

“Hunger is our Only Hope”: The Russian Disinformation Ecosystem and Online Conspiracy Communities Shifting Focus to Looming Food Crisis

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Summary:

- Russia’s aggression in Ukraine has exacerbated global food insecurity and Russian media, Kremlin Proxy sites, and pro-Putin trolls are amplifying narratives to pin blame on Western countries and international aid agencies for the looming food crisis.
- Online conspiracy communities and influencers linked to QAnon are notably shifting from COVID conspiracy theories to food crisis disinformation, often linking rising food insecurity to a shadowy cabal.
- Concurrently, on Twitter, globalist and “New World Order” conspiracies are surging in reaction to the “farmers protest” in the Netherlands and now appear to target food supply mandates and mobilizations.
- Explicitly pro-Putin propaganda networks on Twitter amplify New World Order themes in conjunction with the food supply crisis. This messaging shows a sharp uptick since July.
- It is NCRI and The Miller Center at Rutgers’ assessment that as food insecurity worsens, disinformation actors will continue to exploit the situation to amplify narratives that sow distrust in the political system of target audiences.

Overview:

According to the U.S. State Department, Russia’s aggression in Ukraine has vastly intensified global food insecurity.¹ Ukraine, once referred to as the “breadbasket of Europe,” and a major supplier of wheat to the Middle East and Africa, have experienced significant destruction of arable land and severely interrupted wheat exports from Russia and Ukraine since the advent of the war. Together, Russia and Ukraine supply 28% of globally traded wheat, 29% of barley, 15% of maize and 75% of the sunflower seeds needed to produce 11.5% of the vegetable oil market.² Soaring food production input costs such as energy and fertilizers are also severely disrupting global supply chains.

¹<https://www.state.gov/disarming-disinformation/russias-disinformation-cannot-hide-its-responsibility-for-the-global-food-crisis/>

² <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2022/05/19/the-coming-food-catastrophe>

For example, Africa, which typically imports grain from Ukraine and produces its own food, is seeing prices of fertilizer rise by 300% which may reduce the total farm production in Africa by 20%.³ Somalia alone used to import 92% of its wheat from Russia and Ukraine. With supply lines blocked, more than 7 million Somalis face acute food insecurity, with nearly 250,000 people at risk of imminent starvation.⁴

Globally the price of fertilizer is up 100% since the beginning of the war.⁵ According to BlackRock founder Larry Fink, the “additional cost is reducing the amount of fertilizer used in farming. That is harming the quality of the crop worldwide.”⁶ These high prices have also led some producers in Europe to significantly cut output.⁷

Russian Disinformation Ecosystem and Food Insecurity Narratives

While the prices of oil are beginning to decrease to pre-invasion levels, food inflation remains high and is expected to increase significantly in the coming months.⁸ Evidently, Russian President Vladimir Putin is keenly aware of the leverage this provides and according to Adm. John Kirby, “Putin is literally weaponizing food.”⁹ One day after ministers from Ukraine and Russia signed an agreement brokered by the UN and Turkey to allow grain exports from Ukrainian Black Sea ports, Russia fired several missiles, hitting critical port infrastructure in Odessa.¹⁰

Meanwhile, Russia’s government officials, Russian state media, and Kremlin-aligned proxies are attempting to deflect attention and, in some cases, pin the burgeoning food security crisis on the West. According to the State Department, the disinformation campaign is heavily targeting the Middle East and Africa, who are currently experiencing the brunt of the crisis.¹¹ Following the attack on Odessa’s port infrastructure, the Russian Ministry of Defense and Russian disinformation proxies said U.S. supplied missiles were stored in the grain facilities.¹²

³ <https://www.ft.com/content/70b6ded7-ac65-4d1a-ae87-4a58d26215f3>

⁴ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2022/somalia-famine-ukraine-war/>

⁵ <https://www.ft.com/content/70b6ded7-ac65-4d1a-ae87-4a58d26215f3>

⁶ Ibid

⁷ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-03-11/why-are-food-prices-so-high-soaring-fertilizer-costs-may-worsen-inflation>

⁸ <https://www2.deloitte.com/xe/en/insights/economy/global-food-prices-inflation.html>

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H5PPLpxgeE0>

¹⁰ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/07/23/russian-strike-odessa-port-ukraine-grain/>

¹¹ <https://www.state.gov/disarming-disinformation/russias-disinformation-cannot-hide-its-responsibility-for-the-global-food-crisis/>

¹² <https://southfront.org/russian-strike-on-odessa-port-destroyed-ukrainian-warship-us-supplied-harpoon-missiles-video/>

Leading Kremlin propagandists openly acknowledge the weaponization of global hunger. Editor-in-chief of Russia Today, Margarita Simonyan, recently said at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, “Hunger is our only hope. What it means is that a famine will start soon, and they will come to their senses, remove the sanctions and be friends with us because they will realize not being friends is not an option.”¹³ According to the NYT, Russia’s Foreign Minister is expected to visit 4 African nations this week, with the intention to pin blame for food insecurity on the U.S. and its allies.¹⁴

The NCRI has also identified Kremlin proxy disinformation websites such as *Global Research* and *South Front* publishing a number of stories pushing food insecurity disinformation.¹⁵



Global Research, considered a Kremlin proxy disinformation outlet by the U.S. State Department, which has published or republished a number of authors attributed to false personas created by the GRU, is shifting focus to food insecurity disinformation.



South Front, a multilingual disinformation site registered in Russia, attempting to deflect attention from Russia’s responsibility for the worsening food crisis.

Online Conspiracy Communities and NWO Narratives

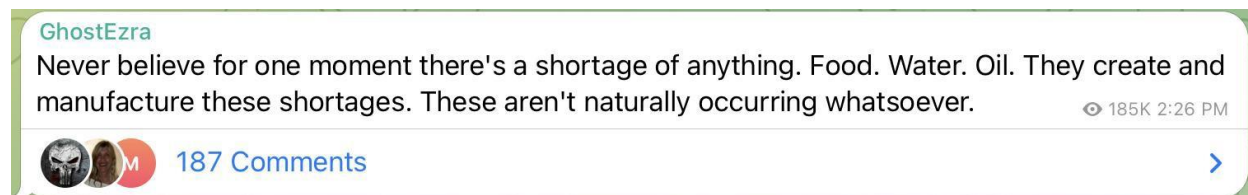
¹³https://twitter.com/EUvsDisinfo/status/1542481869236756481?s=20&t=w0Bf-2RaM_S_y9jmgeCupQ

¹⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/07/24/world/ukraine-russia-war>

¹⁵https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Pillars-of-Russia's-Disinformation-and-Propaganda-Ecosystem_08-04-20.pdf

NCRI analysts have observed a notable shift in online communities that have coalesced around anti-vaccine and anti-mandate narratives shift focus to supply chain and food inflation issues, often associating the issue to a cabal of shadowy, and often Jewish elites, for bringing about the “New World Order.” These communities and the New World Order conspiracies they disseminate amplified and organized numerous world-wide anti-vaccine mobilizations. While most of these were peaceful, extremist elements, violence and unrest were notable elements in the worldwide protests.¹⁶

According to Telescope Research, the food shortage narratives amongst extremist/conspiracy groups on Telegram have been circulating since the Spring, often linking vast conspiracy theories to fires that have occurred at food plants.¹⁷ New legislation in the Netherlands targeting the farming sector, has also energized these online communities. The NCRI has also seen several Qanon influencers push food shortage disinformation as well. For example, Ghost Ezra, an antisemitic Qanon influencer with over a quarter of a million followers claimed “there is no shortage of anything. Food. Water. Oil. They create and manufacture these shortages.” The “they” referenced in a number of these conspiracy communities is typically a code for “the elites,” and in some cases, the Jewish community.



5/27/2022 - GhostEzra (real name Robert Smart), 263K followers - key QAnon Influencer. Considered the biggest “pro-Hitler voice on Telegram”

Dutch Farmers - Legitimate animus cited as evidence of the NWO by conspiracy communities

Authorities in the Netherlands recently released details highlighting significant emission cuts that will heavily impact the farming sector. In response, farmers in the Netherlands have blockaded food distribution centers and major roads with tractors and have protested outside of the homes of Government officials. As Dutch farmers continue to protest legitimate grievances against climate legislation directly impacting their livelihoods, online communities have cited the development as evidence of the “New World Order.” On Twitter, the NCRI identified a significant and sustained

¹⁶ <https://nypost.com/2021/11/21/europes-covid-19-vaccine-mandates-spark-violent-protests/>

¹⁷ “In Focus: US Domestic Extremism, Telescope Research.” 19 July 2022.

phase change in New World Order associated terms starting in late June, with some terms mentioned roughly 250 times per hour (excluding retweets) (figure 1).

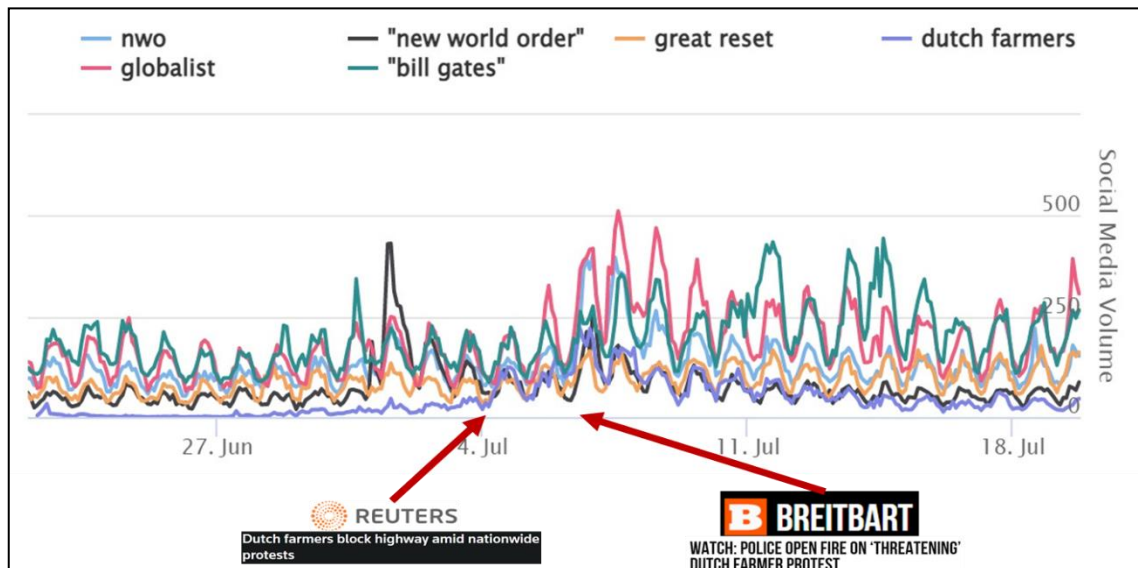


fig 1. Timeseries analysis on hourly key terms on Twitter shows surges in New World Order conspiracy terms which coincide with developments during the Dutch Farmer's protest. These surges are sustained as messaging for the NWO shifts away from vaccines and toward food shortages and climate related mandates.

Twitter Social graph analysis (figure 2) of the most prominent users who disseminate the new world order conspiracy reveals political and media influencers, several of whom disseminate anti-vaccine conspiracy. Several of these influencers seize on the grievance to amplify political narratives around the Dutch Farmer protest alongside conspiracies such as the World Economic Forum seeking to assassinate farmers, as well as the "eating bugs" conspiracy - a 4chan narrative that "globalists" are seeking to force nations to consume insects through mandates. More colorful tweets containing the eating bugs conspiracy mix elements insect conspiracy with vaccine mRNA technology to perform advanced mind control on populations.

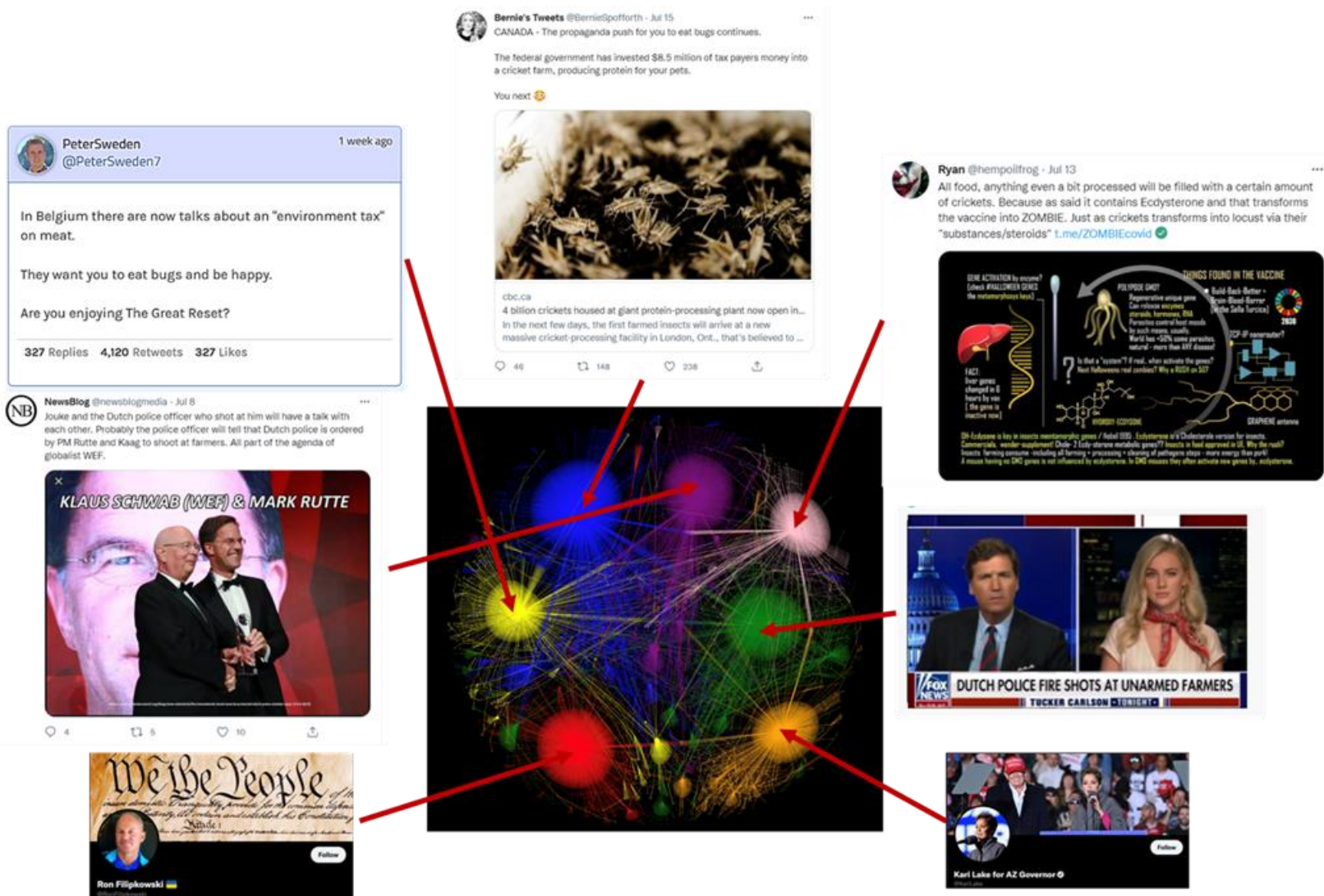


Fig 2. A social graph of users who have the most interaction over a 30 day period (ending 7/21/2022) that disseminate "new world order", globalist, NOW, "bill gates", "greatreset" and "dutch farmers" shows political candidates (@karilake) Far right journalists, and media sources (@petersweden7, @newsblogmedia, and @bernieSpofforth), as well as fringe subcultural influencers (@hempollfrog). Many of these influencers disseminated bug eating, assassination and world domination conspiracies pertaining to food supply and connected to the Dutch farmer protests.

These colorful conspiracy narratives around DNA manipulation and satanic globalists, while seeming harmless or outlandish, have been shown to motivate extremist, fringe and even populist elements¹⁸ (such as Qanon) and agitate unrest by more devoted actors during elections and

¹⁸ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2021/02/16/pizzagate-qanon-capitol-attack/>

vaccine mandate protests. These developments and narratives are notable in the evolution of the new world order conspiracy as it now switches themes to global food supply.

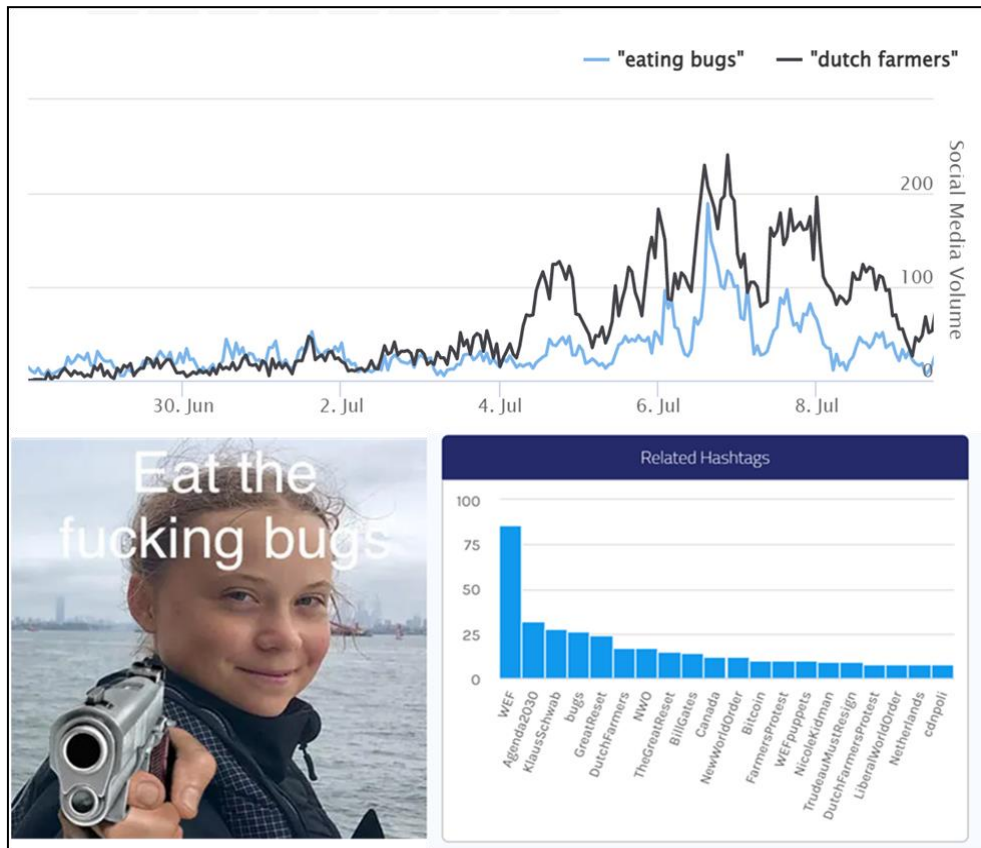


Fig 3. (Top) hourly trace activity shows peak to peak co-occurrence of “dutch farmer” comments with comments pertaining to “eating bugs” on Twitter. The eating bugs conspiracy, originating on 4chan, is often the subject of colorful memes about forced mandates (bottom left). The eating bugs conspiracy is emerging on Twitter and other mainstream communities as part of the new world order mythology as shown by related hashtag analysis (bottom right).

Further analysis of “eating bugs” conspiracy show that the narrative peaks during the farmer protest activity on Twitter while associated hashtags with “eating bugs” confirms that related topics are virtually all related to World Economic Forum topics, new world order conspiracy and globalist narratives. (figure 3.)

Finally, NCRI analyzed pro-Putin accounts which disseminated #IstandwithPutin and #IstandwithRussia, which Twitter had identified as a coordinated inauthentic disinformation campaign on its network to analyze recent messaging from the user network. We perform time series analysis and natural language processing over users that employ the above #istand

hashtags and find peak levels of mentions of “farmer” in early July, followed by surges in NWO and globalist conspiracies (figure 4).

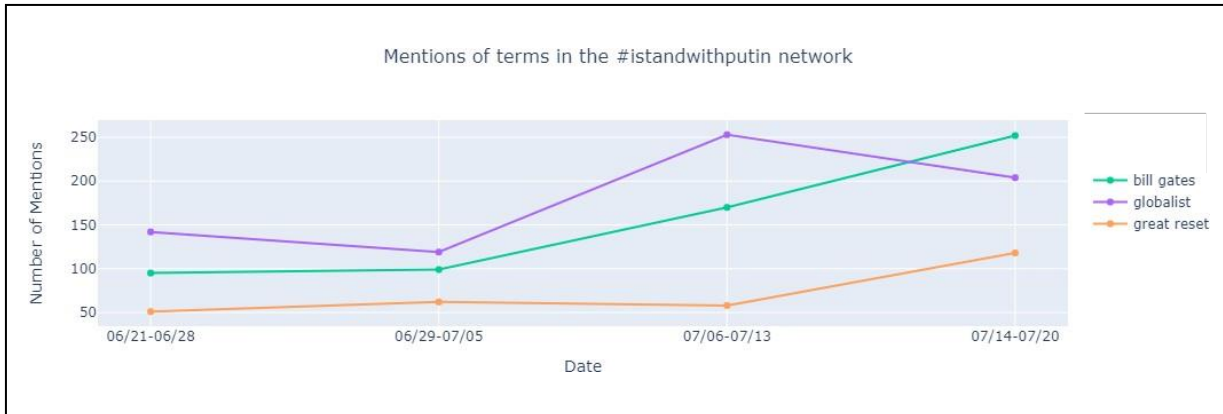
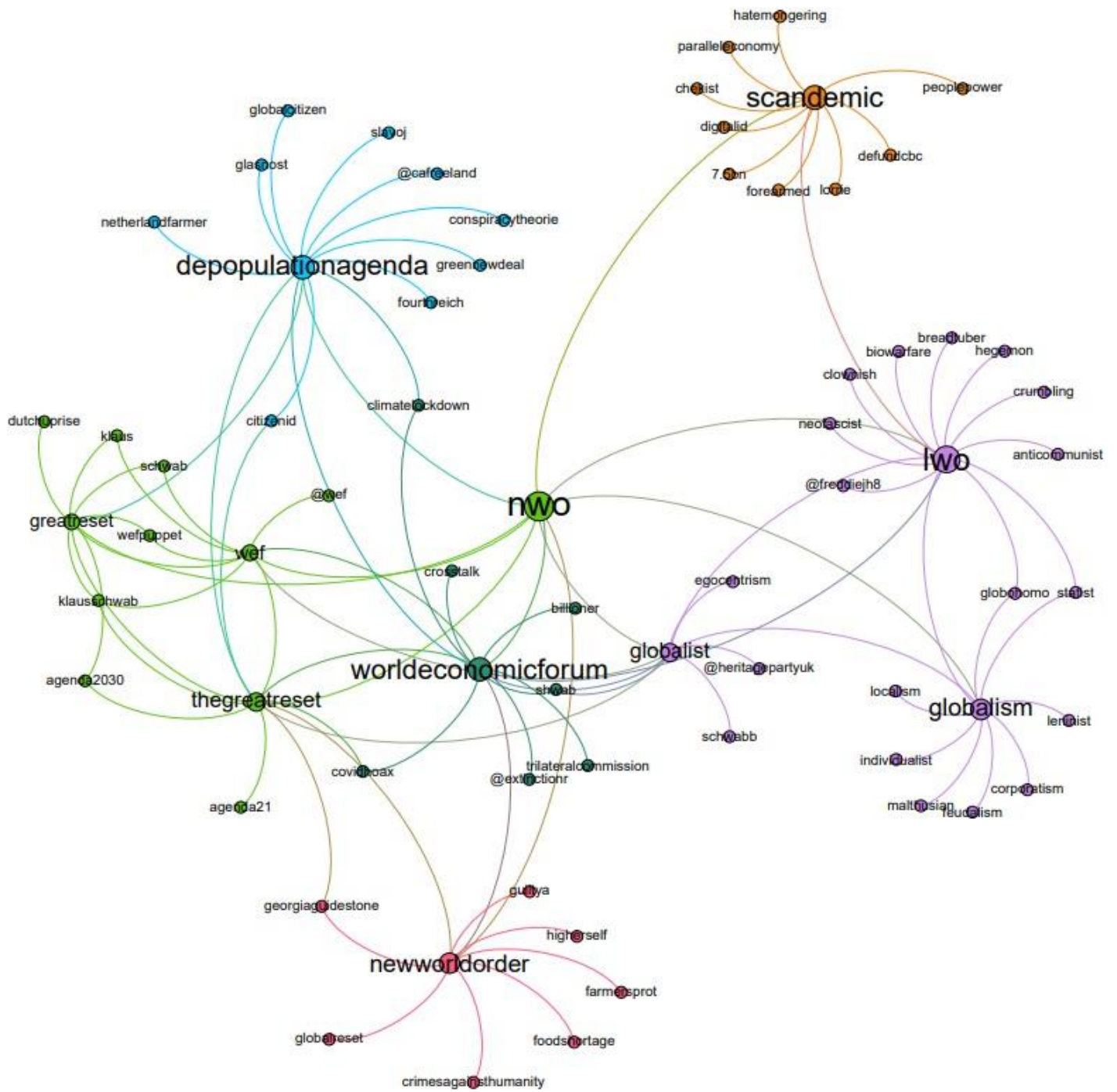


Fig 4. (Top) hourly trace activity shows weekly increases in the use of NWO conspiracy terms (globalist, NWO, new world order) in users that disseminate the #istandwithputin or #istandwithrussia hashtags. Peak use of the term “farmer” appeared with these users in early July 2022 with the Netherland protests (data not shown).

Topic network analysis (figure 5) shows that themes of “depopulation” are conjoining with the Dutch farmer protests, alongside food supply conspiracies, vaccine conspiracies and hyperbolic and paranoid narratives of apocalyptic collapse and control. Taken together, these data suggest that networks that disseminate pro-Putin material and engage in inauthentic coordinated behavior are now switching to amplify NWO/globalist narratives in tandem with narratives about food security and agricultural mandates.



Key Takeaways:

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is now exacerbating global food insecurity. In anticipation of the resulting food crisis, Russia, its state media, its proxy influencer ecosystem, and subcultural online communities are increasingly disseminating disinformation which blames Western nations, institutions, and/or a shadowy group of elites. The NCRI/Miller Center assesses this amplification of food insecurity disinformation and conspiracy theories will accelerate if the food crisis worsens in the coming months and could seep into mainstream discourse.

Mobilizations and protests surrounding food security are already beginning to occur internationally as the food crisis worsens. The New World Order conspiracy is prominent from anti-government militias to the Qanon movement, both of which have inspired extremist activities ranging from disruptions at protests to stochastic violence and threats against elected officials. The NCRI/Miller Center assesses that the continued food insecurity will likely presage increases in such extremist activities moving forward.