

**RUSSIA’S ROLE IN THE FAR-RIGHT TRUCK CONVOY: AN
ANALYSIS OF RUSSIAN STATE MEDIA ACTIVITY RELATED TO
THE 2022 FREEDOM CONVOY**

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Abstract

Nearly a year after the start of Canada’s 2022 Freedom Convoy—a series of protests and blockades that brought together a wide variety of far-right activists and extremists, as well as ordinary Canadians who found common ground with the aggrieved message of the organizers—the question of whether and to what degree foreign actors were involved remains largely unanswered. This paper attempts to answer some of those questions by providing a brief but targeted analysis of Russia’s involvement in the Freedom Convoy via media and social media. The analysis examines Russian involvement in the convoy through the lenses of overt state media coverage, state-affiliated proxy websites, and overlap between Russian propaganda and convoy content on social media. The findings reveal that the Russian state media outlet RT covered the Freedom Convoy far more than any other international media outlet, suggesting strong interest in the far-right Canadian protest movement on the part of the Russian state. State-affiliated proxy websites and content on the messaging platform Telegram provide further evidence of Russia’s strategic interest in the Freedom Convoy. Based on these findings, it is reasonable to infer that there was Russian involvement in the 2022 truck convoy, though the scope and impact remain to be determined.

Introduction

One year after the start of Canada's 2022 Freedom Convoy—a series of protests and blockades that brought together a wide variety of far-right activists and extremists, as well as ordinary Canadians who found common ground with the aggrieved message of the organizers—the question of whether and to what degree foreign actors were involved remains largely unanswered. During a recent talk about disinformation for the 2022 CASIS West Coast Security Conference, I briefly presented a few slides of data on international media coverage of the convoy, including coverage by Russian state-funded media (U.S. Department of State, 2022). The data I presented showed that Russian state media arm RT (formerly Russia Today) covered the convoy more than any other international media outlet, particularly during the crucial early weeks of the protest, which may have given RT an opportunity to influence the tone and framing of coverage for the duration of the convoy. These few slides of data were not the focus of my presentation, but the amount of engagement and discussion they generated suggests that there is still significant interest in trying to resolve the unanswered questions about foreign involvement in the truck convoy. This paper attempts to answer some of those questions by providing a brief but targeted analysis of Russia's involvement in the truck convoy via media and social media.

Before looking at Russia's involvement in the far-right truck convoy, it's important to emphasize that this movement didn't appear out of thin air, nor was it shipped over from Russia. The organizers, tactics, networks, and ideology behind the 2022 Freedom Convoy are a direct outgrowth of the anti-lockdown protests, which themselves spawned from Canada's Yellow Vest movement and United We Roll convoy (Orr, 2019; Orr, 2021). Underneath all of these seemingly distinct movements is a rising tide of right-wing populism—infused with a toxic blend of conspiracy theories, disinformation, grievances, and scapegoating—that is now dominating political narratives and leading to increasingly inflammatory rhetoric that, at times, has spilled over into violence. The truck convoy, therefore, doesn't represent a new movement in Canada, but rather a new method drawing upon old grievances. However, as evidenced by examples such as Black Lives Matter in the U.S. and the Yellow Vests in France, Russia views homegrown protest movements like this as an opportunity to exacerbate social divides and sow discord as part of its asymmetric assault on western democracies (Aceves, 2019; Johnson, 2019). Russia's involvement in domestic protest movements around the world has included activities such as starting local activist groups, organizing rallies, coordinating funding, producing and amplifying media reports, creating deceptive social media personas, and more (U.S. Department of Justice, 2019). Russian operatives often work both sides of divisive issues by providing support for protesters while also inciting violence against them, and by organizing dueling rallies, and there is ample evidence of Russia's involvement in far-right movements around the world (Butt, & Byman, 2020; Michael, 2019; Orttung & Nelson, 2019; Stratfor Worldview, 2021). From the National Front in France to the Northern League in Italy to the

Alternative for Germany (AfD), Russia's ruling political party has established formal and informal ties with ultranationalist movements across Europe (Karnitschnig, 2022). As part of this effort to destabilize Europe and weaken the European Union, the Kremlin has provided financial support to far-right political parties and NGOs; organized networking events, meetings, and cultural and religious exchanges for leaders of far-right movements; and leveraged its expansive state-funded propaganda machine to attack opponents of European far-right politicians, inflame tensions around social issues, and spread disinformation to chip away at the foundation of democratic societies (Bradley, 2017; Karnitschnig, 2022; Shuster, 2017). Russia's activities have helped fuel a rising tide of far-right populism that has sparked mass protests and civil unrest (Karnitschnig, 2022) surrounding issues like immigration (Crişan, 2019) and vaccines (Marek, 2020), and energized far-right extremist movements in Europe, North America, and elsewhere. Members of extremist groups such as Atomwaffen, The Base, and the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM)—all of which are listed terrorist entities in Canada—have reportedly trained in Russia while carrying out attacks in the U.S. and Canada, and Russian disinformation campaigns have been cited as a contributing factor in pandemic-related protests, extremist activity, and unrest (Gradon, 2022).

In this paper, I used the data from my 2022 CASIS West Coast Security Conference presentation as a starting point for a deeper dive into Russia's involvement in amplifying divisive and inflammatory narratives about the Freedom Convoy through on-air (television) and online coverage. Trends in Russian state media coverage can provide a good indication of what events and issues Russia may be targeting and/or seeking to influence. Russian state propaganda arms like RT and Sputnik have been described as an instrument of the state used to “meddle in the politics of other states” (Elsawah & Howard, 2020), and as “directed global messengers [...] using the guise of conventional international media outlets to provide disinformation and propaganda support for the Kremlin's foreign policy objectives” (U.S. Department of State, 2022). By studying RT's coverage, we can get a better idea of what those objectives are and where Canada fits into them. To that end, this study employed Google Jigsaw's Global Database of Events, Language and Tone (GDELT) to analyze trends in convoy-related television coverage across seven international media outlets, including RT, for the three-month period from January 8, 2022, through April 8, 2022 (GDELT Project, 2022). Next, a mixed-methods Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) analysis was conducted to examine online convoy coverage, via RT.com, Russian state-affiliated proxy websites SouthFront.org and GlobalResearch.ca, and Russian-linked convoy channels on the messaging platform Telegram.

The primary objective of this study was to assess potential Russian involvement in the Freedom Convoy by documenting the activity of state-backed media and state-affiliated proxy sources, as well as the spread of Russian propaganda through convoy-related Telegram channels. This article does not attempt to

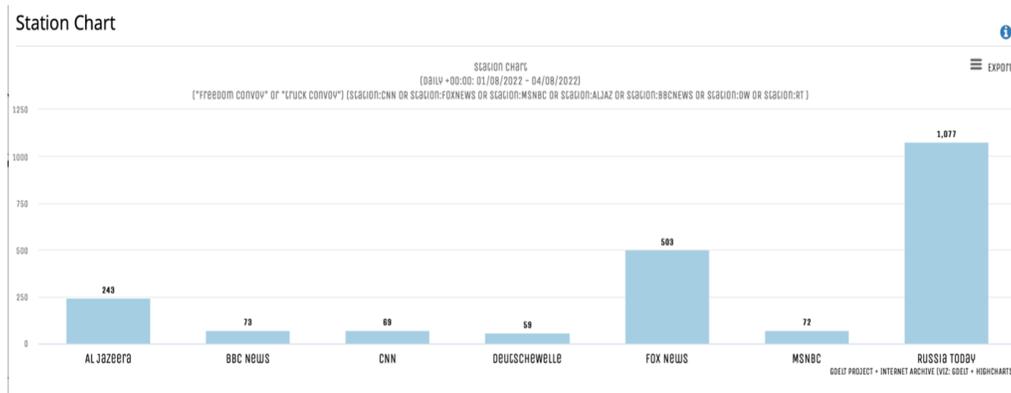
measure the impact of such coverage, but rather investigate Russia’s strategic interest in the convoy and discuss this in the broader context of Russia’s involvement in far-right protest movements around the world.

RT’s On-Air Coverage of the Freedom Convoy

Keyword searches for “Freedom Convoy” or “Truck Convoy” during the specified time period (1/08/2022 through 4/08/2022) were performed using GDELT’s “Television Explorer” tool, which queries the Internet Archive’s Television News Archive. The results of this search are presented in the charts below. The findings show that RT produced a higher volume of convoy-related television coverage than any other international news outlet, including Al Jazeera, BBC News, CNN, DW, Fox News, and MSNBC. Specifically, RT had nearly twice the raw volume and percentage of convoy-related coverage (measured by keyword mentions per 15-second interval of airtime) as all other outlets combined. Fox News had the second-highest volume of coverage, but it didn’t even reach half the volume of RT. The total volume of coverage is not particularly high, but the disproportionate focus on the convoy by RT is worth examining.

Figure 1

Overall Coverage Volume



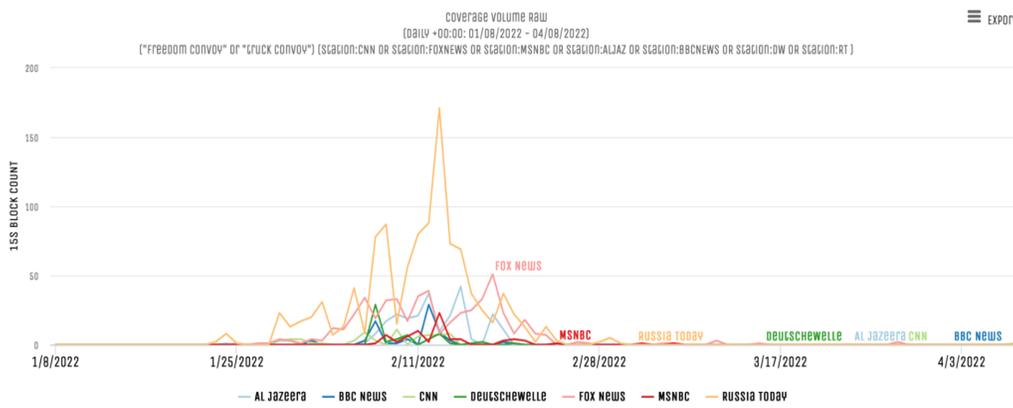
Note. Overall coverage volume, as measured by mentions of the keywords “Freedom Convoy” or “Truck Convoy” per 15-second interval of airtime, across seven international media outlets from 1/8/2022 through 04/08/22. RT had a higher raw volume and a higher percentage of convoy coverage than almost all other stations combined (GDELT Project, 2022).

Viewing the timeline of coverage helps give additional context to the data. Of note, RT was the first of the seven international outlets to refer to the convoy in on-air coverage (on Jan. 23, 2022). Coverage volume peaked on Feb. 13, 2022, and by late February, had largely dropped off. At its peak, Freedom Convoy 2022 coverage made up just under 3.5% of total airtime on RT. This time period

overlapped with the start of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, so the fact that RT devoted significant airtime to a Canadian protest during this time underscores its importance as an issue of strategic interest for Russia. Importantly, RT’s early dominance of convoy-related coverage could have provided a crucial opportunity for Russian state actors to influence and shape subsequent media reports to align with the Kremlin’s broad goals of sowing discord and weakening Western democracies by amplifying extreme and/or divisive social movements. The timeline of coverage also reveals another notable trend involving RT and Fox News; specifically, when RT’s coverage starts to drop off, Fox News’ coverage picks up. Recent reports have documented a symbiotic relationship between the two networks, which may explain the pattern described here (Corn, 2022; Thompson, 2022).

Figure 2

Timeline of Freedom Convoy Coverage



Note. As measured by mentions of the keywords “Freedom Convoy” or “Truck Convoy” per 15-second interval of airtime, across seven international media outlets from 1/8/2022 through 04/08/22. Russian-state media outlet RT is represented in orange (GDELT Project, 2022).

We can also derive insight into Russian state media’s goals and tactics by looking at word clouds, which provide a visual representation of textual data in which the size of a word or phrase represents its frequency or importance (Korab et al., 2021). In this case, the word clouds below are a visual summary of transcripts from three months of television coverage (1/8/2022 through 4/08/2022) across seven international news networks, focusing only on 15-second clips during which the phrases “Freedom Convoy” or “Truck Convoy” were mentioned. As such, the word clouds provide insight into the topics, people, and sentiment associated with the key phrases “Freedom Convoy” and “Truck Convoy.” To get a more nuanced view of Russian state media’s coverage of the “Freedom Convoy” movement, we can look at word clouds with RT included, excluded, and isolated. Notable themes that emerged from the word clouds include the

prominent use of the keywords “NATO” and “Ukraine” by RT, which disappeared from the word cloud once RT’s coverage was removed from the input. Similarly, the keyword “nazi” did not appear in the word cloud without RT’s coverage as input, but it does appear in the word cloud with RT’s coverage included. RT’s coverage showed a preference towards describing the Canadian protest as a “freedom convoy,” while the phrase “truck convoy” when used by RT appeared to be closely associated with coverage of military truck convoys in the context of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Figure 3

Word Clouds Showing the Most Commonly Used Words in Freedom Convoy-related Coverage.



Note. On the left, the word cloud represents all 7 international media outlets. The middle image represents all international media outlets but with RT removed. The image on the right represents only RT’s coverage (GDEL Project, 2022).

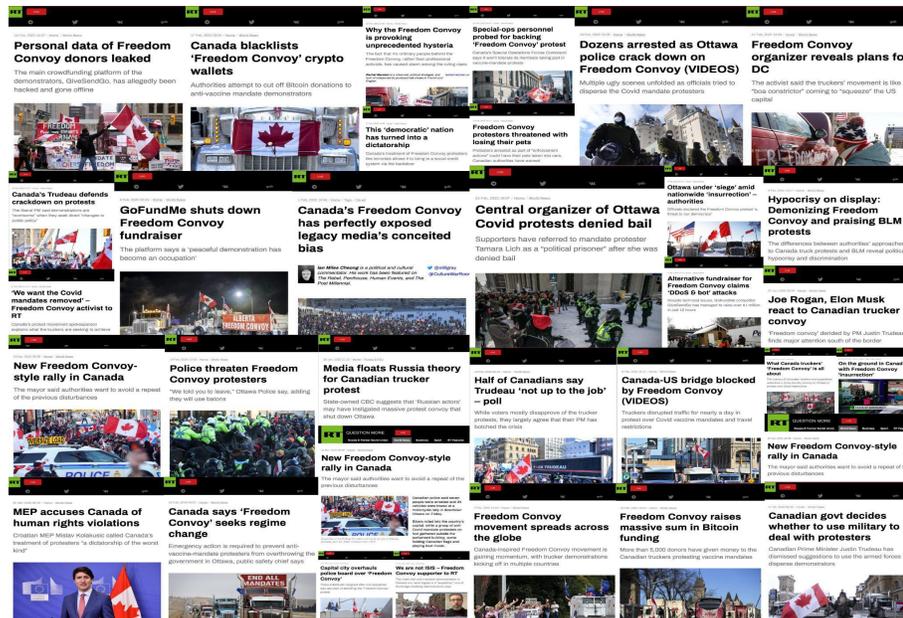
Russian State Media and State-Affiliated Proxies

In addition to amplifying convoy-related coverage on television, Russian state media also produced a significant amount of online content related to the convoy movement. A search for the key phrase “Freedom Convoy” on the site RT.com yielded more than 250 articles about the convoy in total, at least 100 of which were published by the Russian state-backed outlet between January and April 2022. The vast majority of these articles were supportive of the convoy and many were also critical of the Canadian government and/or specific Canadian government officials, including Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. The top convoy-related topics covered by RT.com included police intervention, fundraisers, the Emergencies Act, cryptocurrency, and civil unrest. The tone of coverage — which emphasized clashes between protesters and police, framed the protesters as victims of an aggressive government, and amplified divisions along political/ideological lines — was consistent with a style that one former RT reporter described as “anything that causes chaos” (Elsawah, & Howard, 2020). In order to focus criticism on the Canadian government and, to a lesser extent,

the “global elite,” RT featured firsthand accounts and interviews, and emphasized human interest stories about ordinary people supposedly harmed by Canada’s COVID-19 restrictions and by the government’s response to the truck convoy. RT also produced a significant amount of coverage about the various fundraisers organized for the convoy, framing the story as one in which the organizers were innocent victims whose money was stolen or redirected by the government and big banks. Freedom Convoy protesters were described by RT as “demonized” and said to have had their “human rights violated.” Repeated, prominent uses of specific labels and phrases—e.g., “dictatorship” to describe the Trudeau government; “crackdown” to refer to arrests of convoy participants—suggests that RT may have circulated internal guidance on terminology for convoy-related coverage, as it routinely does for its international coverage (Elsawah & Howard, 2020). Of note, RT also sent correspondents to the scene of the convoy and, on numerous instances, featured interviews with convoy participants and organizers. As a result, RT’s coverage was shared widely on social media by Canadian supporters of the convoy. This strategy of connecting with domestic influencers to encourage them to share foreign propaganda is one that has been used successfully by China in recent years (Mozur et al., 2021), but its use by Russian state actors has not been explored as extensively.

Figure 4

Coverage of the Freedom Convoy on RT.com



Note. Coverage of the truck convoy on RT.com, the website of Russian state-backed media outlet RT (Source: Caroline Orr Bueno).

Freedom Convoy Coverage on Russian State-Affiliated Proxy Websites

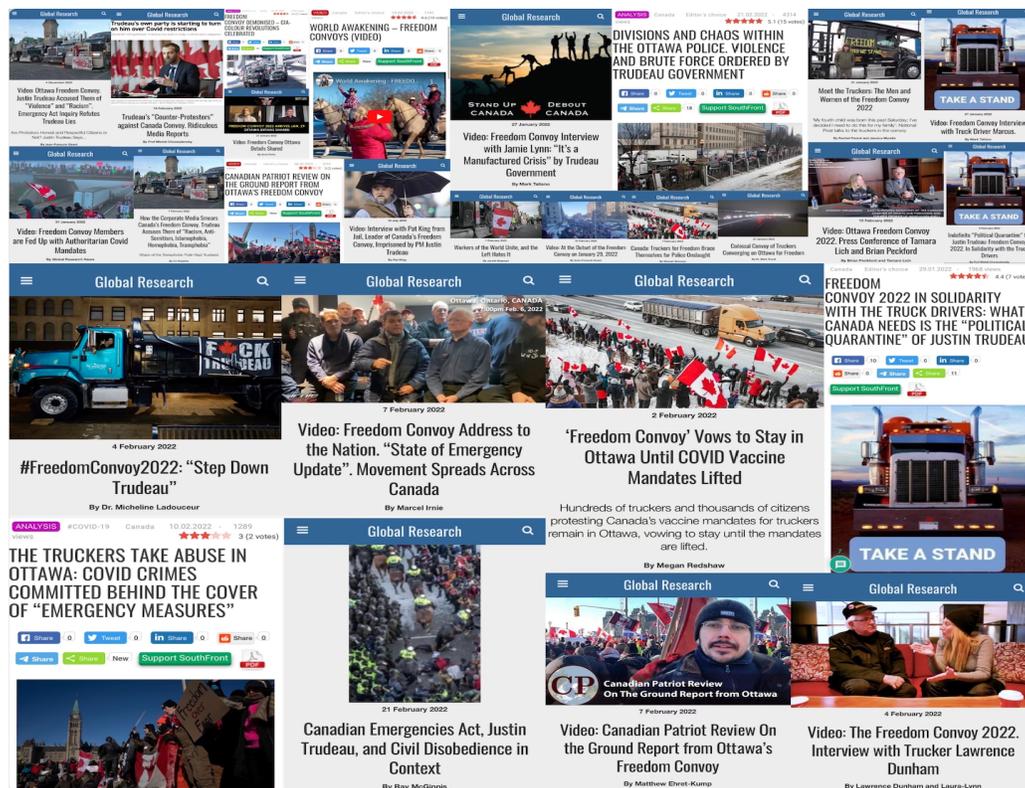
In addition to overt propaganda arms like RT, Russia also employs proxy sources to disseminate propaganda and other content while maintaining a degree of plausible deniability. These proxy websites and organizations “occupy an intermediate role between the pillars of the ecosystem with clear links to Russia and those that are meant to be fully deniable,” according to the U.S. Department of State (2020). The use of proxy sources creates the appearance of independence and manufactures false consensus by making it appear as though the content is coming from multiple, independent sources. Proxy websites may also be used to disseminate tailored content targeting specific audiences, and to localize the Kremlin’s narratives by crafting them around specific events, communities, and grievances. Two of the primary proxy sites used by Russia to disseminate propaganda to English-speaking audiences are SouthFront and Global Research. As described by the U.S. Department of State (2020), SouthFront “combines Kremlin talking points with detailed knowledge of military systems and ongoing conflicts” and “attempts to appeal to military enthusiasts, veterans, and conspiracy theorists, all while going to great lengths to hide its connections to Russia.” The Crimean-based website frequently publishes COVID disinformation and conspiracy theories, and often republishes articles written by authors with “advanced academic degrees” in order to boost the credibility of the content (U.S. Department of State, 2020). Global Research is the website of the Centre for Research on Globalization, a Canadian organization that promotes “alternative” and fringe viewpoints about everything from vaccines to weather control (U.S. Department of State, 2020). It plays an important role in Russia’s disinformation ecosystem by providing a Western voice that can be used to spread and popularize misleading narratives aimed at delegitimizing Western governments and institutions. Despite denying its ties to the Russian government, a 2019 report by Stanford’s Internet Observatory found that the website has published or republished at least seven authors who were discovered to be false online personas created by The Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, also known as the GRU (DiResta & Grossman, 2019). In total, these seven GRU authors published more than 108 articles that appear on Global Research.

A keyword search of the two websites revealed that both SouthFront and Global Research published ongoing coverage of the Freedom Convoy that often included disinformation and inflammatory rhetoric, as well as repeated calls for Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to step down. Global Research produced much more extensive coverage, but SouthFront’s coverage was much more inflammatory and conspiratorial. Echoing RT, SouthFront claimed that protesters were being “demonised” and “abused” by the media and the government, and accused the Trudeau government of “ordering” the use of violence against demonstrators. SouthFront also invoked what it called “CIA colour revolutions” in an attempt to highlight perceived hypocrisy in the way the Freedom Convoy protesters were portrayed in the media, compared to the way “CIA-engineered regime change

operations” were celebrated. Several articles used tactics such as *appeals to authority* — a logical fallacy in which a claim is said to be true based on the authority of the person making it (Goffredo et al., 2022)—while others made sweeping, unfounded claims about the COVID vaccine being a “killer.” In comparison, coverage by Global Research focused more on portraying the protesters as victims being unjustly punished by the Trudeau government and unfairly criticized by the media. The most prominent theme in articles published by Global Research was the depiction of COVID mandates as “authoritarian” measures being used to control and oppress the population. Both SouthFront and Global Research also made unfounded claims about “agent provocateurs” sent in by the Trudeau government to incite violence—a common trope deployed by Russia as part of its active measures campaigns (Schoen & Lamb, 2012). The two proxy sites also republished each other’s content, as well as articles from other Russian proxy sites, demonstrating the tightly connected and coordinated nature of Russia’s disinformation ecosystem.

Figure 5

Coverage of the Freedom Convoy on SouthFront and Global Research



Note. Freedom Convoy coverage on Russian state-affiliated websites SouthFront and Global Research. (Source: Caroline Orr Bueno)

Freedom Convoy Telegram Channels as a Conduit for Russian Propaganda

Using basic Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) techniques to explore Freedom Convoy content on the messaging platform Telegram uncovered evidence of further overlap between convoy content and Russian propaganda. In January and February 2022, a large number of public Telegram channels were created or repurposed under the auspices of supporting the Freedom Convoy. These channels were used to share information about the convoy route(s), solicit donations, discuss ongoing convoy-related events, express opinions about politics and COVID restrictions, post links to news stories, spread conspiratorial content, share calls to action, and encourage people to take part in the protests. Active monitoring of these channels revealed a pattern of accounts sharing Russian propaganda, starting very early in the life cycle of these channels and growing over time, to the point that some Freedom Convoy channels effectively became repositories for pro-Russia propaganda, including several that are now posting Kremlin press releases and videos in Russian language. Channels such as “Freedom Convoy” (52,641 members), “Convoy to Ottawa 2022” (22,209 members) and the “Global Freedom Convoy” (14,851 members) all regularly post pro-Kremlin content and share messages from explicitly pro-Russia channels. In the “Global Freedom Convoy” channel, a search for the keyword “Russia” returns 1,206 results; in the “Convoy to Ottawa” channel, the same search returns 921 results; and in the channel “Freedom Convoy,” the search returns 225 results. Some of these channels still post convoy-related content, too, including plans for upcoming events and rallies, while others have pivoted away from the convoy entirely and now only post a mix of Russian propaganda, QAnon conspiracy theories, and other conspiratorial content. Many of the conspiracy theories posted in these channels either originated from or circulated widely in Russian propaganda networks, including allegations that COVID-19 is a bioweapon and/or that Russia invaded Ukraine to shut down U.S.-backed biolabs, claims that Russian interference in the 2016 election was a hoax, and various conspiratorial narratives about COVID vaccines, 5G technology, and tracking chips. Some of the most widely shared content on these channels included narratives portraying the Canadian government as being overrun with Nazis and claiming that the Canadian government supports Nazis in Ukraine. These narratives align with some of the most dominant propaganda narratives used by Russia to justify its invasion of Ukraine. Other posts fused multiple Russian conspiracy theories together, such as one post in an Ottawa Convoy channel that claimed Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 was not shot down by Russia, but rather by “Freemasons” who targeted the airplane because there was a world-renowned AIDS researcher onboard who was preparing to tell the world that AIDS was a man-made virus created by Dr. Anthony Fauci, the former director of the U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease and former chief medical advisor to the president who served on the White House Coronavirus Task Force. Another thematic pattern observed in these channels was the posting of conspiratorial content promoting beliefs about being “replaced.” This

primarily included posts about the so-called “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory, which describes a common belief among white supremacists and neo-nazis that white Europeans are being deliberately replaced through immigration and demographic changes resulting in the growth of minority populations (Davey & Ebner, 2019). Other “replacement” themes that appeared in the convoy Telegram channels included beliefs about foreign workers replacing Canadians for domestic jobs and speculation about various politicians and public figures being “replaced” by body doubles or robots.

More broadly, the tactics employed by the operators of these channels—including multilingual posting, repurposing existing channels, creating networks of interconnected channels, and using Telegram to coordinate talking points on other social media platforms—have previously been linked to Russian influence operations (Brody, 2022). In particular, there is evidence that state-sponsored organizations have used closed private groups on Telegram to coordinate social media activity on other platforms, including mass posting and harassment of dissidents (Brody, 2022).

Conclusions

The data presented in this article reveals a demonstrable strategic interest in the truck convoy on the part of Russian state-backed media outlet RT, as evidenced by the total volume of coverage on television and online. RT is among the most forward-facing parts of Russia’s multifaceted disinformation and propaganda ecosystem, and thus serves as a relatively reliable indicator of Russian state interests and priorities. The confluence between RT’s coverage and the Russian government’s foreign policy interests has been thoroughly documented, as has RT’s participation in disinformation and propaganda campaigns stemming from Russian intelligence agencies (Elsawah & Howard, 2020; U.S. Department of State, 2022). These campaigns typically involve an assembly line of actors and organizations through which information and narratives are transmitted, shaped, manipulated, and laundered. As such, it is reasonable to infer that RT’s extensive coverage of the convoy may be just the most visible sign of a broader influence campaign encompassing other actors and activities including proxy sources, cyber operations, social media accounts/engagement, and involvement in activism/organizing. This is an area that should be explored further in future research, as the current article’s scope was limited primarily to content directly and overtly linked to Russian state media.

In addition to RT’s coverage, this analysis also documented sustained interest in the Freedom Convoy on the part of Russian state-affiliated proxy sites SouthFront and Global Research. These two sources showed significant alignment with state media in terms of coverage timelines, thematic patterns, terminology and language, and conspiratorial/disinformation content. Both websites have been identified by the U.S. Department of State (2020) as proxy sources that have distinct roles in Russia’s propaganda and disinformation

ecosystem, occupying a space between sources that are overtly linked to Russia, like RT, and those that are meant to be entirely covert and deniable. These sources are generally perceived as more credible than Russian state media outlets, and often purposely publish content produced by “experts” and individuals with specialized degrees and/or titles in order to bolster the appearance of being independent and authoritative sources of information. There is a significant degree of cross-posting within the web of proxy sites and extending to other Russian state-backed sources, and several state-affiliated proxy sites have a history of publishing articles written by false personas created by Russian intelligence agencies (U.S. Department of State, 2020). Importantly, state-affiliated proxy sites also tend to reach broader audiences (U.S. Department of State, 2020). In the assembly line of Russian propaganda and disinformation, proxy sites are one step further down the line than overt state-funded media, and their primary function is to help diffuse Russian narratives into the broader information environment. As such, tracking the narratives as they move from state-funded media to proxy sources to social media and into mainstream information spaces is an important task for future research that could help us recognize coordinated Russian disinformation and influence operations, and also allow us to identify websites, social media accounts, and other sources that may be wittingly or unwittingly taking part in such operations.

Through the use of basic OSINT techniques, this analysis also found significant and meaningful crossover between Russian propaganda and convoy-related content on the messaging platform Telegram. A number of Telegram channels that initially shared news and information related to the convoy later became repositories for Russian propaganda, including content from RT and Russian government websites. Much of this content was related to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and the vast majority were sympathetic towards Russia and hostile towards Ukraine. Other popular content spread on these channels included allegations that western media outlets are biased and engaged in a cover-up, and that the Canadian government is using the pandemic to push “tyrannical” laws and policies. In one Ottawa Convoy Telegram channel, for example, a search for the word “tyrannical” returned more than 200 posts focusing on vaccine mandates, gun laws, legislation banning hate speech, and more. Often, convoy-related content and Russian propaganda were posted at the same time in these channels, suggesting at least that the same operator(s) were posting both types of content. The origins and ownership of these channels are unclear, but it should be noted that Telegram plays a critical role in Russia’s information and disinformation spaces, and previous Russia-linked influence operations have used methods and tactics that are similar to those described here (Bergengruen, 2022; Brody, 2022; Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2022). Additionally, Telegram has been widely used by far-right activists, in part because of its lack of content moderation, as well as its design features, which allow for full anonymity, end-to-end encryption, and both private and public messaging (Gerster et al., 2022; Shadnia et al., 2022). It has also emerged as an increasingly important refuge for far-right activists, disinformation actors, and others who

have been banned from major social media platforms, including in Canada (Gerster et al., 2022; Hart et al., 2021). In terms of its function, Telegram serves as a gathering place where networks are built (and rebuilt), links are shared, and messaging is coordinated, often with the goal of increasing the reach of content on other platforms. As such, content areas where different groups overlap—for example, QAnon-related content and biolab conspiracy theories—play an important role, as they introduce users to other seemingly like-minded groups. In this case, conspiratorial content served as an important area of overlap between convoy supporters and pro-Russia accounts. Future research should explore whether this area of overlap served as a conduit for foreign influence.

As stated previously, the 2022 Freedom Convoy originated as a domestic movement, and the vast majority of its participants and supporters were Canadian citizens. However, coverage of the convoy—and therefore, its prominence on the global stage—was amplified by foreign actors, including Russian state media. It is unlikely that this coverage had a meaningful direct impact on the convoy movement, but rather may have influenced supporters and participants through more subtle and indirect pathways, including through social media platforms like Telegram. RT and other Russian state media outlets have been an important part of several recent global protest movements, including the Yellow Vest Movement in Europe (Gérard et al., 2020) and far-right movements in Germany (Zakharova, 2022), as well as Black Lives Matter demonstrations and far-right rallies in the U.S. (Aceves, 2019; Butt, & Byman, 2020; Michael, 2019). RT claims to present an “alternative” view to Western audiences, which may be strategically attractive to far-right audiences who share a similar worldview characterized by conspiratorial beliefs, distrust of the media and government, and resentment towards “globalists” and “elites” (Zakharova, 2022). Research suggests that far-right communities may utilize RT in unconventional ways, such as by using the comment sections to bring up far-right views by “localizing” the international content to domestic agendas and concerns (Zakharova, 2022). These dynamics could help to explain the significant degree of overlap between Russian state propaganda and truck convoy-related content and should be explored further.

Limitations

This study focused primarily on overt Russian propaganda, which is only one part of a vast disinformation ecosystem that also includes a variety of more subtle activities and covert tactics. Therefore, the findings presented in this paper should not be interpreted as representing a comprehensive analysis of Russian activities surrounding the Freedom Convoy. Additionally, the keyword-based approach used in searches of television coverage, websites, and social media may have missed relevant activity and content that did not use any of the specified keywords or phrases. Furthermore, non-English language content was largely excluded from this analysis.

Another limitation of this analysis is that it did not seek to estimate the reach or impact of Russia's activities. Therefore, it is unclear how many people were actually reached by RT's coverage of the convoy. RT's own estimates of its viewership numbers are known to be exaggerated, and the share of the population that sees RT each month varies widely by country (Benton, 2022). However, as the Nieman Lab put it in a 2022 report, "RT doesn't need a huge audience to be influential—only the right one." Furthermore, as stated above, RT should not be viewed as an isolated entity, but rather as one part of a complex disinformation ecosystem with roots that trace back to the Russian government and intelligence agencies. The data presented in this paper, therefore, are presented as a starting point for further investigation looking at the reach and impact of Russian state media's coverage of the convoy.

Finally, since this analysis used OSINT techniques to analyze publicly available information and social media data, it would not be appropriate to make any inferences about whether or not the social media channels and accounts included in the analysis are witting participants in a Russian disinformation or influence campaign, nor would it be appropriate to infer that the organizers of the Freedom Convoy knowingly worked with Russia or accepted Russia's support for their movement. This analysis focused on unidirectional influence (from Russia) and did not attempt to make any determinations about intentional coordination between Russia and other actors, nor did it explore the individual accounts posting in public Telegram channels.

Future Directions

The far-right Freedom Convoy that took place last year in Canada was part of a global trend of "pandemic populism" fueled by a combination of legitimate fears and anxiety, long-standing grievances, anti-government sentiment, and reactionary responses to rapid social change, among other things (Vieten, 2020). The underlying causes of the movement that became the Freedom Convoy have long existed in Canada, but the circumstances of the pandemic proved to be fertile ground for the growth of a new protest movement that cultivated and exploited backlash to pandemic restrictions and mandates. While the Freedom Convoy emerged as a domestic movement, there remain questions about the extent of foreign involvement in various aspects of the protests. This paper represents a first attempt to answer some of those questions by examining Russian state media and propaganda activity surrounding the Freedom Convoy. Using a media monitoring tool and OSINT techniques, this analysis documented a persistent strategic interest in Canada's far-right Freedom Convoy movement on the part of the Russian state, as evidenced by Russian state-backed media coverage, state-affiliated proxy websites, and the use of the messaging platform Telegram as a shared information space for Russian propaganda and pro-convoy content. Although the data presented in this paper do not address reach or impact, they do offer some of the first verifiable answers to lingering questions about Russia's

involvement in the convoy movement, and they represent an important starting point for further investigation.

Future studies should build on these findings by exploring several new directions of related research. As noted in this paper, the timeline of Russian state media coverage appeared to potentially interact with Fox News' coverage of the convoy, but that was outside the scope of the current analysis. A more in-depth investigation of the amount and type of coverage produced by different international media outlets could yield important insight into the spread of certain narratives, including foreign disinformation narratives. This could also help answer questions about whether Russian state media's early and dominant coverage of the convoy influenced subsequent coverage by other international news networks.

Another promising line of study may be found in the analysis of visual imagery used by Russian state media, state-affiliated proxy websites, and associated social media accounts. The current study focused almost exclusively on text, with no formal analysis of accompanying visual imagery or memes. However, Russian disinformation campaigns often feature sensationalist imagery and memes designed to go viral, suggesting that images may be used just as strategically as text. As such, image-based analysis could yield insights that cannot be accessed via textual analysis. Additionally, themes and patterns found in images and their metadata could provide an opportunity for researchers to identify and track Russian disinformation content without relying on keywords or text-based approaches. Recent research indicates that important evidence can be extracted from images used in Russian disinformation and influence campaigns, including details that can help identify and link websites and accounts that are being used in such campaigns (Zannettou et al., 2020). Targeted analysis of visual content can also play an important role in the detection of disinformation (Cao, 2020), particularly when analyzing far-right political content (Faulkner et al., 2021).

There is also a need for additional research exploring the role of Telegram as a conduit for Russian propaganda and, more generally, conspiracy theories, disinformation, and extremism. Longitudinal research tracking the life cycles of Telegram channels would be particularly useful given that channels with large audiences are often renamed, repurposed, and reused for different purposes in different disinformation campaigns. Much of this can be traced back to QAnon, which established a disinformation infrastructure that is still in use today and continues to be successfully replicated for new disinformation campaigns and protest movements across the world (Kim & Kim, 2022). While it is already well known that the Russian government uses Telegram and has urged the public to use the messaging platform to find pro-Kremlin content (Bergengruen, 2022), it is not yet known whether and to what extent Russian operatives are utilizing the infrastructure built by QAnon. Exploring Russia's use of Telegram on a more granular level could reveal novel findings about how Russia has adapted its disinformation campaigns and tactics in the aftermath of widespread

deplatforming in 2022. Gaining a better understanding of the evolving nature of Russia's information warfare strategy—including its relation to counter-disinformation efforts, its platform-specific adaptations, and its role in promoting extremist content—is necessary to inform the development of the technical, social, and cognitive defenses that are needed to guard against it.

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