

The Night Wolves' Anti-Maidan and Cultural Representations of Russian Imperial Nationalism¹

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Abstract: *This article applies approaches grounded in popular geopolitics, critical discourse analysis, and cultural semiotics, to an analysis of artistic and performative representations linked to the anti-Maidan in Russia. We use the term “anti-Maidan” here not only to refer to the eponymous pro-Kremlin public movement that appeared in Russia after the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine in 2013–2014, but also in a wider sense, approaching the anti-Maidan as a cultural phenomenon grounded in the radical rejection of the Ukrainian experience of regime change, democratic transformation, and Europeanization.*

In this article we examine the structural logic of the Russian blend of nationalism and imperialism articulated by the Kremlin-sponsored Night Wolves motorcycle club, through their performative and highly publicized actions. We argue that the Night Wolves' bike shows are aimed at normatively appealing to two supreme sources of veracity and universality: the Orthodox faith, and the heroic feats of the Soviet Union in the Great Patriotic War. Both nodal points are juxtaposed and symbolically appropriated as undeniable “truths” beyond political debate, a confected status that turns even the slightest disagreement with either of them into an act of rebellious contestation of Russia's primordial and sacrosanct identity and therefore as lacking in authenticity and normatively false.

From a practical perspective, our research lens and the methodology we apply can be instrumental in identifying key points in radical national imperialist discourses that, under certain circumstances, can be transformed into justification for policy action.

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