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More to Russian Bikers than the Night Wolves

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The Night Wolves — and their outspoken leader Alexander "The Surgeon" Zaldostanov — may be the face of Russian bikers, but other less high-profile clubs say there is more to Russian biker culture than Orthodoxy and pro-Kremlin PR stunts.

The president of the Dobermans motorcycle club, who goes by the nickname Custom, told the Moscow Times, "The very idea of being a biker means for us not to get involved in politics and religion."

Ivan, a representative of the Hells Angels in Russia who preferred not to give his last name, takes a similar view. "We call each other brothers and avoid being linked to any religious and political organizations, as these are things that divide people. To express my political views, I vote," Ivan told the Moscow Times.
Zaldostanov, however, has been active in using the media to express his controversial views on a number of political and social issues.

In December, Zaldostanov told television channel NTV "Feminism must be burned out [of Russia] with a red hot iron; gays must be thrown out of the Orthodox country."

Zaldostanov stood by President Vladimir Putin during Easter celebrations at Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral in April and has called Putin the "savior of Russia." He has also made many statements to the press supporting Russia's annexation of Crimea.

"The biker community of the country is divided into two parts — Night Wolves and everyone else," a biker who preferred to remain anonymous told The Moscow Times.

Dmitry, the president of the Cossack motorcycle club, who declined to give his last name, said that Russia is a multi-confessional country and his club welcomed bikers from any background — not just Orthodox believers.

The Dobermans' Custom agrees: "We love bikes, freedom and traveling with friends. The main thing is that the person must agree with the rules of the club."

Boys' Club

One of the rules the Dobermans, Cossacks and Hells Angels do share with the Night Wolves is that women cannot join their clubs.

This rule doesn't bother Maria Mukhina, president of the all-female Wings motorcycle club, which was founded in 1999.

"According to our rules, men are forbidden to be part of the club." Mukhina told The Moscow Times.

"I wouldn't call us feminists. We just do what we want to do. But if that's what feminism is, then you can call us that!" she added.

For Mukhina, being a member of a motorcycle club is about freedom. "Freedom for us is the freedom not to be linked to any religious or political organizations, since this implies certain obligations," she said.

Mukhina said that she didn't care what Zaldostanov said about feminists. "It's his personal opinion. We don't really care."

Supporting Russia

This May, the Night Wolves were in the news again as they attempted to ride from Moscow to Berlin to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Allied powers over Nazi Germany in World War II. They had planed to arrive in Berlin on Victory Day, May 9, but were not permitted to enter the EU at the Polish border.

Dmitry, the leader of the Cossacks, said that he didn't forbid anyone of his club to join the Night Wolves on their ride, but he personally wouldn't go.

"I think a much more patriotic action would be just to provide some financial support to those few World War II veterans who are still alive," Dmitry said.

"The Night Wolves and the Cossacks are two different clubs and we have our separate ways to go," Dmitry added.

Other clubs support the Night Wolves' actions, however.

The Ghosts motorcycle club, based in the southern Moscow suburb of Domodedovo, joined the Night Wolves on their trip to provide security at the polls in Crimea on the day of the peninsula's referendum on whether to join with Russia in March 2014. They were photographed at polling places by GlobalPost's Dan Peleschuk. The bikers told journalists that they went to Crimea to "understand the will of the people" and "protect them from provocations."

It's unclear how many bikers there are in Russia. One club representative told the Moscow Times that there is no club in Russia that has even 1,000 members, despite the Night Wolves' claim to 5,000 bikers. Said a representative of the Dobermans, "There are more of us than you can imagine, but less than we would like."

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