirs.

Yet, despite its stated peaceful commemorative intent, the 2015 Victory Tour attracted widespread media attention and considerable controversy across the countries affected by the tour. Of particular interest are the differences in the ways in which media outlets in Poland, Germany, and Russia reported the event and how they evaluated its political significance.

### *Border Crossings and East-West Mobility*

The theme that dominated news coverage on the Night Wolves' Victory Tour was the movement of the bikers across various national borders in Central Europe (Figure 1). In fact, border crossings assumed immense symbolic significance in the process as they came to demonstrate who wields more power over territory and movement. Border crossings were crucial moments during which the Night Wolves could be located, checked and potentially stopped. Hence, the depiction of border crossings, the rendering of arguments to justify entry bans, and the questioning of the legitimacy of entry bans were closely coupled with local media's understanding about who has the authority—and the actual

<sup>18</sup> <http://nightwolves-ru.livejournal.com>, accessed April 27, 2015.

<sup>19</sup> <http://nightwolves-dp.ru/about>.

FIGURE 1  
 “Commemorative motorcycle rally: Routes of Victory”—The Night Wolves’  
 route map of the Victory Tour<sup>20</sup>. [Source: [https://vk.com/  
 event117685152?z=photo-117685152\\_406651410%2Falbum-  
 117685152\\_00%2Frev](https://vk.com/event117685152?z=photo-117685152_406651410%2Falbum-117685152_00%2Frev)].



power—to control borders. The coverage of the Night Wolves’ failed and successful border crossings in Central Europe became an important commentary on who is really in control of European borders.

Also striking were the differences among Polish, German, and Russian media sources in defining the aims and identifying the reasons for and the political significance of the Victory Tour. Our analysis of this media discourse is based on highlighting and explaining these differences as well as showing how these competing understandings contribute to the construction and maintenance of symbolic boundaries and physical borders in Europe.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> The route map dates from 2016 as the Night Wolves did not yet publish a map on their social media sites in 2015. However, the 2016 tour followed the same route as in 2015.

<sup>21</sup> This is also why we, at times, refer to the “German” or “Polish” media without implying that national media sources can be reduced to a uniform position on the issue.

*The true purpose of the victory tour: provocation, security threat or commemoration?*

The respective national presses saw the underlying aims of the Night Wolves' victory tour in a vastly different light. The Polish press lies at one end of the spectrum, declaring the victory tour an outright political *provocation* by Putin's Russia. At the other end, we find the Russian interpretation, describing the objectives of the tour as benign *commemoration* and confounded by the hostility with which it was greeted in the affected countries. In between the two poles lies the German media's position according to which the victory tour amounts to a *security threat* but not as imminent a threat as it appears to the Poles. In the following, we elaborate on these conflicting visions of the ultimate purpose of the Night Wolves' rally across Central Europe.

Polish media invariably described the Victory Tour as a *provocation* (*provokacja*) or more precisely as "Putin's provocation." Newspapers from the most liberal to the most conservative depicted different hypothetical but plausible scenarios that could unfold as a provocation. For example, if the Night Wolves entered Poland and were attacked by Polish nationalists, Russia would certainly be keen on using this against Poland. Alternatively, if Poland refused the bikers entry to the country, Russia would accuse the government of breaching European Union law. Several politicians actually asked newspapers to stop reporting the story of the rally, arguing that the very fact that newspapers were obsessively covering the controversies surrounding the rally could be interpreted as a Russian provocation and a political victory for Putin. Minor differences between liberal and conservative newspapers were primarily concerned with the extent to which they saw the Night Wolves' rally as a calculated provocation. Liberal and leftist papers argued that right-wing media had created an overblown hysteria that made it all the more likely that some actual provocation would occur if the Night Wolves were allowed to pass through Poland [Ciastoch 2015]. Tensions around the rally were also aggravated by the looming Polish presidential and parliamentary elections of 2015. But the nearly complete media consensus—that the "Victory Tour" was a vehicle for political provocation—underscored the understanding of the Night Wolves as a proxy for what Polish analysts call Putin's "hybrid war."<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> The concept of hybrid warfare became widely used in Poland after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. It refers to the varied and expanding repertoire of irregular and concealed techniques (e.g., irregular military

groups, misinformation campaigns, hacking) employed by Russia to intervene in the internal affairs of other states. For a more comprehensive analysis, see HARRIS 2020; LANOSZKA 2016.

German reporting clearly drew on and echoed Polish coverage although the tone was less frantic and agitated. Nevertheless, news outlets across the political spectrum agreed that the objectives of the victory tour were dubious. Consequently, the Night Wolves as a group presented a *public safety threat*. Eventually, this interpretation became the ground on which the Schengen visas of the Russian bikers to enter the EU were annulled by the German government. The *Bild Zeitung*, one of the largest circulation tabloid newspapers in Germany, quoted German government officials who asserted that:

There is a risk of not being able to maintain public safety. Aside from that, the Federal Government opposes “any instrumentalization of the immeasurable suffering of the victims and the resistance against the Nazi regime,” said the State Department and the Federal Ministry of Interior in a joint statement [*Bild.de* 2015a].

Yet, although German media perceived the Night Wolves rally as a security threat that required a firm response, the threat was seen as more distant and abstract than in the case of Poland—a legal technicality rather than a cunning political tactic deliberately provoking Polish society.

In sharp contrast, Russian media expressed bafflement that news coverage across Europe attributed ulterior motives to the bikers, even though it should have been evident that the main objective of the Night Wolves’ rally was *commemoration*. Russian sources suggested that the bikers’ Victory Tour was in fact the second most important commemorative act following the monumental Victory Day military parade on Moscow’s Red Square. Bikers were simply wanted to pay respect to the memory and graves of their grandfathers. The view of the Russian media largely coincided with the perspective of the Night Wolves themselves. In fact, Russian papers often drew on information posted to the Night Wolves’ *LiveJournal* and *vkontakte* sites and published interviews with club members. For instance, *Komsomol’skaia Pravda*, the widely read nationwide tabloid daily newspaper, quoted the bikers’ leader, Alexander Zaldostanov:

We are going on a peaceful mission; we are going to cemeteries. And we are met by military in bullet-proof vests. They cancelled our visas and denied us entrance because of the idea of this rally. I am like bin Laden for them because I want to show my respect to graves [Grishin 2015].

### *Controlling the mobility of Night Wolves: enacting symbolic boundaries*

Varying perceptions of the objectives and intentions of the Russian bikers translated into different courses of action across the affected



countries, as well as diverging explanations and justifications for containing the mobility of this idiosyncratic migrant squad.

The Polish response followed from the conviction that the victory tour was a provocation, a calculated campaign reflecting Russia's foreign policy vis-à-vis Poland: Putin's so-called "hybrid war." Several Polish journalists emphasized that "various propaganda actions conducted by advocates of a Russian version of World War II can be understood within the framework of the so-called hybrid politics of the Kremlin. This time, however, this understanding was reinforced not with the help of rebels [i.e., Russian minorities in Eastern Ukraine fighting against the Ukrainian government] and tanks but with a specific type of civil society" [Potocki and Parafianowicz 2015]. In this sense, the journalists continued, Russian bikers were just another instrument of a new technology of power deployed by Russia, often proceeding through the mobilization of seemingly democratic practices outside Russia's borders.

Examples of this tactic include the setting up of new types of NGOs dedicated to the protection of minority rights of ethnic Russians in countries like Moldova or Latvia. Organizations such as the "Native Language" NGO in Latvia, which was founded to protect the use of Russian as a minority language, were allegedly created to protect minority rights. However, they in fact serve Russian interests by forging closer ties to Russia. In this context, the term "Russian" is understood as a civilizing concept derived from the idea of *Russkiy Mir* (Russian world) that is linked to Russia's victory in the "Great Patriotic War," i.e. World War II. The notion of *Russkiy Mir* then becomes a cultural tool of pan-Russian nationalism aiming to bring together and unite all lands inhabited by Russian-speaking populations under the "scepter of a two-headed eagle" (referring to Russia's coat of arms based on the Russian imperial coat of arms restored in 1993). If Western Europe naively continued to view such practices as simply an effort to protect the fundamental rights of minority language users, then it would create a serious security vulnerability—Polish journalists argued.

In a related vein, the most influential Polish newspapers such as *Rzeczpospolita* and *Gazeta Wyborcza* cited the popular politician Paweł Kowal—a leader of the central-right Polska Razem party—who warned that the Night Wolves' victory tour was alarming because "symbolic violence sows the seeds of serious violence" [*Rzeczpospolita* 2015]. Along this line, *Fakt*, a popular tabloid-style newspaper openly called the rally an "attack on Poland" [*Fakt24.pl* 2015]. The newspaper went on to compare the Night Wolves to Adolf Hitler, suggesting that this type of politics should be nipped in the bud. The thesis that symbolic violence

would escalate was also seen to be verified by the fact that the Night Wolves were depicted as key organizers of Russian anti-Maidan efforts in Ukraine, an official movement aimed at preventing any kind of “color revolution”<sup>23</sup> and blocking liberal opposition.

Undoubtedly, the Night Wolves’ direct involvement in Russia’s forceful territorial expansion in Crimea and Ukraine was identified as a clear warning sign that their intentions when crossing Russian borders were not innocent. Polish media highlighted this fact as the main reason why the Russian motorcade should not be allowed to cross into Poland. For instance, the main conservative-liberal economic-legal daily, *Rzeczpospolita*, stressed that “[the Night Wolves] were in Crimea already before the Russian annexation. They were in Donbass (Eastern Ukraine), and now they are killing and ransacking the cities controlled by Russians” [Kalinowska and Pieńkowski 2015]. It suggested that the Night Wolves’ active involvement in the Ukrainian conflict not only indicated that the bikers were literally carriers of Putin’s aggressive and violent politics, but it was also an omen that similar incidents could occur in Poland. The liberal daily, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, added to this argument that the United States and Canada both applied travel sanctions against Zaldostanov, the Night Wolves’ leader, reinforcing the suspicion that the bikers represent a serious security threat.<sup>24</sup>

The general portrayal of the Night Wolves across the Polish media landscape made it obvious that the group was not perceived as an independent civic association but as an agent of Vladimir Putin and his politics. Newspapers universally referred to the bikers as “Putin’s Night Wolves,” “Putin’s bikers,” or the “Wolves of Putin” while some tabloids even described them as “Putin’s sweethearts” and “Putin’s darlings.” Images accompanying the articles also frequently pictured the Night Wolves with Vladimir Putin who rides with them, or standing next to Zaldostanov.<sup>25</sup> In addition, they emphasized the bikers’ use of not only Russian flags but also of totalitarian Soviet symbols (e.g., the Soviet flag, the hammer and sickle, portraits of Stalin). These images reinforced

<sup>23</sup> The term “color revolution” is used to describe social movements of a peaceful character which lead to socio-political transformations. It originates from the so-called Orange Revolution in Ukraine which followed the disputed results of the 2004 presidential election.

<sup>24</sup> Only the most left-leaning, small-circulation newspaper, *Przegląd* was against the ban on the Night Wolves’ entry into Poland. The paper was concerned that similar

bans could be introduced against Polish bikers visiting the site where Polish military officers and intellectuals were massacred by the NKVD, the Soviet secret police, in 1940 in Katyn located in today’s Russia.

<sup>25</sup> The Polish tabloid media published a large number of cartoons and satiric images, many of which aimed to ridicule the biker group and their camaraderie with Putin by feminizing them.

typical descriptions like the one in the *Dziennik Zachodni*, a regional newspaper published in Upper Silesia, that the Night Wolves “look like devils, they drive under the gold banner of sickle and hammer and with Putin in their company” [Biernat and Król 2015] and “the presence of Russians in Poland is controversial because of their open associations with Vladimir Putin and his politics. The leader of the Night Wolves, Aleksandr Zaldostanov, is considered a close friend of the Russian president” [Dragański 2015]. Newspapers also widely reported that, when border guards were trying to identify members of the Night Wolves at the Polish border, they were looking for Soviet symbols as these were considered distinctive markers of group affiliation.

Akin to Polish views, German portraits of the Night Wolves were dominated by their association with Vladimir Putin, implying that they operated as informal envoys of the Russian government's politics. Besides labeling the Night Wolves “Putin's bikers” like Polish papers, German journalists referred to them as “Putin's informal bodyguards,” “Putin's propaganda bikers,” “Putin's pack,” “bikers with close ties to the Kremlin,” “Putin's nationalist supporters.” Interestingly, in contrast to the Polish media where critical commentary often zoomed in on the Night Wolves' use of Soviet—i.e., totalitarian and imperialist—symbols, the German media rarely mentioned the presence of Soviet symbols. Instead, it emphasized the nationalist symbolism of the bikers. Photographic illustrations generally pictured the Night Wolves as a large motorcade with a paramilitary feel—thanks to the black leather biker uniforms—as a “pack of wolves” roaming across Europe. In general, the association of the group with excessive nationalism was more salient in the German press than in Poland where the group's aspirations and practices were viewed as belonging to the repertoire of Russian/Soviet imperialism.

For instance, the left-leaning, cooperative-owned German daily, *Die Tageszeitung (taz)* described Zaldostanov, the leader of the Night Wolves as:

An imposing figure. He looks like a Rurikid, one of the forefathers of the Rus. Very tall, with a flowing beard and long hair, with arms as thick as tree trunks and hands like a metal press. The boss of the Moscow biker group Night Wolves usually wears a worn, dark leather uniform with the slogan: “Where we are, is Russia.” As of late, a medal which President Vladimir Putin gave to his friend Zaldostanov accompanies the motto—the medal was awarded for Zaldostanov's social engagement and unassailable loyalty.<sup>26</sup> [Donath 2015a].

<sup>26</sup> In 2013 Zaldostanov was awarded the Order of Honor for his patriotic engagement.

The tone of the more conservative *Süddeutsche Zeitung* is similar but significantly sharper:

The Night Wolves are disgusting dudes: nationalists with dreams of a Great Russia, enemies of a free society, supporters of the annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbass region. As part of the right-wing “Anti-Maidan” movement which is protected by the Kremlin, they called for violence against dissidents and ridiculed people with disabilities by calling Maidan protesters “Maidownies” [Hans 2015].

The latter extract also calls attention to the increasing role of violence interlinked with the Night Wolves’ activities—a theme that was also central to the Polish coverage. The German papers agreed that the Night Wolves’ engagement with military campaigns and interventions, most prominently their participation in the Ukrainian crisis and the annexation of Crimea, cast serious doubt on the claim that they rally across Europe with the sole intention of peaceful commemoration. As *Spiegel*, one of the most widely read German news magazines noted, rather than treating the 2015 Victory Tour as a biker rally dedicated to the commemoration of World War II veterans, it had to be considered a political campaign:

The “Night Wolves” are more than a biker club. [...] The changed perception has a reason: The role played by the biker club in Russia as well as Ukraine since the last visit in 2013. The “Night Wolves” position themselves as President Putin’s bodyguards. They not only celebrated the annexation of Crimea but fought along the pro-Russian “People’s Republics” in Eastern Ukraine against Kiev’s troops [Bidder 2015].

The shifting understanding of the Night Wolves from a civic biker club to an organization engaged in military campaigns outside Russia had decisive consequences for how their border crossings were perceived within the framework of the Victory Tour. The precedent of the Night Wolves’ involvement in Ukraine indicated that the group’s border crossings could constitute a *de facto* act of aggression.

German reporting, by and large, disseminated and reasserted the German authorities’ changing perceptions of the Night Wolves’ rally as politically motivated, which undermined diplomatic relations, as it did not conform to notions of “dignified commemoration” [Gebauer 2015]. The ensuing discussions regarding a response to this potential security threat revolved primarily around the Russian bikers’ Schengen visa controversy. Given the heightening tensions over the underlying intentions of the Night Wolves’ victory tour, on May 2, 2015 the German Federal Government decided to annul the Schengen visas of the Russian bikers that were previously issued by the German consulate

in Moscow and would have permitted entry into the European Union. According to the German government's justification for this decision, the Night Wolves' recent military and political activities demonstrated that they obtained their Schengen visas under false pretenses. Meanwhile newspaper coverage helped establish the narrative that the Night Wolves were attempting to exploit World War II commemoration ceremonies for the purposes of Russian political propaganda [Nutt 2015; Jerofejew 2015; Donath 2015b].

It was through the minute technicalities of visa requirements and physical border crossings that the German Federal Government as well as the German border guards attempted to control the mobility of the group and prevent its members from entering Germany. On the one hand, the bureaucratic details of the Night Wolves' trip were being questioned by authorities. The argument was put forward by Foreign Ministry officials that their visas were cancelled because they did not provide sufficient information about their itinerary, route, and overnight accommodation in the Schengen Area countries they sought to enter. On the other hand, German border guards on the ground mobilized the same interpretive frames to justify their decision to deny physical entry to the Night Wolves. Furthermore, border guards resorted to long checks at border checkpoints. Thus, they not only undermined the Schengen treaty that allows the free movement of Schengen visa holders across the Schengen Area but were able to demonstrate their leverage in controlling the movement of the Night Wolves or any group that associated with them across Germany's borders:

A spokesman of the German federal police force said that these are normal questions regarding entry [referring to the long border checks]. About 50 people with different nationalities, among them sympathizers of the "Night Wolves," waited in a parking lot behind the border for hours. [...] One of the bikers was denied entry: Jenin Jovanovski, President of the Night Wolves in Macedonia, had to leave Germany. Earlier, the 47-year old man was kept at the border controls for three hours. Reasons: "violations against residence regulations" [*Berliner Morgenpost* 2015].

Simultaneously, especially more conservative news sources like the *Bild Zeitung* were echoing and amplifying the German government's position that the Night Wolves originally obtained their visas under false pretenses. They presented them as "tricksters," who actively tried to circumvent the entry bans. The *Bild Zeitung* suggested that the Night Wolves "are playing a game of cat-and-mouse with the European border guards" [*Bild.de* 2015b], and for example, "one member of the Night Wolves apparently flew into the Czech Republic and was able to travel to

Poland with a motorcycle bearing a Czech license plate” [*Bild.de* 2015c]. Here, the Federal Government and European border patrols were portrayed as victims of the Night Wolves’ “games” and scams deployed to deceive European governments.

As borders are seen as means to control the movement of the Night Wolves across Central Europe, tracking the border crossings of the bikers enabled newspapers to monitor whether police and border patrols in Germany indeed managed to contain their movements and the security threat they represent. Similarly, the Night Wolves used the border crossings to demonstrate their ability to evade entry bans, thereby arguing that they were more powerful than Polish or German foreign ministries, and therefore could not be stopped or controlled.

In fact, German media coverage was so preoccupied with the visa controversy and the physical control of borders that it never reported how many Night Wolves actually made it to the May 9 demonstration in Berlin’s Treptower Park that was meant to be the final destination of the Victory Tour. Moreover, coverage of their controversial rally completely overshadowed reporting on the celebrations of the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II in Berlin [Gabowitsch 2017].

Predictably, Russian media representations of the Night Wolves’ 2015 Victory Tour diverged considerably from media treatment in Germany and Poland. The general portrayal of the bikers is a strong case in point. German and Polish descriptions always attached a set of qualifiers to politically position the bikers, thus linking them to Putin (“Putin’s bikers”) or labelling them “nationalists.” In the Russian press, however, the Night Wolves were rarely accessorized with qualifying adjectives. Most importantly, Russian sources depicted them principally as “Russian patriots”, corresponding to the way in which the Night Wolves describe themselves. They were considered “ambassadors of *Russkiy Mir*.” This term was used in the Polish press in a pejorative sense signifying the cunning imperialist agenda of Russia. In Russia, however, the idea of *Russkiy Mir* is understood as a progressive force carrying on a tradition that brought peace across Europe and helped to save European civilization.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Since the early 2000s, *Russkiy Mir* (Russian world) has evolved into an important ideological framework for the Russian state. It has served as a soft power strategy of Russian nationalism, emphasizing the civilizational community of Russophones living beyond the borders of the Russian Federation and

introducing a range of policy measures to support this sizeable Russian diaspora by providing various resources for the protection of Russian language, culture and historical heritage, see also GORHAM 2014; SERGUNIN and KARABESHKIN 2015; WAWRZONEK 2014].

FIGURE 2

*German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, and Polish President Bronisław Komorowski forming a protective line against a Night Wolves biker*

[Source: [https://vk.com/sharzhipero?z=photo-91934366\\_371141593%2Falbum-91934366\\_00%2Frev](https://vk.com/sharzhipero?z=photo-91934366_371141593%2Falbum-91934366_00%2Frev)].



Likewise, Russian newspapers tried to ridicule Western media representations for focusing excessively on the appearance of the Night Wolves which they described as menacing and violent. In turn, they emphasized how European cities were full of bizarre creatures that could be perceived as equally threatening:

Yes, so guys [i.e., the Night Wolves] are riding [motorcycles] in jackets with rivets. But is it possible to shock European cities with these outfits, where a punk sits next to a transvestite and marijuana smoking hippies—where there is talk of women in black who give the impression they emanate the air of Jihad? [Karulov 2015].

The Night Wolves posted similar comments to their *vkontakte* site, mocking the excessive alarm sounded by European press reactions to the rally. They also shared cartoons, such as Figure 2, showing anxious European politicians—German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and Polish President Bronisław Komorowski—forming a protective line against a Night Wolves biker headed towards Berlin.

The Russian media was also chiefly concerned with border crossings into various countries along the route—Poland, Slovakia, Lithuania, Belarus—using this moment as an important lens into the Europe-wide controversy around the Night Wolves. Reports elaborately described the difficulties individual bikers faced in passing through borders: how they were made to wait long hours under the surveillance of “special armed forces,” interrogated on every detail of their planned trip, and eventually refused entry without any justification. Similar incidents were reported in the Night Wolves’ diary on their *LiveJournal* blog. One group claimed that when they were turned back at the German border, they told the border guards:

Arrest us. We are patriots of our country. We do not consider ourselves guilty. In the name of our homeland, we are ready to sit in prison until May 9th. This statement made them [border guards] very angry.<sup>28</sup>

The visa cancellations were declared a violation of human rights and a slap in the face of European values. They also described Zaldostanov’s trip to Brest, Belarus where he gave an emotional interview to demonstrate how determined the bikers were to continue their trip despite bureaucratic setbacks:

We will not abandon our plans; we will not change our route. If we abandon our stances now, then we can renounce everything—May 9, our graves, our memorials—we might as well abandon then our history [Chinkova 2015: 8].

By using the phrase “we will not abandon,” Zaldostanov was also referring to a favorite Russian World War II slogan that is also used today by Putin.

Even though the Russian media stressed the peaceful commemorative character of the rally, Russian journalists sometimes turned to war metaphors to frame the progression of the Victory Tour in response to the apparent European hostility. For instance, when a number of bikers successfully overcome obstacles to finally cross into Slovakia, the article reporting this event was entitled: “Night Wolves broke through the European border” [*Novaya Gazeta* 2015a]. Similarly, another article carried the title, “It is time to mark the ‘taken’ cities: Vienna, Bratislava, Munich” [Karulov 2015], reporting on the progress of the tour as if it were a war campaign, conquering city after city in Europe.

Another trope common in the Russian news coverage was to distinguish between the reaction of governments and that of ordinary people in the same country. The Russian papers often recounted scenes in which

<sup>28</sup> <http://nightwolves-ru.livejournal.com/2015/04/27/>.



humble locals, like simple peasants in Belarus, offered Night Wolves members bread and salt, understood as a gesture of warm welcome. The same example can also be found almost verbatim in one of the Night Wolves' *LiveJournal* entries, confirming again that the Russian newspapers heavily relied on the group's online diary for their descriptions and interpretations of the tour. Biker groups in other countries, including Poland, were described as expressing solidarity with the Night Wolves regardless of their governments' position. Even at the final destination of the rally in Treptower Park in Berlin on May 9 on the occasion of the commemoration, "the residents of Berlin welcomed bikers with Russian flags and cheers" [*Novaya Gazeta* 2015b]. Likewise, in an interview, Zaldostanov called the Victory Day as a "test for Europe":

For me it became the triumph of Russia and an integrity check for Europe. Night Wolves experienced all the hypocrisy of European politics, all the power of the information machine directed against us. But ordinary people in Europe supported us. In Berlin, instead of 15 bikers, almost 500 showed up [*Komsomol'skaia pravda* 2015].

The emphasis on the contrast between the negative official response of governments and the positive response of locals was used to imply that European governments were overstepping their power, and that their actions did not reflect the will and values of their people.

Moreover, the Russian press interpreted the ban on the Night Wolves as a clear manifestation of a widespread anti-Russian atmosphere in Europe and the official denial of the role of the Red Army in the victory over fascism. The *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* described this problem in greater detail [Grishin 2015]. It reported on a survey conducted for the Russian government-controlled Sputnik international news agency in the United Kingdom, Germany and France between March 20 and April 9, 2015. In it 1,000 people in each country were asked which army they thought had most contributed to the victory over fascism. Most respondents (43%) believed that the US Army had played the most important role in achieving victory in World War II, followed by Britain. Russia's Red Army was mentioned only in third place.<sup>29</sup> For Russian journalists, this was a lie: available statistics on the losses of the Red Army and the number of victims unequivocally demonstrated that the Red Army suffered the most.<sup>30</sup> Denial of these facts was presented as a sign of growing anti-Russian propaganda and anti-Russian memory politics

<sup>29</sup> The full survey can be viewed at <https://sputniknews.com/society/201504281021462315/>, accessed December 8, 2020.

<sup>30</sup> On the detailed description of Soviet

casualties during World War II, as well as the problems involved in establishing reliable statistics in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, see ELLMAN and MASKUDOV 1994.

across Europe, which eventually explained why the bikers were denied entry to the EU. The newspaper also suggested that the next alarming step in anti-Russian memory politics would entail the likening of Stalin to Hitler and the roles Germany and the USSR played at the beginning of World War II, as this could already be seen in Kyiv (Kiev), Warsaw, and the Baltic States. It warned that while Europe had forgotten the important role played by the USSR in overcoming fascism, the “bandera groups”<sup>31</sup>, fascist and nationalist radicals fighting in Kyiv (Kiev), were portrayed in the West as defenders of democracy.

### *Discussion and Conclusion*

Our analysis shows that the Night Wolves’ strategy in launching the cross-border rally was to demand support for a transnational narrative of the memory of World War II, recognizing the crucial role of Russia in saving Europe. In reality, it had exactly the opposite effect. It triggered strong resistance that was further intensified by present-day geopolitical tensions over Russia’s controversial role in Ukraine. As a result, the bikers’ victory tour was not used in German and Polish media as an opportunity to reflect on the memory of World War II. The war was present principally as a set of shadow metaphors evoking Poland’s experience of being invaded (rather than liberated) by the USSR and Germany’s postwar effort to reconstruct itself after the war as a state that respects law and human rights.

The Night Wolves were simply understood as a proxy for Russia and for the Soviet Union’s antagonistic relationship to Eastern Europe. National news coverage thus exposed how these countries perceive Russia and the kind of threat it presents for Europe today. In this sense, media discourse functioned as a narrative project that elaborated sharp symbolic boundaries—the “soft borders”—between Europe and Russia. **Table 1** shows that the key concepts and categories that emerged for each country in making sense of the tour crystallized around a relatively coherent narrative plot.

There was surprisingly little variation in reactions to the Victory Tour within countries along the political orientation of the news source. The Night Wolves’ symbolic and physical transgression of territorial

<sup>31</sup> The label refers to contemporary followers of the Ukrainian ultranationalist leader of the World War II era, Stepan Bandera [see ROSSOLIŃSKI-LIEBE 2014].

RUSSIA'S NIGHT WOLVES

TABLE I  
*Summary of the key concepts and categories framing  
the Night Wolves victory tour*

	<b>Poland</b>	<b>Germany</b>	<b>Russia</b>
Main theme	New techniques of Russian imperialism	False intentions	“Russkiy Mir” (Russian world/Russian civilization)
Aim	provocation	security threat	commemoration
Identity	Adjectives: links to Putin and Russian government	Adjectives: links to Putin and Russian government	No adjectives: Russian patriots
Portrayal of Night Wolves	Not a civic association	Not a civic association	Civic association: Ambassadors of “Russkiy Mir”
Border crossings	Violence: involvement in military interventions in Ukraine and Crimea  Hybrid war  Totalitarian (i.e., Soviet) symbols	Violence: involvement in military intervention in Ukraine and Crimea  Instrumentalization of World War II memory  Nationalist symbols	War metaphors: Breaking through borders Taking cities in Europe  Europeans’ denial of Russia’s role in the liberation of Europe and defeat of Nazism  Anti-Russian propaganda  Government versus the people  Violation of human rights and EU values

borders—not only to commemorate but also to ensure recognition for Russia’s role in World War II— activated first and foremost nationally distinct frames and anxieties. This highlights how transnational memory politics is not merely about transcending the relevance of the nation state but about how national memory narratives are defined in relation to and in reaction to each other.

In the case of World War II memories, the Night Wolves' transnationalizing attempt failed. It actually cemented national narratives also because Russia's memory politics was seen as just another form of its regional geopolitics [Zhurzhenko 2007]. Accordingly, Poland consistently treated the Night Wolves' victory tour as an integral part of a new toolkit of present-day Russian imperialism. To the Polish news media, left and right, there was no doubt that the Night Wolves were closely aligned with the Russian government, and they could pinpoint numerous other instances where the Russian government had instrumentalized civil society groups to advance Russian interests abroad. These cases and the Night Wolves' involvement in the violent conflicts of the Ukraine and Crimea confirmed that the bikers' activities could only be explained within the framework of Russia's "hybrid war", waged on multiple fronts to extend Russian influence beyond its current borders. The Poles' preoccupation with Russia's imperialist aspirations was also evident in news sources emphasizing the Night Wolves' regular use of totalitarian (i.e., Soviet) rather than nationalist symbols; an uneasy reminder of the socialist era when Poland belonged to the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union.

In contradistinction, Germany's chief concern revolved around the sincerity of the Night Wolves' intentions behind seeking entry into the European Union and Germany. Both liberal and conservative media agreed that the bikers' recent participation in various military campaigns such as the annexation of Crimea and the Ukrainian conflict rendered the militant nationalist image of this nominally civic organization more than just a matter of style and a harmless façade. It raised serious questions about the real motivations for the cross-border rally and implied that the memory of World War II served merely as an instrument for Russia's demonstration of its political power, potentially posing a security threat.

Russian news sources also took for granted the equation of the Night Wolves with Russia. They considered that the indignities bikers had to endure at the Polish and German borders were an insult against the Russian nation. The Russian media's position vis-à-vis the victory tour was anchored in the notion of *Russkiy Mir*, a widespread conviction in Russia that the country acted as a civilizing force in Europe during World War II and saved the continent from barbarism. The Night Wolves' visits to Soviet war memorials and cemeteries with graves of Red Army soldiers were seen to symbolically reclaim these sites outside the borders of Russia as part of Russian patrimony.

Against this deeply ingrained belief, the treatment of the Night Wolves' commemorative tour was read as a European denial of Russia's role in the liberation of Europe and a clear manifestation of anti-Russian propaganda. According to Russian sources, European reactions also revealed the hypocrisy of the European Union that grossly violated the human rights of bikers by annulling their valid visas and banning their entry, ridiculing the EU's own principles.

We also demonstrate that news media in the three countries did not only generate boundary narratives about cultural differences, but also illuminated how these soft borders had an impact on hard, institutionalized, state borders. Namely, both Poland and Germany implemented measures and responses that were closely rooted in the "imagined boundaries" fleshed out in media discourses. Poland—where media coverage of the victory tour was emotionally charged, unanimously considered a political provocation and a new tool of Russian imperialism—consistently denied entry to the Night Wolves into the country—not only in 2015 but in subsequent years as well. By contrast, Germany—which was clearly uneasy about the Night Wolves' touring across Europe, questioned the intentions of the group, and perceived the rally as a potential security risk—acted in a more ad hoc manner and turned the conflict into a legal squabble. First, it annulled the bikers' visas. It later removed the entry ban for lack of evidence that the Night Wolves posed a threat to public safety in Germany. In subsequent years, the Night Wolves' annual victory tour was allowed to enter the country, participate in the commemoration in Berlin's Treptower Park, and ride through several parts of the city in a convoy, albeit accompanied by a heavy police presence.

The case study of the Night Wolves' commemorative tour across Central and Eastern Europe reveals how transnational memory politics does not simply "spill over and seep through national borders" [Assmann 2014: 546]. It also shapes the very meaning and salience of those borders. This process is particularly intensified when the physical traversing of contested borders becomes part of the strategic toolkit of mnemonic entrepreneurs. Moreover, symbolic boundary work that narratively defines soft borders can have a causal impact on institutionalized (hard) borders. This impact is likely to be larger in times when hard borders—and entire systems of interlinked borders like in the European Union—are questioned and become objects of political struggle. This is especially true for contemporary Europe in the wake of mounting migration pressures and the consequences of Brexit.

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## Résumé

L'article examine la controverse déclenchée par le « Victory Tour » de la célèbre organisation de motards de Russie, les Night Wolves, pour marquer le soixante-dixième anniversaire de la défaite de l'Allemagne nazie contre l'Union soviétique. La tournée a suscité d'importantes questions sur la relation entre les frontières européennes et la politique de commémoration de la Seconde Guerre mondiale. L'article soutient que le discours public international autour des Night Wolves illustre la façon dont les frontières des États sont transformées à la fois en frontières dures et territorialisées et en frontières symboliques « douces ». L'analyse compare la manière dont les médias imprimés et en ligne en Russie, en Pologne et en Allemagne ont encadré la tournée des Night Wolves à travers l'Europe. Il met l'accent sur la construction des frontières comme projet narratif et cartographie les stratégies de tracé symbolique des frontières mobilisées par différents acteurs. Il montre comment les visites commémoratives transfrontalières peuvent servir d'outil de politique de la mémoire transnationale qui façonne la signification et la saillance mêmes des frontières étatiques et des divisions régionales.

*Mots-clés:* Frontières; Politique de la mémoire; Mémoire transnationale; Nationalisme; Europe de l'Est.

## Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag untersucht die Kontroverse, die die „Siegestour“ des russischen Biker-Clubs „Die Nachtwölfe“ zum siebzigsten Jahrestag des sowjetischen Siegs über Nazi-Deutschland ausgelöst hat. Die Tour stellt das Verhältnis zwischen europäischen Grenzen und der Gedenkkultur zum Zweiten Weltkrieg in ein neues Licht. Die internationale öffentliche Debatte um die Nachtwölfe zeigt auf, wie Staatsgrenzen sowohl in harte, territorialisierte Grenzen als auch in „weiche“, symbolische Grenzen umgewandelt werden können. Die Untersuchung vergleicht die Darstellung der europäischen Nachtwölfe-Tour durch russische, polnische und deutsche Print- wie Online-Medien. Sie unterstreicht das narrative Projekt der Grenzkonstruktion und dokumentiert die Symbolik der Grenzziehungsstrategien verschiedener Akteure. Es wird aufgezeigt, wie grenzüberschreitende Gedenkbesuche im Rahmen einer transnationalen Erinnerungspolitik instrumentalisiert werden können, die entscheidend die Bedeutung und die Wichtigkeit staatlicher Grenzen und regionaler Teilungen prägen.

*Schlüsselwörter:* Grenzen; Erinnerungspolitik; Transnationale Erinnerung; Nationalismus; Osteuropa.