

Inspired by Canadian truckers, Europe's 'Freedom Convoy' heads to Brussels

BRUSSELS — We stand with the Canadians. We oppose vaccine mandates. And have you heard about the globalist plot to take over the world? So flows the content coursing through European social networks, as aggrieved citizens, inspired by Canada's "Freedom Convoy," plan convoys across the continent.

After weeks of online organizing — and despite warnings to stay away — French convoys rolled into Paris over the weekend, disrupting traffic on parts of the Champs-Élysées despite the deployment of more than 7,000 police. The police blocked roads and used tear gas to disperse crowds — scenes quickly forwarded across Freedom Convoy social media channels.

Some French demonstrators are now en route to Brussels, where smaller convoys from other European countries are expected to converge Monday. Belgian authorities have said they plan to monitor routes to the capital. Local officials said protesters may be diverted away from the heart of the city.

The preparations underscore the nervousness in Western capitals, as the world watches a small but radical fringe wreak havoc in the heart of liberal democracy.

The Canadian demonstrators have used big rigs to paralyze parts of Ottawa and have shut down critical border crossings to the United States. While Canadian police try to regain control, copycat convoys are popping up around the world. The Department of Homeland Security has warned that U.S. blockades could affect President Biden's State of the Union address on March 1.

In Europe, as elsewhere, the movement is a mix of earnest frustration with pandemic policy and more extreme anti-vaccine, anti-establishment, even apocalyptic views.

Régine Briquez, 66, an alternative medicine practitioner from Belfort, France, has demonstrated against government-issued health passes in France since the summer and plans to travel to Brussels to protest. "What I want is my freedom

back,” she said.

Some make more specific demands. A news release from members of another French convoy called for reduced fuel taxes — a central concern of “yellow vest” protesters — along with the dissolution of parliament and the resignation of French President Emmanuel Macron’s government.

In European Freedom Convoy channels, videos of smiling Canadian protesters are mixed with anti-vaccine propaganda, Tucker Carlson clips and anti-globalist memes.

Like the last conspiratorial import to Europe, QAnon, the Freedom Convoy movement offers common ground to “anti-system” groups across countries, said Chine Labbe, managing editor at Newsguard, a start-up that rates the reliability of online news sources and tracks disinformation.

As they organize convoys and swap content, some groups get more radical, Labbe said. The goal: “To cast doubt on democracy itself.”

Calls for a “European Freedom Convoy” emerged after the earliest protests in Ottawa.

A digital flier posted to Twitter on Jan. 31 called on local groups to “block” each European capital, then make their way en masse to Brussels, the headquarters of the European Union, to protest “tyrannical rules.”

In the past two weeks, related groups have grown quickly. One French Facebook group for the convoy now lists more than 300,000 members. On Telegram, a messaging app popular with far-right groups, global and European convoy channels boast tens of thousands of members. Those who join are quickly directed to local channels for more than two dozen countries.

It is not clear how much of the mobilizing represents authentic, grass-roots enthusiasm. And some of the groups have recently rebranded themselves in an apparent attempt to capitalize on interest in the Canadian cause.

In late January, for instance, the moderator of a Telegram group for “unvaxxed” people in France and Belgium posted that the group and others in the network had been renamed to support the Freedom Convoy to “facilitate greater international cooperation and accelerate this movement.”

The siege of Ottawa has been supported and shaped in part by the American far right. While researchers have yet to find clear financial links between U.S. actors and European organizing, it is common for Europe's far right to adopt and adapt U.S. content — and vice versa — and the convoy movement is no different.

Lisa-Maria Neudert, a researcher at the Oxford Internet Institute who has been tracking Europe's anti-lockdown movement, particularly in Germany, said English-language material from right-wing U.S. media and conspiracy theory sites is being forwarded into German-language groups.

"These Telegram groups have a history of looking to what is happening in the U.S.," she said.

Unclear is whether the convoy-organizing will translate into real-world action beyond the scale of what Europe has already seen.

In 2018, social inequality and outrage over a proposed fuel tax in France helped launch the yellow vest movement, an anti-establishment uprising that produced months of demonstrations — some violent and disruptive — in the streets of French cities and towns.

During the pandemic, some yellow vest groups joined forces with the anti-lockdown movement, a catchall that has come to include vaccine skeptics, those who oppose pandemic health measures, and groups on the far right.

In recent months, large protests against vaccine mandates and passports have been held in several European capitals. On Jan. 23, tens of thousands gathered in Brussels, some clashing with police.

"The convoy is not coming out of nowhere," said Jacob Davey from the Institute of Strategic Dialogue, a London-based think tank that studies extremism. "It's coming out of an established anti-vax, anti-lockdown movement that has been putting down roots in different countries."

For the protesters who hoped that their convoy to Paris would precipitate the fall of the French government, the weekend's events were perhaps disappointing.

The question now is whether convoys from France and other European countries will make it to Brussels and — if they do — whether a broader movement is born.

Antoine Bristielle from the Fondation Jean Jaures, a center-left French think tank, said it seemed unlikely that a Europe-wide movement would take hold, particularly because coronavirus restrictions are implemented at the national level. And many of those are being phased out.

Briquez, from eastern France, said she will press on to Brussels. "It's up there where they make the decisions," she said. "The government must stop mistaking us for idiots."

Source:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/10/europe-ban-freedom-convoy/>

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