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To cite this article: Jan Kleiner, Miloš Gregor & Petra Mlejnková (2023): The Night Wolves: Evidence of Russian Sharp Power and Propaganda from the Victory Roads' Itinerary, *Problems of Post-Communism*, DOI: [10.1080/10758216.2023.2164864](https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2023.2164864)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2023.2164864>



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Published online: 24 Jan 2023.



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The Night Wolves: Evidence of Russian Sharp Power and Propaganda from the Victory Roads' Itinerary

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ABSTRACT

The article researches the Russian Night Wolves Motorcycle Club from the perspective of the sharp power concept. It is argued that NWMC serve as a proxy for Russian sharp power, playing the role of messenger for pro-Kremlin propaganda in European countries through Victory Roads events. Using a mixed-methods Google Search data and media content analysis, the article analyzes the effectiveness of the Victory Roads events as a sharp power propaganda tool. It provides evidence that the physical presence of NWMC is indeed a powerful tool of Russian sharp power, increasing interest among the targeted population and creating long-lasting political impact.

Introduction

The Night Wolves Motorcycle Club (NWMC) has become an international security and political issue, intensified by the club's role in the 2014 Crimea annexation and their activities in Ukraine before and after this incident (Harris 2020; Lauder 2018; Zabyelina 2019). Moreover, in the current political reality of the Russian Federation, the club became part of the Kremlin's political influence toolbox. In the newest research on authoritarian regimes, Russia is described as a "sharp power" (Walker and Ludwig 2017; Walker 2018; Lucas 2020), using hybrid tactics to ensure its own political influence in the post-Soviet region and in other important areas where it is believed to maintain influence, for example in Europe. As a sharp power, the Russian government seeks to penetrate the political and information environments of targeted countries, and its strategy is to distract and manipulate (Walker and Ludwig 2017). It is not principally about persuasion or attraction; its aim is rather to degrade the credibility of democratic regimes. Walker and Ludwig (2017) stress that the tactics of sharp power to influence do not lie in attraction or winning over, but in manipulation, confusion, division, and repression. It is not necessary to leave a positive sentiment in the targeted society; the goal is to weaken the democratic environment and to influence the information environment. Therefore, even the presence of tools of sharp power is worth analyzing, though it represents only a piece of the puzzle of the influence operations of the Russian government.

The scope of sharp power influence tools is broad. The Russian Federation very often uses non-governmental (but state-sponsored) entities as proxies (Lutsevych 2016). The state outsources services traditionally conducted by state intelligence and defense services, for example, combat operations, intelligence collection, propaganda dissemination, agitation and provocation, and cyberspace operations. Indeed, the Kremlin's propaganda machinery is also partly built on alleged

non-governmental entities, such as the Internet Research Agency, well known for employing people as internet trolls (Pavliková, Šenkýřová, and Drmola 2021). In research on Russian influence outside its own territory, attention is predominantly paid to media, social media, and the use of trolls and bots, disinformation campaigns, and cyberspace activities (e.g., Alvarez, Choi, and Strover 2020; Kellner 2018; Dawson and Innes 2019) or to private military companies like the Wagner Group (e.g., Marten 2019). In the case of the NWMC, we can see a large gap in the research on Russian sharp power despite the NWMC representing an interesting sharp power tool (Krekó and Szicherle 2019) operating in and outside Russia, predominantly offline and supporting the Kremlin with diverse activities ranging from paramilitary operations to youth work. When being studied, it is the NWMC's paramilitary activities during the annexation of Crimea and the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine, where club members actively participate on the Russian side, that have been analyzed (Lauder 2018).

However, the NWMC is not just for fighters in state conflicts. The club operates as part of the propaganda machinery and serves as a proxy (Chivvis 2017), penetrating the information environment in targeted countries, promoting an expansionist agenda and Russian values, provoking public debates and deepening controversies (Krekó and Szicherle 2019). During the Victory Roads rides, organized annually since 2015, the NWMC enters countries like Belarus, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Czechia, Austria, and Germany in order to celebrate the end of the Second World War in Europe and to honor the Red Army fallen. The controversy surrounding the event corresponds with the European media attention devoted to Victory Roads (e.g., Noční vlci—Téma—SME n.d.; Nocne Wilki n.d.; Noční vlci n.d.), and, even though there is consensus among scholars that the propagandist undertone of Victory Roads is

significant (Zabyelina 2019; Harris 2020; Lauder 2018; Mesežnikov 2019), no attention has been paid to this aspect of Victory Roads and extremely little to the Night Wolves in this context. This article argues that Victory Roads serves as a tool of sharp power and propaganda.

In the conclusion of her paper on the Night Wolves, Kira Harris (2020, 268–69) states that although “the NWMC pro-Kremlin propaganda and influence is well documented in post-Soviet states, it is unclear how much influence extends to countries further abroad.” Therefore, our paper is designed to help fill this gap by offering original analysis of the Victory Roads events as a tool of pro-Kremlin propaganda from the perspective of the impact on its targeted audience, which is the public in countries where the event transpires. As already mentioned, and as will be demonstrated further, even the presence of the tools of sharp power can fulfill their purpose, no matter whether the likability toward Russia rises among the audience or satisfaction with the political regime (or elites) declines in the country.

Douglas Walton’s description of propaganda provides another justification for our study. Walton (1997) says that the central purpose of propaganda is to get action. Such actions, of course, can vary from mental to physical acts. We usually think of being persuaded or motivated to support the regime actively and loudly; however, stimulation of interest in a topic and searching for further information are propaganda’s aims as well. Therefore, we argue that NWMC’s Victory Roads can be perceived as a successful example of a proxy for Russian sharp power, and they play the role of messenger for pro-Kremlin propaganda in European countries when they fulfill this purpose and citizens become interested in the club. The aim of this paper is to ascertain whether the Victory Roads events represent a tool of sharp power and propaganda, how effective they are, what is their probable political impact, and how both these factors change over time. To do so, we employ a two-part mixed-methods research design composed of a statistical analysis of Google Search data combined with a qualitative case study investigation of probable Victory Roads impacts.

The core of the analysis consists of interest in the NWMC as measured by Google searches in countries where Victory Roads take place; thereafter, the results for single countries are compared. The focus is placed on the audience because the audience plays a crucial role in assessing influence. The assumption is that the Victory Roads events are designed with the goal of serving sharp power—to penetrate the information environment and leave a footprint in it as a messenger of propaganda. Therefore, the simple fact that people are interested in the NWMC and Victory Roads events is enough to assess the mission as accomplished since it brings with it other effects such as media interest, an increased opportunity to spread certain narratives, and the amplification of the same narratives by homegrown pro-Kremlin and anti-Western actors. This leads us to another assumption that Victory Roads events serve a purpose if there is interest in them. Moreover, as is further elaborated below, data gathered from Google Search represent a direct indication of people’s interest, no matter what the policy is or the framing in mass media. Unlike in social media analysis, we can capture not only active

users spreading narratives of propaganda but also passive users interested in the issue, thanks to the Google search analysis.

Propaganda as a Tool of Sharp Power

Although the main focus of the study of propaganda lies in the twentieth century (see Bernays 2004; Ellul 1973; O’Shaughnessy 2016; Lasswell 1927; Jowett and O’Donnell 1986; Soules 2015), contemporary propaganda studies did not entirely disappear, nor did the use of propaganda. On the contrary, interest in propaganda has recently been strengthened by the development of modern technologies (e.g., Lock and Ludolph 2019; Hashemi and Hall 2019; Bastos and Farkas 2019; Baines, O’Shaughnessy, and Snow 2019; Gregor and Mlejnková 2021) and new, especially non-state actors on the scene (e.g., Zollmann 2017; Baugut and Neumann 2019; Rosenblatt, Winter, and Basra 2019). Propaganda can be seen as a performance of power (Staal 2019, 44). While in the twentieth century propaganda was mainly discussed in the context of state actors and campaigns carried out by state institutions (for example, the Ministry of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda in Nazi Germany or the Propaganda Committee of the Communist Party in the USSR), there are significantly fewer propagandistic organizations and institutions directly and visibly connected to state actors today. With the exception of some nondemocratic regimes, the clear link between the state and propaganda has been smeared along with the development of technology. The usual suspects among geopolitical actors remain the same in most cases of international propaganda, but the tools and channels they use to spread messages are changing. This is the case for Russia too, which, in addition to China, is one of the most frequently analyzed countries in terms of propaganda due to its current activities around the world.

While deploying various strategies and tools, such as disinformation, emotional appeals, and polarization (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018; Guess and Lyons 2020; Gregor and Mlejnková 2021), the aim of propaganda barely changes over time; its goal is to shape people’s minds and create desired role models as well as consciousness (Baines, O’Shaughnessy, and Snow 2019). It presents the institutionalized dissemination of essentially systematically arranged ideas, theories, opinions, doctrines, or whole ideologies. This description remains valid, no matter whether the source of the propaganda is a state or non-state actor. Propaganda is rarely used as a solo instrument; it is usually part of a broader approach to international affairs. It can be understood instead as a tool used by actors in the broader understanding of information warfare (Simons 2019). To grasp the range of tools used by the Russian government in contemporary warfare, Robert Seely arranged six broad categories: governance, economics and energy, politics and political violence, military power, diplomacy and public outreach, and information and narrative warfare (Seely 2017, 52). With the knowledge of what propaganda is and what its goals are, one could definitely consider it to be part of the information and narrative warfare category. However, if we take into account the fact that the boundaries of propaganda are blurred, as already mentioned, it is difficult to imagine other categories not being influenced or penetrated

by propaganda as well. The distinctive danger of propaganda is that it is usually not recognized as such (Stanley 2015).

It is not only propaganda that is characteristic of Russian international relations today. Besides propaganda, used as a persuasive communication style, the concept of “sharp power” is being discussed lately (Walker 2018; Leonova 2019; Walker, Kalathil, and Ludwig 2020). While “soft power” is widely used in international affairs (see Nye 1990, 2019; Lee 2009; Gallarotti 2011), sharp power determines Russian propaganda and better reflects the nature of Russia’s international relations strategies and goals. The distinguishing characteristic of sharp power is expanding activities that threaten the integrity of institutions vulnerable to manipulation. Regimes seek to gain control over the information environment, which includes not only mass media—in Russia, for example, we can talk about state-run international broadcasters such as RT or news agencies such as Sputnik—but also communication channels such as social media and other peer-to-peer information exchange platforms (Walker, Kalathil, and Ludwig 2020). While national communication is characterized by the presence of strong censorship, selective information and narrative manipulation prevail internationally. In both cases, the aim is to make information available in a selective way. Hand in hand, the strategy is accompanied by technological capacity in fields such as artificial intelligence (AI). These tools may, among other things, serve to distract, as Russian attempts at election interference in a growing number of countries proves. As Christopher Walker (2018) states, “By manipulating the public conversation, it seeks to sharpen tensions within and between democracies.

However different the two concepts may be, sharp power should not be perceived as soft power’s opposite since countries can consider and apply both approaches. The difference lies in, among other places, intentions and the fact that while democratic regimes usually apply soft power accompanied by hard power, sharp power is more often found in nondemocratic regimes and their attempts to influence international affairs. This argument confirms Walker’s assessment that sharp power is a sign of the international turn authoritarian countries such as Russia and China have taken in recent years (Walker 2018, 13). These regimes seek to blur perceptions of the corruption and hypocrisy that pervade their countries while polluting or redirecting public discourse in democracies (Walker, Kalathil, and Ludwig 2020, 128). However, there are not just state actors active in sharp power. Beyond politics, even media, culture, or the activities of NGOs can be marred and misused for the promotion of sharp power. In this article, we argue that the Night Wolves Motorcycle Club serves as a sharp power tool.

Night Wolves as a Propaganda Tool of Sharp Power

The NWMC was established in 1989 under Gorbachev’s *glasnost* policy, and since that time they have transformed into the largest motorcycle club in the Russian Federation. From dissidents of the Soviet establishment, they have become fierce supporters of Vladimir Putin’s regime (Zabyelina 2019). Rather than an ordinary motorcycle club, the Night Wolves can be viewed as a complex network penetrating different areas. It is

funded by the Russian Federation through various grants and contracts for either youth organizations, the Russian Motorcycle Association, or Wolf Holdings, which serves as an umbrella company for various business units (Lauder 2018; Zabyelina 2019).

During the 2014 Crimean crisis, according to Matthew A. Lauder (2018), the Night Wolves participated in the collection of intelligence, the organization of protests and militias, and other subversive activities that fall under the fifth column concept, referring to groups imbedded within a population so as to undermine the majority (Galeotti 2016; Harris 2020). The Night Wolves have also been active in separatist areas of Ukraine. In Luhansk and Bakhchisaray, they functioned as a quasi-police force and educators of youth (Lauder 2018, 10).

The Night Wolves have also played a noteworthy role in terms of propaganda. Their famous large-scale shows in Moscow, Russia, and in Sevastopol, Crimea, regularly attract tens of thousands of people. The shows appeal to the audience by using lasers, pyrotechnics, and other special effects (CASIS 2018); Russian artists are engaged as well. The performances are underlined ideologically and devoted to nationalist stories inspired by Soviet and Russian history, often related to military events. The focal points are Russian messianism, nostalgia for the former Soviet empire, Orthodox themes, and anti-Americanism connected with Western decadence. For example, in the 2014 show, *Redemption*, performed in Sevastopol, the United States was portrayed as the world’s puppet-master, manipulating the strings of nations and geopolitical events (Yatsyk 2018). The New Year’s shows for children do not differ much. Featuring songs and fairy tales, this propaganda for children has included a story in which the Statue of Liberty kidnapped the snow princess Snegurochka, who is then saved by the Night Wolves (Schreck 2015; CASIS 2018).

Outside the post-Soviet region, the NWMC is known due to the establishment of foreign chapters, for example, in Germany, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Slovakia, where the chapter existed only for a limited time (Zabyelina 2019; Kottová 2018). However, what contributes the most to the publicity of the club outside the post-Soviet region is the motorcycle rides. One of the most famous is called Victory Roads. Started in 2015, the annual ride follows the Soviet Red Army’s route to Berlin at the end of the Second World War. The NWMC passes through Belarus, Slovakia, Czechia, and Germany, where the ride ends on May 9. In the first two years, the NWMC also passed through Austria (Connolly 2015; Ruptly 2016) and, in 2015 and 2017, Hungary (Hungarian Spectrum 2017; Carpenter 2018). In Poland, however, the Night Wolves have always been officially banned from entering. Nonetheless, there is evidence that the NWMC and affiliated riders permeated Polish borders in all the examined years (see Polsat News 2017; Sputnik Polska 2019). The formal purpose of these rides is to commemorate the end of the Second World War and fallen Red Army soldiers. However, their propagandistic undertone is evident and significant.

The NWMC serves as a messenger of Russian nationalism, anti-Westernism, Orthodox Christianity, and pan-Slavism. The Victory Roads events promote the expansionist agenda and values of contemporary Russia and help unify Putin’s proxies and anti-Western or pan-Slavic entities (Harris 2020; Krekó and

Szicherle 2019). The NWMC penetrates the Victory Roads countries using the Great Patriotic War narrative, still used in Russian foreign policy, as well as a resurgent pro-Stalin sentiment. Such narratives depict the USSR and Stalin as having accomplished the unique mission of saving the world from evil (Domańska 2019). The myth of the Great Patriotic War uses the 1945 victory over Nazi Germany as an instrument to legitimize Russia's aspirations as a superpower. The NWMC refers to Stalin as “the idol of Russian history, the consummate leader. Stalin created a mighty state for us, bringing the Russian civilization back from the abyss into which it collapsed after the fall of the Romanovs” (Zabyelina 2019, 57). On the other hand, the responsibility shared by Stalin's USSR in unleashing the Second World War is ignored, as is the loss of human life under the regime (Coalson 2016; Mesežnikov 2019; Zabyelina 2019). These losses are relativized through use of a narrative concerning the danger of a Western world led by the United States: “The people who yell about repressions are those who destroyed more people than Stalin did. Across the world, American democracy killed more people” (Luhn 2015). The Western value system is perceived as corrupted, decadent, and sinful (e.g., rights for homosexuals). Night Wolves leader Aleksandr Zaldostanov talks about America as controlled by global satanism—that is, capitalism. The Western world is viewed as based only on consumption and driving the whole world toward its destruction. Contrarily, Russia is different, and fights to reverse such processes by offering traditional values and Slavic solidarity (Mesežnikov 2019; Rychetský 2018a, 2018b)

Rationale for Google Search Data

How well does Google data represent reality? Research by Stephens-Davidowitz (2017) and Kostakos (2018), who grasped the perception of organized crime using Google and Twitter data; Jahedi, Wenger, and Yeung (2016), who introduced the concept of propensity¹; and others support the idea of big data as a potent and valid source as it manages to correlate or associate results with real-world evidence. The study by Ettredge, Gerdes, and Karuga (2005) on the topic of unemployment in the United States proved that the search volume of selected terms correlates with the reality among states. They were thus able to use this variable for predicting how the unemployment rate would most probably shift in the near future. Stephens-Davidowitz (2017) even provides more precise results compared to the conservative methods of data collection. Other recent studies proved that Google Search trends could be used as an efficient pandemic outbreak detection tool thanks to the disease symptoms searched even before an outbreak happens (Husnayain, Faud, and Chia-Yu Su 2020; Walker, Hopkins, and Surda 2020).

A theoretical and empirical background able to provide insights about a variety of topics ranging from the prediction of an unemployment rate to armed forces recruitment based on Google search metrics and user inputs presents a rather solid rationale that such a tool can be efficient in measuring people's attitudes or interest in selected issues and organizations. Such an assumption is supported by rich examples of successful empirical applications (see Jahedi, Wenger, and Yeung 2016; Stephens-Davidowitz 2017; Stephens-Davidowitz and Varian

2015; Kostakos 2018; Ettredge, Gerdes, and Karuga 2005; Husnayain, Faud, and Chia-Yu Su 2020; Walker, Hopkins, and Surda 2020) as well as our pre-study. The interest in an issue, its increased salience, is a sign of the successful use of propaganda as a tool of sharp power. The search volume concerning the NWMC (data from Google Search) should therefore correlate significantly with real-world data, in our case, pertaining to the Victory Roads events.

Research Questions

One aim of this paper is to ascertain whether the perception of the NWMC as a tool of sharp power and Russian propaganda is reflected in the interest of citizens from countries covered by the Victory Roads rides. We argue that one of the goals of these events is to penetrate the information environment in order to confuse, divide, and influence the information that reaches its target audience. This, in turn, pollutes the audience's understanding of the world and thus undermines the health and credibility of democratic regimes, making the democracy appear less attractive (Walker and Ludwig 2017). Under such conditions, the analysis starts with a deeper look at whether the NWMC reaches the basic condition of achieving its sharp power purpose. That means, whether the NWMC and their Victory Roads events are of interest in the information environment—in our case in the virtual space represented by Google data. Just the fact of entering the information space brings an opportunity to disseminate propaganda where pro-Kremlin and anti-Western narratives get a chance to resonate more.

As regards the operationalization of the real-world phenomena of Russian sharp power and tools of propaganda, two variables are derived from the existing theory and research. There is a firmly held view that the physical presence of the club and the Victory Roads events are among the most effective tools of the NWMC's propaganda oriented outward from Russia (Harris 2020; Zabyelina 2019; Lauder 2018). Therefore, the physical presence in the respective countries during the Victory Roads rides served as an independent variable that allowed us to compare countries. Poland represents a special case since the Night Wolves were officially banned from entering the country despite their proven presence, as mentioned above. In this regard, we decided to view this unofficial physical presence during the rides as proven for our analysis. After all, the conceptualization of a physical presence does not need to be official. In combination with the goals set in the introduction, our framework leads to the following research questions:

RQ1: How strongly do search volume and real-world phenomena pertaining to the NWMC correlate?²

RQ2: What is the relationship between the search volume of the NWMC and the Victory Roads events themselves to the physical appearance of the club in a given country during the events?

RQ3: What are the differences among the examined countries regarding the Victory Roads events and their related variable effects on search volume?

RQ4: What is the overall trend (i.e., long-term effectiveness) of the search volume in the event countries?

Data and Methods

To gather the data necessary for the analysis, we used Google’s official tools: Google Trends and Keyword Planner. Google Trends provides data that can reach far enough to cover the whole analyzed period of 2015 to 2019 (they go as far back as 2004); Victory Roads began in 2015 and can be geographically localized. Such settings allow us to compare across states.

For a given keyword or topic, space, and time, Google Trends shows search volumes that are aggregated and range from 0 to 100, the latter indicating a spike of interest while 0 denotes no interest whatsoever (Google 2020). We collected the data in seven runs for each Victory Road country and for the examined years of 2015–2019; thus, the 0–100 range was distributed to the whole period. These filter setups provided us with weekly data instead of monthly, so the analysis could be more accurate and nuanced. The localization was set for all of the Victory Roads countries except Russia, where the Night Wolves reside. The term “night wolves” in native languages³ was used as search terms—seeds. Google Trends returned interest-over-time⁴ for these seeds and for each week of the given year and location. The analysis examined each Victory Road event from 2015 to 2019 separately. Five dichotomous dummy variables emerged: (1) physical presence connected with the Victory Roads rides in a given week and a given country; (2) the week before the presence; (3) the week after that presence; (4) the sum of the abovementioned three weeks; and, finally, (5) whether the Victory Roads event was happening regardless of the location (see Table 1). The variables of the week before and after the visit were added to gather insights as to any possible interest and hype that extended beyond the physical presence, including its duration, and determine whether the search engine resonates with the NWMC queries immediately before the visit.

This quantitative analysis, however, cannot sufficiently account for the effectiveness of Victory Roads as a propaganda tool. To deepen our investigation in this regard, we also employ a qualitative content analysis of the three most-

visited online media platforms in the Czech Republic—novinky.cz, idnes.cz, and aktualne.cz—each with around three million unique visitors per day (Mediaguru 2018). Czechia serves as an ideal example, as the correlations between the physical NWMC presence and search interest are relatively high (see Table 1). There is also close cultural and linguistic proximity with Slovakia, resulting in a connected information space to some extent. Moreover, Polish and German media narratives have already been captured by Molnár, Koziura, and König-Paratore (2022). Within the examined period of 2015 to 2019, we identified relevant articles (n = 211) and assigned their content open, axial, and selective codes in keeping with grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss 1990), specifically looking for indicators of the sharp power concept (see Walker and Ludwig 2017), for interrelated topics, and for general valence regarding the Night Wolves (negative, neutral, and positive). We also created a binary variable depicting whether the particular article only mentions the NWMC or if it was predominantly about the club. As per the qualitative coding process, we close-read the relevant articles. We transcribed the texts into the initial categories by employing Walker’s and Ludwig’s (2017) sharp power as the sensitizing concept, and its indicators (manipulation, confusion, division, and repression) were used as the most abstract open codes. Topics and subtopics of the media articles were treated as subcategories to provide substantive information about the narrative’s effectiveness. The axial phase sought to refine the categories (indicators) and subcategories (topics) and link them together using Corbin’s and Strauss (1990) coding paradigm. Finally, the core category of division (see the results) emerged.

Analysis and Results

The Relationship between Search Volume, Physical Presence, and Victory Roads

The association between the Google search volume and real-world phenomena—the Victory Roads events and the physical presence of the Night Wolves during them—was already noticeable in the pre-study and data collection phases. To test the association and its strength, the Kendall rank correlation was used. The dependent variable was measured on a scale

Table 1. Correlations of Interest-over-Time and the Five Dichotomous Variables

Interest-over-time by country		Physical presence week	Week before	Week after	Sum of three weeks	Victory Roads in progress?
Austria	Kendall’s tau	.290**	.135**	.278**	.409**	.249**
	R ²	.19	.04	.18	.36	.15
Belarus	Kendall’s tau	.178**	.095	.179**	.266**	.305**
	R ²	.08	.02	.08	.17	.21
Czechia	Kendall’s tau	.404**	.73**	.11	.472**	.484**
	R ²	.35	.17	.03	.46	.48
Germany	Kendall’s tau	.25**	.080	.131*	.257**	.285**
	R ²	.12	.02	.04	.15	.19
Hungary	Kendall’s tau	.31**	−.012	−.012	.353**	.60**
	R ²	.70	.00	.00	.28	.06
Poland	Kendall’s tau	.19**	.020	.156*	.306**	.314**
	R ²	.23	.00	.06	.21	.22
Slovakia	Kendall’s tau	.406**	.187**	.336**	.552**	.522**
	R ²	.36	.08	.25	.58	.54

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

R² represents Kendall’s tau values transformed according to Walker’s syntax (2003, 529).

from 0 to 100, while the independent ones were dichotomous (presence denoted as 1, absence as 0). The interest-over-time (dependent) variable was not normally distributed, and it contained a large number of tied ranks; hence the non-parametric Kendall's tau suited the data the best. The results are shown in Table 1.

The level of alpha for all our models was set to 95 percent. Most correlations were significant on the $p < .01$ level and some on the $p < .05$ level. All six non-significant results pertained to artificial (i.e., not rooted in theory) variables created by us for the abovementioned reasons—the week before and after the NWMC presence. The remaining variables mostly range from medium (above 0.21) to strong (above 0.35) correlations. Such values may not seem high when compared to Spearman's and Pearson's correlation coefficients. However, Strahan (1982, 763–65) states that the outcome of Kendall's tau is usually 66–75 percent smaller than Pearson's correlation coefficient, while the magnitude of the measured effect stays the same. Moreover, all coefficients are positive, which means that with the increasing values of five real-world variables the *de facto* interest in the NWMC among the audience—the population of searchers—tends to increase as well.

Besides bringing evidence of a relatively tight positive association between Google search volume and the Victory Roads (VRs) variables, the correlation coefficients in Table 1 can also tell us a bit about VRs' effectiveness. If the coefficient is squared, we get the proportion of the explained variability. In other words, how much of the interest-over-time variable's movement can be explained by the physical presence or the Night Wolves' VRs. We cannot do that directly with Kendall's tau. However, thanks to Walker's (2003) research, we have been able to solve the issue by transforming the tau to Pearson's r , which could then be squared (R^2). The proportion of the search interest's variability explained by VRs variables ranges from 70 percent in the case of physical presence in Hungary to as low as 8 percent in the case of Belarus. This indicates that in Hungary, the NWMC's mere presence during the Victory Roads event is somehow connected with over two-thirds of the overall interest in the Night Wolves. On the other hand, in Belarus, a staggering 92 percent is left unexplained by these tools. Victory Roads themselves (as an event) can account for a maximum 54 percent of the interest in Slovakia and for a minimum of 6 percent in Hungary. Although a partial picture of the effectiveness in each of the examined countries can be drawn upon these numbers, we must be aware that correlation does not imply causation, and there may be other alternative

explanations at play. Correlations provide us with information about how tightly the interest follows the appearance at VRs of the NWMC, but not about how big is the increase. That we investigate using the Mann-Whitney test below.

Also, the correlation results show that the sum of the three weeks variable, which is partially artificial and partially rooted in theory due to the physical presence factor, significantly and relatively strongly associates with the search volume—information we make use of in the Mann-Whitney test, which, below, we used to investigate more deeply the efficiency of the now three VRs variables in the context of interest in the Night Wolves (the interest-over-time). Although non-parametric, this test is almost as powerful as its parametric counterpart due to the large sample of 261 weeks. And yet, this choice is the more responsible choice due to the specifics of our data. The physical presence, sum of three weeks and Victory Roads functioned as groupings for dichotomous variables denoted in the resultant Table 2 as “yes” and “no” (no physical presence of the NWMC; hence, no sum of weeks and VRs not happening).

The Mann-Whitney test ranks the scores of the interest-over-time in each condition (e.g., physically present vs not physically present), adds them up, and returns the mean rank. The condition with the highest mean rank is also the condition with the greatest number of high interest-over-time values. To make the interpretation of the results easier and the differences between conditions clearly visible, the mean rank differences were calculated. They show the magnitude of the interest-over-time variable's shift between a situation where the Night Wolves are present and not present and where the Victory Roads event is happening and not happening. The results are shown in Table 2.

All the differences are significant at a level of $p < .01$ and positive. In every examined country, the appearance of the Night Wolves during their events and the VRs themselves are accompanied by an increase of interest. Moreover, this increase is both statistically and factually significant and relatively large. From Table 2, we can see that, without exception, this increase fades if we follow the rows from left to right, that is, from short-term to long-term variables (confirmed by the medians). In other words, the one-week physical presence is associated with a much higher increase in the audience's interest than the weeks-long Victory Roads rides. An exceptional case is Hungary, where the physical presence is associated with an increase of interest thirteen times bigger than the VRs as an event. In Austria, it is almost four times. The remaining

Table 2. Mann-Whitney Test

Country	Physical presence?			Sum of three weeks?			Victory Roads?		
	Mean Rank Difference	Mean Rank		Mean Rank Difference	Mean Rank		Mean Rank Difference	Mean Rank	
		Yes	No		Yes	No		Yes	No
Austria	127.73**	257.75	130.02	104.91**	233.50	128.59	34.48**	162.57	128.09
Belarus	63.11**	192.90	129.79	55.7**	183.50	127.80	53.39**	179.89	126.50
Czechia	126.84**	254.92	128.08	92.59**	217.91	125.32	82.02**	206.11	124.09
Germany	126.12**	254.70	128.58	84.85**	210.97	126.12	78.58**	203.20	124.35
Hungary	130.00**	260.00	130.00	42.30**	172.33	130.03	10.32**	140.45	130.13
Poland	100.26**	228.57	128.31	63.11**	190.00	126.89	57.49**	183.64	126.15
Slovakia	124.36**	252.50	128.14	105.67**	230.19	124.52	86.15**	209.89	123.74

** Significant at the 0.01 level.

countries show more stable results around a ratio of 1:2. We can, therefore, firmly claim that in terms of the associated increase of interest in the Night Wolves, the most effective of the examined tools is, by far, their physical presence.

The Overall Trend

All the abovementioned correlations and mean ranks do not consider the time factor; they take the whole 2015–2019 period into account. But the overall trend of interest is not visible in that data. The Google Trends tool can, however, provide a comparison of cases and deliver aggregated data for it (see Fowl 2020). The overall trend aggregated and relativized for the seven Victory Roads countries and for the years 2015–2019 is shown in Graph 1.

There is a spike of interest in 2015 largely driven by Poland (with a value of 100) followed by Belarus (73), Czechia (49), Austria and Slovakia (37 and 34), and Germany (20). Despite Hungary’s very tight correlation to physical presence and the highest increase of interest associated to it, its overall audience’s interest in the NWMC is beyond marginal in the context of interest in other VRs countries. The appearance in the country increases interest in the Night Wolves among Hungarians a great deal. If compared to a Victory Roads visit to Poland, we learn that the latter is accompanied by a relatively lower increase of interest (see Table 2), but it reaches many more people in absolute numbers (see Graph 1).

Thereafter, the trend decreased until 2018, when there is a spike in Czechia (32) in May corresponding again with the Victory Roads’ NWMC presence and in Slovakia (43) in mid-July. The Slovakian Night Wolves’ chapter was established near the village of Dolná Krupá around that period and filled the media space in exactly the same week (Sattler 2018; Kottová 2018). It is the only major discrepancy from the stable pattern defined by the highest peaks in April and May. From 2018, considering the mean interest, the trend slightly rises even if

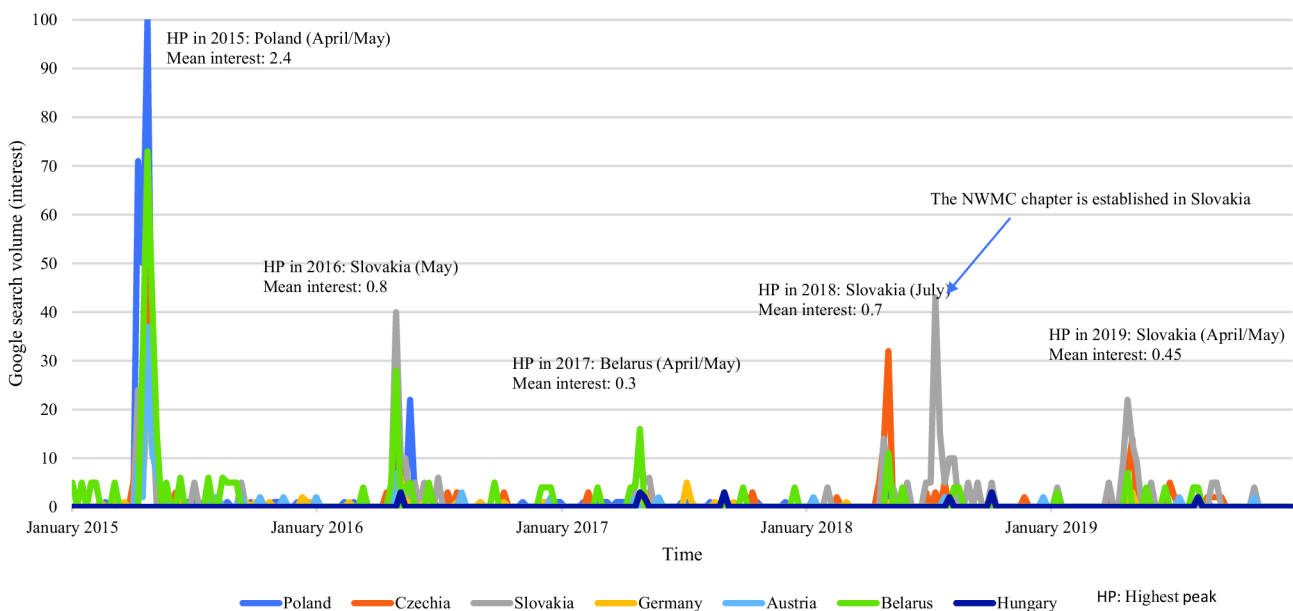
the Slovakian outlier was justifiably removed. To summarize, the interest in Belarus, Germany, Poland, and Austria firmly declines throughout the 2015–2019 period. However, Czechia and Slovakia constitute a second cluster in which the interest’s variability is so large that a general trend cannot be reliably identified. Hungary is its own case; due to the very low number of search queries, even a modest increment creates wild spikes across its graph.

Lasting Impact: Czech Media Case Study

Of the 211 analyzed Czech media articles pertaining to the Night Wolves during the considered period, only roughly a third of them (75) were predominantly about the club, the rest only mentioned them. In accordance with the statistical results, this group of articles almost exclusively occurred in April and May of each year—months firmly connected with VRs. Most articles were neutral and informative, usually about the VR itinerary. The NWMC was presented with a negative connotation in 87 articles (41.2 percent) and positively in a mere 13 (6.2 percent).

Let us now move to the coding results based on sharp power indicators (Walker and Ludwig 2017). We identified them in almost 30 percent (61) of the articles. This is not to say that the most visited online mainstream Czech media platforms were spreading propaganda at such volumes, only that they were informing the public about it.

Of all the sharp power phenomena, division (category) stood out the most by far, and the remaining codes decisively centered around this (selective coding). The emergence of political division is what we called the Kremlin’s fifth column, which was the central topic (subcategory). The political division was tied with and mirrored by the societal one as well, specifically in the form of people who physically greeted the Night Wolves and those who openly opposed them (subtopics). The former dominated. A rather disparate group of



Graph 1. “Night Wolves” search term trends 2015–2019; VRs countries comparison.

politicians from parties that included the then-governing Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) as well as the far-right Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) and the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) became rather publicly visible in this regard, especially Michal Hašek (ČSSD), Marta Semelová (KSČM), and Jaroslav Foldyna (SPD, formerly ČSSD). All three welcomed the Night Wolves to the Czech Republic and participated in the memorial events. All three were highly criticized for it, creating a substantial political division even in their own parties, as was the case for Hašek and Foldyna. Interestingly, these politicians, and their deeds connected with the NWMC, resonated in the public space long after the NWMC had departed Czechia. In this regard, their visit can be considered as having a non-marginal impact on the Czech political scene, thus being effective.

And despite the domination of division, it does not end there. We also found in the dataset multiple reports of general confusion and manipulation of historical events. These mostly stemmed from positive narratives about the purpose of VRs, Second World War commemorations, and the honoring of fallen Red Army soldiers—presented as liberators of Europe from Nazism. This narrative was spread in the mainstream media by those very politicians who were creating the division. We did not find any substantively significant signs of repression or its reporting in the media dataset.

Discussion and Limitations

Google search data can provide us with valuable information; however, its gathering also has considerations and limitations. Firstly, conclusions cannot be inferred about the general population here but to the population of Google searchers, which is volatile and changes over time (Stephens-Davidowitz and Varian 2015, 17). On the other hand, our approach allows us to capture the whole online population and not just a sample drawn from it. Similarly, results are conditional upon the seeds used by the researcher, the questions asked and their exact phrasing. Broad queries logically produce less space for wrongly formulated seed queries, but they also usually lack in-depth insight. Hence, a suitable balance must be found time (Stephens-Davidowitz and Varian 2015, 15). This limit however degrades in cases where a name or brand is investigated, like the Night Wolves in the local Victory Roads countries' languages. The results should also be viewed and interpreted while considering Google's market share in the given countries and the examined period. It oscillates around 95 percent, the only exceptions being Czechia (80 percent) and Belarus (70 percent) (Statcounter 2020).

Throughout the paper, we cautiously avoided formulations implying causality. It is partly a matter of the research setup based on Google data collection. We were able to logically connect the dependent and independent variables through strong correlations. The direction of effect is logically given as well. It is highly improbable that an increase in search interest in Hungary would cause the Night Wolves to appear there. However, we cannot rule out alternative explanations. For example, the influence of the media, whose coverage of the NWMC could cause people to look them up more or less often.

Furthermore, local politicians supporting Night Wolves play an irreplaceable role when boosting NWMC narratives articulated during the Victory Roads. For example, politicians in Czechia (PMs Jaroslav Foldyna, ex ČSSD, now SPD, and Marta Semelová from KSČM) or Slovakia (Ján Čarnogurský, former prime minister, and MP Marián Kotleba from LSNS) actively support NWMC and strengthen their visibility and reach. Such examples, however, do not question the role of the Victory Roads; quite the opposite: without the Victory Roads, these politicians would have a difficult way to reach the audience. Nevertheless, even in that case, the Victory Roads events and physical presence, given our strong evidence, could be perceived as an efficient propaganda tool impacting the audience despite the presence of other phenomena mediating or increasing the interest.

Besides the general limits of the selected approach and dataset, one of the results should be discussed as well. It is the Slovakian July 2018 anomaly which we explain as a reaction to establishment of a Night Wolves chapter there. It is not the anomaly itself that is interesting. After all, the existence of chapters and the physical presence in general is viewed in the existing literature as a strong tool (Harris 2020; Zabyelina 2019; Lauder 2018). The fact that we do not see such a reaction elsewhere though is intriguing here. The Night Wolves established a chapter in Berlin in 2016 as well and in the second half of the year, which would allow it to be distinguished from the Victory Roads event (Vice 2016). Unlike in Slovakia, where the value of interest jumped to 43 on the 100-point scale, no visible spike occurred in Germany—the score was close to zero. An effect similar to the Slovakian one also occurred in Czechia at the same time despite the fact that there is no Night Wolves' chapter there. The situation can be explained by the cultural closeness of Czechia and Slovakia in relation to the twentieth-century state of Czechoslovakia, which they shared. It means, among other things, a great similarity in the languages of the two countries—the name Night Wolves is spelled the same in both. Czech politicians, media, and even citizens are closely interested in Slovakia and vice versa. Hence the high salience of the NWMC Slovak chapter topic in the Czech media (see Sattler 2018; Kottová 2018; ČTK and iDNES.cz 2018). Last but not least, a parliamentary election took place in Czechia in October 2017, and some of the well-known, pro-Kremlin politicians were elected; a few members of the parliament even publicly expressed support for the Victory Roads and met with members of the NWMC when they were riding through Czechia. The presidential election took place in January 2018 whereby Miloš Zeman, one of the most salient advocates of the Kremlin in the country, was reelected. We do not have an explanation as to why the effect of the German chapter's establishment in 2016 is so different.

Conclusion

Our research provides evidence that the physical presence of the Night Wolves and their Victory Roads events are indeed a powerful tool of the NWMC and therefore a tool of Russian sharp power and propaganda. So far, this has only been hypothesized in the relatively scarce academic literature devoted to the Night Wolves (Harris 2020; Zabyelina 2019;

Lauder 2018). Although we are cautious about claiming causality, we were able to find tight correlations between the appearance—the short-term physical presence—of the Night Wolves during the Victory Roads rides and a significant increase of search interest in all VRs countries, namely Austria, Belarus, Czechia, Germany, Poland, Hungary⁵ and Slovakia. The Night Wolves have successfully penetrated the information environment, which is the basal condition in achieving the sharp power's purpose. Only after that can the sharp power and its proxies' dissemination of its narratives and propaganda be efficient (Walker and Ludwig 2017). Using Google data from the 2015–2019 period, we learned that not only do the VRs and physical presence (and its iteration of the sum of three weeks) tightly correlate with interest-over-time in all the analyzed countries (countries of the Victory Roads) but also that the Victory Roads events and physical presence can account for as much as 70 percent of the movement in interest-over-time—and possibly more when we take into consideration only separate variables and not their interactions (e.g., physical presence plus VRs) as these are hard to untangle in the real world. The lowest value of 6 percent of the explained variability belongs to Belarus. It indicates that there are other phenomena responsible for most of the search interest than the Victory Roads events and the appearance of the NWMC, the two being more effective further to the west.

Every time and everywhere the Night Wolves visited and that Victory Roads events were taking place, there was both a statistically and factually significant increase of interest in the NWMC—the largest in Hungary, the lowest in Belarus, which corresponds with the correlation results. This increase is relative to each country, and, in Hungary, it can mean dozens of searches in absolute numbers, whereas in Poland, where the increase was lesser, hundreds or thousands of searches. However, the effectiveness of the propaganda tools is best assessed by these relative numbers, allowing various comparisons. When comparing the independent variables (physical presence, sum of three weeks, and VRs), we noticed that the search interest was rather short-lived and peaked during the NWMC's physical presence as the before and after weeks' correlations were weaker.

There are also questions as to the lasting political impact and the operational effectiveness of VRs and the NWMC in this regard. The results of our content analysis of the three most visited online Czech media platforms are in accordance with what we drew from the Google Search data statistical analysis. We found that the Night Wolves penetrated the Czech information environment mostly with division. This occurs marginally on the societal level—some people welcome the NWMC as they arrive, some protest. Predominantly and highly visibly, there is political division. Public figures like Foldyna, Hašek, or Semelová openly associate themselves with the Night Wolves, creating conflicts among their party colleagues, sowing confusion, and manipulating the public space. All of this resonates in the media long after the NWMC departs each year. In this sense, we deem VRs effective as indeed the Night Wolves do penetrate and affect the local information environment.

In relation to the NWMC and its Victory Roads events in European countries, we can talk about a specific type of

propaganda, which we call *appearance propaganda*, understood as a kind of a promotion of ideas based on physical presence. The specific narratives obtain more saliency in the target population based on the short-term presence of the messenger in the information environment, but the exposure to the narrative is intense and concentrated because the messenger has only limited time for action. In the case of Russia, this is nothing new. The same mechanism can be traced back to the Russian Civil War (1917–1922), when the Soviet Union and the Bolshevik regime used “agit-trains” or “agit-boats” in order to support the Red Army and mobilize Russian citizens to support the revolution. Agit-trains rolled through Russia disseminating government propaganda materials, playing revolutionary-themed movies, and introducing Bolshevik artists, amplifying the propaganda narratives to the public (Heftberger 2015). Leaving aside the context that agit-trains were also introduced as a tool to reach an otherwise illiterate population, the main pattern (of appearing in order to affect a target audience) remains. The Night Wolves regularly ride through Russia, post-Soviet states, and a large part of Europe where they project the Kremlin's influence (Harris 2020). Our data and analysis bring evidence that this type of information environment penetration has a measurable effect that is not only statistically but also practically significant. Moreover, the correlations and the time-series in Graph 1 show that sudden and controversial actions, the Victory Roads events, have a huge impact on the visibility of the NWMC and its propaganda. That is in accordance with both the existing research pertaining to the Night Wolves (Harris 2020; Zabyelina 2019; Lauder 2018) and the sharp power concept (Walker and Ludwig 2017).

Notes

1. Jahedi et al. (2016, 4–5) argue that search queries are in fact communication acts in which users formulate phenomena they are interested in. Such a process can reveal the perceived benefits and setbacks of an action (joining the US Army, in their case) and a propensity to perform that action.
2. This question inherently encompasses the “if they correlate” factor which we checked and for which we found a positive answer during the pre-study phase.
3. Ночные волки (Belarus), Noční vlci (Czechia and Slovakia), Nachtwölfe (Germany and Austria), Nocne Wilki (Poland), and Éjszakai farkasok (Hungary).
4. The interest-over-time variable represents the operationalized and aggregated form of the search volume.
5. All Hungarian searches come from the capital Budapest; other regions showed no interest in the NWMC during 2015–2019.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

The article was written as a part of the research project, “Hey Slavs! Visual culture of propaganda inspired by Slavic nationalisms in the Czech Republic and Slovakia and its anti-European character” (GA20-07592S) funded by the Czech Science Foundation (Grantova agentura Ceske republiky).

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