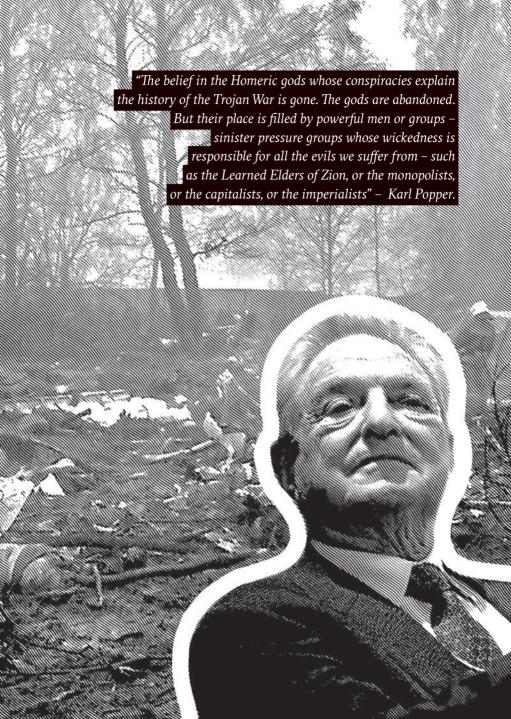


CONSPIRACY
THEORIES
VS EUROPEAN
LIBERALS









A few years ago, Europeans associated *conspiracy theories* with harmless lunacy. With American pop culture, which was fed stories about aliens from Roswell in New Mexico or Area 51 in Nevada, about the moon landing, which never took place or Elvis, who still lives. Or that Hitler lives... Each spectacular transportation disaster, an accident that happened to a politician or a celebrity, gave rise to stories, which had followers overseas but reached Europe already modified by writers and directors. It was the same in the last few years when theories about flat Earth (entirely contradictory to the primary school curriculum) or humanoid reptiles taking control of the world's most powerful grew in popularity. We watched documentaries about followers of such theories on streaming sites and treated them just like sequels of Borat, like mockumentary comedy too ridiculous to be true.

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However, conspiracy theories were popular in Europe. For many years, in fact. Some of them are very old, others concern a distant past, for example, the phantom time hypothesis, according to which, the time of early Middle Ages (614–911) never occurred, because the date was moved by forging documents<sup>1</sup>. But there are newer theories and even very recent ones. There are pan-European narratives and strictly national ones. One of latter ones is Smolensk theory in Poland, which had influence on the change of the ruling party and even the political orientation of the entire country<sup>2</sup>. What's more, not only those locally

See e.g. Andrei, M. (2021, February 1). Crazy ideas: The Phantom Time hypothesis. ZME Science. Retrieved from https://www.zmescience.com/other/feature-post/crazy-ideas-phantom-time-hypothesis/

See e.g. Tamkin, E. (2018, April 10). Has the Clock Run Out on the Smolensk Conspiracy? Foreign Policy. Retrieved from https://

grown theories but also the most popular global theories, no matter how absurd they seem at first glance, gain followers all over the continent. Deep state, QAnon, chemtrails... you name it.

Regardless of the conspiracy theories' rise in popularity and their destructive potential, up till recently, they were beyond the scientists and politicians' main sphere of interest. It would be extremely hard to find interdisciplinary research on conspiracy theories or plans for systematic fight against them which were created by governments or the EU as a whole. Conspiracy theories, associated with paranoia, ignorance, naiveté and reduced to a light mental disorder, have been blossoming as a silly phenomenon, not worth the attention.

However, it has turned out that conspiracy theories are not just trivial stories, which can be put next to 'urban legends' and 'American folklore'. In the favourable times of post-truth and the hegemony of social media, we have understood that conspiracy theories have an enormous potential to engage people; organise and direct their actions in the public sphere. In those fast-growing movements, which are based on beliefs contradicting the world of science, many ordinary citizens, as well as people with academic degrees, found themselves at home. Belief in conspiracies is a phenomenon found in all sectors of society<sup>3</sup>. Also politicians have noticed, and can't ignore, their potential for elections. The Us

foreignpolicy.com/2018/04/10/has-the-clock-run-out-on-the-smolenskconspiracy/

But research has shown that the proportion of conspiracy theorists suffering from mental illness is no greater than the proportion among the general population. przed adresem dodać: See e.g. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/ejsp.2494

presidential candidate Donald Trump has deliberately fished from the Internet's depths the followers of QAnon theory, according to which, Hillary Clinton led an international paedophile gang, which was directed from a pizzeria; using QAnon, he cleared his path to the most important office in the world. The same movement was meant to help him stay in power after the loss in the 2020 elections, by creating the avant-garde of a coup, the symbol of which became a shaman, bison-man, who stormed the Capitol.

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Supporters of conspiracy theories not only influence election results, but they are elected themselves. And it's not only cynical Trump, who is leaving in disgrace (for now) but also a new wave of his followers, who are taking over the Republican Party and joining various legislative bodies. For example, new congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene, who follows the most peculiar conspiracy theories, including antisemitic theory, according to which the deadly wildfire in California was caused by Rothchild Inc. "space solar generators" In other words, in the Us House of Representatives, there is a person who believes that Jews set deadly fires using huge mirrors placed in space... For now only one.

Is it better in Europe? Not really. Conspiracy theories serve as a foundation for the identity of at least two major political parties, which have been ruling Poland and Hungary on their own for a few years, gradually depriving those countries of their place in the family of liberal democracies. The conspiracy theory about George Soros and his *dangerous network*, coming

Chait, J. (2021, January 28). GOP Congresswoman Blamed Wildfires on Secret Jewish Space Laser. New York. Retrieved from https://nymag. com/intelligencer/article/marjorie-taylor-greene-qanon-wildfiresspace-laser-rothschild-execute.html

from the Hungarian Prime Minister, has spread throughout half Europe, intensifying nationalistic and xenophobic climate. It has been used by heads of state (Czech Rep.), governments (Slovakia, Slovenia) and many populistic, right-wing parties on the entire continent. Also those parties, which created government coalitions (e.g. Independent Greeks, EKRE in Estonia)<sup>5</sup>.

The migration crisis and economic crisis connected with it were used by all kinds of European populists. Joining, or even fueling conspiracy theories that explain the mass migration of refugees from the Middle East to Europe has helped them build support for elections on anti-Muslim and anti-establishment slogans. As well as slogans opposing the power of Germany, financial institutions – real ones and imagined – social and business clubs... All this enabled power-hungry politicians to find simple explanations for complicated socio-economic problems, which many European countries have been facing. In order to understand this phenomenon better, one should observe the political scene in Greece, where almost all political parties have found culprits of the crisis very far from the painful reality.

Since 2008 buzzwords in the EU have been "disinformation" and "fake news". One after the other, public agendas on the European and national levels as well as NGOs have been creating plans and programmes to fight them. A lot of research has been financed, which enabled us (in part) to understand the phenomenon's essence and take action. Conspiracy theories, if they were noticed at all, stayed on the margins of this discussion.

BBC News (2015, September 24). New Greek minister Kammenos quits in tweets row. Retrieved from https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34346590

And only the Covid-19 pandemic brought conspiracy theories to the forefront of Europeans' consciousness, showing what they really are, and how dangerous they can be.

With panic which accompanied the appearance of coronavirus in Europe and the first lockdown, came the interest in conspiracy theories about 5G and Big Pharma responsible for the production of the virus and vaccines causing autism. The old theories about HIV were brought back to life – with the name of the virus changed. The three major narratives could be identified: 1. the origins of the virus (5G, Russians, Chinese, bioweapon programme out of control); 2. the cures and medical treatments for the virus (e.g. Covid-deniers filming empty hospitals); 3. the instrumental use of the virus to push secret agendas (to get rid of the elderly, chips to control the population). All have threatened public security.

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The WHO warned about the outbreak of an "infodemic", which could destroy hopes for a quick victory over the virus. Research showed that one-third of people in Germany believe in conspiracy theories, even more Slovaks believe that the number of deaths caused by the coronavirus is artificially overvalued. In countries like the Czech Republic, Romania and Bulgaria, vaccine sceptics

There was even 1st WHO Infodemiology Conference (https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/epi-win/infodemic-management/infodemiology-scientific-conference-booklet.pdf?sfvrsn=179de76a\_4)

DW News (2020, September 6). One-third of people in Germany believe in conspiracy theories: poll. Retrieved from https://www.dw.com/en/ germany-conspiracy-theories/a-54834488

The Slovak Spectator (2020, December 14). More than one third of Slovaks believe conspiracy theories about the coronavirus.

Retrieved from https://spectator.sme.sk/c/22554626/more-than-one-third-of-slovaks-believe-conspiracy-theories-about-the-coronavirus.html

have included former presidents and even some doctors. In the Netherlands, Ireland, Cyprus and Belgium cell towers have been attacked to prevent the virus<sup>9</sup>. In Italy, the doctors and nurses lauded for their exhausting, dangerous work in the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic later started to face a new challenge: conspiracy theories accusing them of faking the emergency<sup>10</sup>. Internet stories became a danger to the public order and safety of Europe, let alone the liberal values.

2020 has shown that the fight against conspiracy theories has to be systemic and solid. Budgets must include resources for interdisciplinary research on this phenomenon, which was up till now seldom considered. This includes the European budget. Not only stopping *conspiracy culture* is at stake, but also protecting open democracy and the European Union itself. The European Union as an "elitist" organization, led by "inhumane bureaucracy" is the perfect surface for populist forces to project their conspiracy theories onto. Populists and extremists have been using conspiracy theories in previous crises, also during the Brexit campaign<sup>11</sup>, and they will not hesitate to use them once more willing to deal the fatal blow to the EU.

<sup>9</sup> Chan, K., Dupuy, B., Lajka, A. (2020, April 12). Conspiracy theorists burn 5G towers claiming link to virus. ABC News. Retrieved from https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/conspiracy-theorists-burn-5g-towers-claiming-link-virus-70258811

<sup>10</sup> Privitera, G. (2020, November 26). Italy's doctors face new threat:
Conspiracy theories. Politico. Retrieved from https://www.politico.eu/article/italy-coronavirus-doctors-face-conspiracy-theories/

<sup>&</sup>lt;u>11</u> See e.g. Payne, S. (2016, May 25). The Vote Leave campaign resorts to conspiracy theories. Foreign Policy. Retrieved from https://www.ft.com/content/83db2140-2262-11e6-9d4d-c11776a5124d

This publication is an attempt to explain what conspiracy theories are and how we can protect liberal democracy and the European Union against them. The authors present the phenomenon from various perspectives and demonstrate their proposals for solving the problem. The first chapter is a philosophical introduction by one of the most popular Polish philosophers and a philosophy populariser, Tomasz Stawiszyński. In his chapter he is looking for the sources of conspiracy theories in "[t]he disintegration of coherent, comprehensive stories about the world; the crisis of institutionalised religions as the main source of meaning and a coherent image of the world; the disintegration of traditional bonds and social hierarchies; the development of science, which presents an image of a world lacking any higher purpose, and of human life as based solely on biological processes and ending at the moment of physical death; loneliness, uncertainty, emptiness, the imperative to succeed in a brutal, ruthless market". On the philosophical road to understanding fundamentalism and pseudo-scientific narratives, we meet, i.a., Heraclitus, Plato, but also Popper, Freud and Jung.

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Swedish-Finnish social psychologist Simon Granroth intends to provide a psychological framework for analysing and understanding the challenges of conspiracy thinking in the context of other destructive social and political phenomena like populism or extremism. He points out four psychological mechanisms, on which conspiracy narratives feed, that is the notion of 'us' and 'them', the theory of cognitive dissonance, appeals to authority and moral intuitions. Granroth explains in an accessible manner all those mechanisms and illustrates them with results from psychological experiments. In his reflections, he also points out

the differences between liberals and non-liberals and the susceptibility of the two groups to conspiracy theories.

In the next chapter Wilbert Jan Derksen from Dutch think tank Prof.mr. B.M. TeldersStichting transports us to the USA, where "everything began". The us is experiencing a surge in conspiracy theories, as ideas that used to be on the fringes take more and more central roles in politics. He takes a closer look at a number of these conspiracy theories and what role they have played in us politics. He presents important conspiracies that have arisen over the years leading up to Trump's presidency and then shows how conspiracies have taken a central role in us politics since the 2016 elections. Derksen analyses the development of conspiracy thinking in the USA, from Roswell, through JFK's murder and 9/11, to the case of Obama's birth certificate to show how the foundation of Trump's success was created. At last, Trump's presidency becomes the starting point for explaining the phenomenon of 'conspiracy entrepreneur'. It turns out that the systematic spread of conspiracy theories became a business model and a source of income for sowers of post-truth associated with the administration of the 45th President.

A subject extremely important for understanding the danger of conspiracy theories is their connection to extremism. Gian Marco Bovenzi from the Italian Fondazione Luigi Einaudi analyses the causal chain that can lead from *conspiration* to violence and terrorism. He identifies the factors representing the drivers of the threat of terrorism derived from conspiracy thinking. His analysis shows that extremist and violence implications can bloom through a self-reinforcing dynamic, in which the conspiracy theorists empower themselves by exploiting the lack of trust in institutions

on the grounds of psychological biases and cognitive processes. "Members of very different extremist groups frequently believe in conspiracy theories, even when such theories do not constitute their 'official' ideology: this belief serves as a 'radicalising multiplier' holding together the groups and sometimes leading to extreme and violent manifestations", he stresses. Any 'external' attempt to deny a particular theory becomes a source of strength because it is seen as a confirmation of its validity. Bovenzi, after considering the role of the Internet in enhancing the spread of conspiracy ideas, focuses on technophobia, a heightened anxiety level induced by Information Technology.

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Closely connected to extremism is another phenomenon hate speech. Researchers from Spain, Ana G. Juanatey, University of Barcelona, and Laia Tarragona, University of Deusto CEI International Affairs, Center Affiliated to the University of Barcelona, concentrate on the subject of hate-based conspiracy theories. They describe the phenomenon of conspiracy theories that are based on prejudice directed against certain groups that have suffered discrimination historically, on the grounds of characteristics such as their religion, race or ethnicity. It is the case, for example, of antisemitic conspiracy theories or the Great Replacement theory. The consequences of such hate-based conspiracy theories are multiple. Not only do these contribute to undermining democracy and building social distrust, but they also have a massive impact on the groups they point at, fuelling prejudice and discrimination against them. In times, this type of conspiracy theories has been linked to perpetrators of hate crime and terrorist attacks. They examine the link between hate speech and conspiracy theories, exploring its consequences and relation

to extremism and violence, the actors that promote and support them, as well as different ways to tackle hate-based conspiracy theories in the age of the Internet.

The last two chapters are focused on the Internet. If it weren't for the extraordinarily fast development of Internet communication, especially social media, conspiracy theories wouldn't have gained such reach and popularity, which we could observe in 2020. "Conspiracy theories are a plague of our time that has been gaining strength, particularly in countries where the citizen's trust in authorities and institutions is low. This plague spreads thanks to the crises (economic, health, political) and popularity of the social media, where anyone can easily find people with similar views and the most unbelievable narratives of today's world", begins her article Anna Mierzyńska, an expert in the new Internet phenomena. In her article she explains links between susceptibility to conspiracy theories and taking part in virtual life, acquiring knowledge only from the Internet. She presents the mechanisms of how conspiracy theories spread on the Internet and how they get through to the offline sphere. And also what are the real consequences of Internet radicalisation.

While Mierzyńska points to the most popular platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, Jasmina Mršo and Faris Šehović from the Boris Divković Foundation in Sarajevo focus on alt-tech, websites and platforms popular among the alt-right, farright, and others who espouse extreme or fringe opinions, due to less stringent content moderation than mainstream internet service providers. After the attack on the Capitol, many people have heard about Parler, but the alt-tech universe is rich. And dangerous. Whilst alt-tech is integral for organising extremist

groups and conspiracy communities, their main target are still the users of mainstream social media platforms. It's there that *the warriors of the post-truth* train, and then, armed with skills in the area of manipulation set out to war for the souls of the 'common folk'. This sphere is virtually unknown to most Internet users, but it requires a well-planned exploration in order to limit the influence of conspiracy theories and other tools of post-truth.

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In between the chapters, there are *conspirationist' cards*, which present conspiracy theories from the European Union member states. Some are recognized outside of their country of origin, due to their significance or connection to global narratives. However, most of them are not well-known. Some are important, some terrifying, and some just interesting. The sum of them shows how complex a phenomenon of conspiracy theories is, how wild European's imagination is, and how much hard work is still to be done.

When our collect ive immune system. IS WEEKENBOLNWELLS



by TOMASZ STAWISZYŃSKI



Special infographics explaining in detail what conspiracy theories are, how they spread and how to counteract them were published in September 2020 by UNESCO<sup>1</sup> – the United Nations agency responsible for education, fostering a scientific worldview and ensuring high intellectual standards.

In these attractive graphic documents, we get – among other things – a condensed definition of conspiracy thinking. This is "the belief that events are secretly manipulated behind the scenes by powerful forces with negative intent".

Right next to it we also have the six most characteristic views that can be detected in any conspiracy theory. What is included in this list? An alleged secret plot; a group of conspirators; "evidence" that seems to support the conspiracy theory; the belief that nothing happens by accident and that there are no coincidences; nothing is as it appears and that everything is connected; they divide the world between good and bad; they scapegoat people and groups.

Furthermore, the materials prepared by UNESCO inform that conspiracy theories reduce anxiety and uncertainty, because they offer a simple explanation for extremely complicated matters. And they are born – this is an accurate diagnosis – sometimes imperceptibly, from a single doubt or distrust, on which a huge edifice of increasingly absurd beliefs and suppositions is then built.

Edmond, C. (2020, September 2). Conspiracy theories have flourished during the pandemic - here's how to stop them in their tracks. World Economic Forum. Retrieved from https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/09/conspiracy-theories-prevent-spread-covid-19-unesco/?fbclid =IwAR0U5uv7njEaJge29YsIl0mpiPzj0kKT6-NuWMmUGKjMCJEIHH4U5h\_hq64

In fact, it seems that sometimes, through such a seemingly small and insignificant crack – some tiny gap in the image of the world, some minimal, innocent deviation from some specific rules of mental handling of reality called scepticism and rationalism – an unstoppable wave of conspiracy thinking bursts into our minds. Behind this disturbing regularity lies as much the logic of our cognitive apparatuses as the logic of contemporary electronic media.

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It starts with a small doubt about the safety of vaccination, with a commentary, a text that seems to be a solid scientific work. And then, unknowingly, without any tangible moment of crossing any border, without experiencing any deep inner transformation, even without feeling that our views have changed, we discover the existence of a great, universal conspiracy. A web – invisible to the naked eye – entwines this world and determines everything that happens in it – from the simplest aspects of everyday life to political decisions at the highest level, from car accidents on the country road to gigantic natural disasters.

Like the victims of various forms of psycho-manipulation, like people seduced by various more or less home-grown charismatic gurus, as well as members of radical groups or staunch supporters of criminal, ideological political systems, someone who has fallen into the mire of conspiracy thinking does not realise at all when and how such a fundamental transformation has occurred in him or her. As if in a thriller or a phantasmagorical film by David Lynch, he wakes up one day in a completely alien place, in someone else's clothes, among strangers – and he has no way of finding an answer to the question of how he actually got there. Perhaps the analogy should be drawn a little differently, because –

and this is precisely the point of the drama – someone who finds himself under the power of conspiracy narratives does not even realise that he has woken up in a completely different world. And although he has long since found himself on the other side of the continuum – in a world populated by shape-shifting lizards, in a world where everything that is really important remains carefully hidden and accessible only to those who make a kind of "voluntary suspension of disbelief" – so although he has long since found himself in this world, even for a moment he has not lost the sense of continuity, he has not felt that his surroundings have changed. It is possible that this is one of the key elements of this particular mechanism, characterised – to quote the British philosopher Ernst Gellner², who used the term in the title of his excellent book on psychoanalysis – by an irresistible "seductive charm".

### THE ESSENTIAL CANNOT BE SEEN

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In the universe designed by conspiracy theories, nothing is obvious and everything is possible. What is visible, observable, nameable, what is officially presented as true, in the media, schools, universities – is only a thin surface layer, under which a game is played by forces that create this layer in order to hide their existence and their real rank from us. Somewhere out there, out of our sight, there is therefore some completely different hierarchy, some completely different structure. They, who "have eyes, but cannot see; have ears, but cannot hear" (Psalm 135), they do not

Gellner. E. (1997). Uwodzicielski urok psychoanalizy (original title: The Psychoanalytic Movement. Translated by Hołówka, T.). Warsaw: Ksiażka i Wiedza

know about it – and do not want to know. But whoever has the courage to look through all these external decorations will see straight through to the "things hidden since the foundation of the world" (Matthew 13:35). "Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed" declares Jesus in the Gospel of John (20:29).

But the sources of this metaphysics obviously go much further back in time.

"The hidden harmony is better than the obvious" – says Heraclitus, the Greek philosopher who lived at the turn of the 6th and 5th centuries BC, in fragment B54. And this seems to be the most condensed and to the very core definition of any decent conspiracy theory and, at the same time, the founding intuition behind the entire Western culture. In a sense, then, the whole of Western civilisation is founded precisely on the idea of such conspiracy, for it is founded on Plato and his dualism – a stunning in every respect development and systematisation of Heraclitean intuition, or rather, who knows, Heraclitean insight.

It was Plato who set the basic parameters of our thinking. Christianity and Cartesianism – the pillars of the Western thinking, the pillars of the Western spirituality – work on the structure designed by him, on the understanding of the hierarchy of beings, which he proposed in a remarkably exquisite intellectual and literary manner. This hierarchy has a simple structure: what is visible, what is here and now, does not count. It is but a distant shadow, an inferior reflection of a perfect model, which can be reached only through intellectual speculation and a special extraintellectual, extra-sensual insight.

Yes, this is the metaphysical framework of our entire perception of reality – and it may seem a bit risky to build an analogy

between conspiracy theory and this sort of set of beliefs. However, I am by no means claiming that it would be possible to put Plato and David Icke<sup>3</sup> in the same line, I am only claiming that somewhere deep down, at the very foundations of our thinking, at the very foundations of our imagination, there lurks some doubt, some disbelief that what is around us, what is visible, accessible, concrete, tangible – that all this really is as it appears to be

Some fundamental temptation to discover the undiscovered, which is stronger and more real than what it has been disguised as, for various reasons. This impulse permeates the Western culture. It enlivens Christianity, especially in its tradition of Plato and St Augustine, it is particularly evident in ancient Gnosticism, and much later it returns in a peculiar guise in the concepts of the three great masters of the hermeneutics of suspicion – Marx, Nietzsche and Freud.

In each of them we have this basic observation: the essential cannot be seen, while what is visible is almost a camouflage for forces and interests of a completely different nature, which, however, constitute the authentic *centre of command*. The exploitation of some at the expense of the wealth of others, producing a specific consciousness that delays any emancipatory processes and, consequently – a social revolt. The power of resentment transformed into a mythology with the help of which the weak enslave the strong, stifling in them the impulses of self-determination and

David Icke is former BBC journalist, known as a Holocaust denier and the king of conspiracy theorists. In 2020 YouTube, Facebook and Twitter permanently suspended his accounts for violating rules regarding coronavirus misinformation [editor's comment].

all life-giving expression. Finally – a complex code of seemingly meaningless dreams, mistaken actions and bizarre symptoms hiding a dark ocean of desires and wants, on the surface of which our proud and self-confident consciousness floats like a small boat. Tossed about every now and then by powerful waves, but at the same time certain that it chooses each direction in a free, conscious and rational manner

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In each of them we also have a specific methodology for reaching the hidden and forbidden, bringing it to daylight and then, in its rays, disassembling it into primary components, blowing it apart, neutralising it – and consequently freeing it from this overwhelming influence. It is these particular applied hermeneutics – dialectical materialism and psychoanalysis (in Nietzsche's case, it is simply a thorough reading of Christian texts against their declared content and values) – that allow, at least in theory, access to the *harmony of the invisible*, which is manifold more powerful than the visible.

However, the perspicacity of these methods, their ability to reach where the unaided eye cannot, gives rise to a particular feature of this kind of thinking that makes it structurally similar to classical conspiracy theories in a disturbing way. It is their non-reproducibility, their non-falsifiability, a term coined by the Austrian philosopher Karl Raimund Popper in his famous work "The Logic of Scientific Discovery". Popper looked particularly closely at psychoanalysis in this context, pointing to a peculiar circumstance: it self-justifies as such. That is, it derives the justification for the truth of its own assertions from within the universe that it projects. With regard to the statements of psychoanalysis, it is impossible to indicate the conditions under which

they would turn out to be false, for no matter what happens or does not happen, they are always and irrevocably true. Therefore, there is no accumulation of knowledge in this field, for in the strict sense of the term no knowledge exists there. There are only sentences which, by coincidence, may agree with some state of affairs, but they are neither an effect nor part of any mechanism which serves to build up an adequate picture of the world. This is because it presupposes a laborious process of hypotheses formulation and then their verification. And for verification to be possible – i.e. for us to be able to check whether a sentence is true or false - a hypothesis must be falsifiable, i.e., susceptible to refutation. Meanwhile, says Popper, Freud's concepts are "simply unverifiable, irrefutable. No conceivable human behaviour could contradict them"4. In practice this works as follows: If a psychoanalyst diagnoses "resistance" in a patient and defines its source as hidden aggression or desire towards himself, then it is over, the door has been closed, and there is no way (except possibly the good will of the analyst) to escape from the power of this interpretation. Even if the patient answers that he or she likes the analyst, this will only prove that the interpretation is correct. It simply means that the patient resists even more intensely, not wanting to allow his authentic feelings into his consciousness, which he is not yet able to "contain" in himself at this stage. This applies to probably every interpretation that the psychoanalyst presents, while the method he uses to produce them is purely

<sup>4</sup> K.R. Popper (1999). Droga do wiedzy. Domysły i refutacje (original title: Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge. Translated by Amsterdamski, S.). Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe, p. 68

arbitrary – because it removes all conditions for verification of own judgements.

## **CULTURE OF CONSPIRACY**

The point here, however, is not to argue that psychoanalysis is simply one big conspiracy theory, but to realise how deeply Western culture - and its dominant perspectives, institutions, languages and viewpoints - is imbued with the mentality characteristic of conspiracy theories. And although researchers of the subject agree that the founding moment for conspiracy thinking, that we today call it, was the Great French Revolution - or, more precisely, the shock of the sudden collapse of the old world, the dissolution of its seemingly eternal, immovable foundations - it is at the same time this fundamental distrust, this fundamental doubt (originating perhaps in the sense of alienation) about how visible and invisible things are, that is as old as human culture. It has always been with us. Perhaps that is why, when today the old world is also falling apart, when the multifaceted and multilevel crises - from the economic one, the mother of all crises, to the identity crisis - have erased in us the remnants of a sense of security and have made the future into one great unknown, perhaps that is why this primordial distrust is growing today to truly gargantuan proportions.

Many researchers nowadays dealing in conspiracy theories are inclined to similar conclusions. While for a very long time the way sociologists or philosophers approached this phenomenon was limited either to seeing it in terms of mere errors in logical reasoning, or to seeing it as a symptom of psychological

disorders - the charismatic thinkers who defined the field in this way were Karl Popper, already mentioned here, and the American political scientist Richard Hofstadter<sup>5</sup> - while for some time now sociologists or philosophers have been looking at conspiracy theories in a completely different way. Some even say – and this is very close to the understanding I am proposing here - that conspiracy theories, or rather: people with a conspiratorial mindset, are by no means a marginal phenomenon, nor isolated from the rest of the world of social institutions. On the contrary, there is only a quantitative difference between the defined "conspiracy theory believers" and all of us who, on a daily basis, watch with suspicion the scheming of politicians and large corporations, read about various scandals, or learn about people who secretly lead completely different lives than we thought. The American lawyer Mark Fenster says in the introduction to his book "Conspiracy Theories. Secrecy and Power in American Culture", that today "we all are followers of conspiracy theories"6. He is echoed by the British cultural studies scholar Peter Knight who, instead of conspiracy theories, speaks of a "culture of conspiracy".

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What they both have in mind is, above all, the universality of conspiracy beliefs and perceptions – pervading popular culture and so-called "common wisdom" – but also the peculiar complete-

Mofstadter, R. (November 1964). The Paranoid Style in American Politics. Harper's Magazine. Retrieved from https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/

Fenster, M. (2014). Dziś wszyscy jesteśmy zwolennikami teorii spiskowych. In Czech, F. (Ed). Struktura teorii spiskowych. Antologia. Cracow: Nomos, p. 154

<sup>7</sup> Knight, P. (2001). Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to The X Files. London: Routlege

ness of conspiracy viewpoints. And their – paradoxical – idealism. The desire for a better, fairer, more transparent, cooperative and empathetic world.

Of course, conspiracy theories are very often vehicles of racist or, in any case, stigmatising ideas about certain social groups, but at the same time, the vision of reality hidden in them, which can be extracted by looking at their *a contrario* diagnoses, allows us to see that "conspiracy theories reject the existing political and social order, but they do so in the belief that a better order is possible".

Let's take, for example, one of the most exotic, yet steadily gaining in popularity, concept that the entire political and economic elite of the Western world is in fact composed of reptilians, or shape-shifting lizards, who arrived thousands of years ago from the distant constellation of Draco. It would seem that a more absurd idea could hardly be conceivable, and yet – according to a poll carried out a few years ago, as many as twelve million Americans admit to this kind of belief.

Judging by the way things are going today – by the number of YouTube videos demonstrating beyond any doubt the alleged moments of "transformation" of well-known politicians or movie stars, but also by internet posts and subsequent books devoted to this subject – there may be many, many more supporters of the hypothesis of a bloodthirsty, lizard-like conspiracy.

<sup>8</sup> Dziś wszyscy jesteśmy zwolennikami teorii spiskowych (2014)

Bump, P. (2020, April 2). 12 Million Americans Believe Lizard People Run Our Country. The Atlantic. Retrieved from https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/04/12-million-americans-believe-lizard-people-run-our-country/316706/

Of course, on the one hand, rationalistic arguments can be made against this mythology. It can be pointed out that we have no evidence, not even the slightest, to support this thesis, because no one has ever managed to capture such a cunning lizard and then make it reveal its true shape.

Reptilianologists will immediately reply, of course – by the way, it is impossible to deny this reply at least a minimum degree of probability – that this proves nothing, because, firstly, the reptilians are so powerful that capturing any of them is almost impossible, and, secondly, even if we did capture them, they have such advanced technology of camouflaging their reptilian nature that we would not get any eye-witness testimony anyway.

If, however, we look at the story of ruthless lizards who wield indivisible power over humanity, who hold the reins of government and the largest corporations, who are rich and prosperous, who prey on the unwitting majority, and who in addition feed on – in the most literal sense – human blood; if we look at this story as a specific metaphor, a modern myth, with the help of which some kind of current experience is symbolically captured, don't we suddenly see that it is, yes, fanciful and caricatured, but nevertheless quite an insightful diagnosis of contemporary, predatory capitalism?

# RIGHT WORLDVIEW

The UNESCO starts from an otherwise intuitive assumption that the growing susceptibility to conspiracy theories stems simply from a lack of reliable knowledge and a misunderstanding of what the scientific method is all about. It follows in the foot-

steps of Karl Popper rather than Mark Fenster or Peter Knight. In this perspective, which is nowadays the dominant one – both in relation to the ever-growing anti-vaccination movements and to less socially harmful ideas, such as the belief that the moon landing never took place and that the alleged film documentation of it was created in Hollywood studios under the professional eye of Stanley Kubrick – a simple assumption is made. It reads: if followers of conspiracy theories – or, more broadly, of various pseudo-scientific stories that have nothing to do with facts, although they very cleverly pretend to be them – were able to distinguish between reliable and unreliable beliefs, they would cease to adhere to these peculiar viewpoints.

It is assumed here that knowledge is the key to the "right" worldview – just as for Socrates it was the key to the "right" ethics. – For all evil, Socrates argued, stems from ignorance. Whoever acts badly, does so because he lacks information as to what good is and how one should act well. If he is provided with this knowledge, he will change his behaviour.

If, however, conspiracy theories are much more than just erroneous beliefs, erroneous reasoning, and if the very structure of these beliefs, once set-in motion, cannot practically be stopped – because everything confirms it, like psychoanalysis, everything always works in its service, everything permanently feeds this particular theoretical perpetual motion machine – this must inevitably mean that education alone is not enough.

That the oppositions rationality-irrationality, knowledge-ignorance, facts-mythologies, correctness-incorrectness, realism-paranoia, health-pathology, do not exhaust the field of possibilities of description. That to confront this complex being – the

culture of conspiracy – some other tools are needed, some other perspective.

### MASSIVE BREAKDOWN OF BONDS

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This missing link, which may be what this is all about, is clearly visible in two recent documentaries – "We Believe in Dinosaurs" the 2019 film directed by Monica Long Ross and Clayton Brown, and a year earlier, "Behind the Curve" directed by Daniel J. Clark. Both take a close look at adherents of beliefs that are peculiar and in stark contradiction to the very elementary facts provided by modern science.

The first introduces us to the circle of American fundamentalist Christians gathered around the organisation "Answers in Genesis" – who believe that the Bible tells the literal truth about the history of the world and mankind, and that the theory of evolution is one big lie. And that therefore the Earth has existed for barely 6.000 years, and quite recently the eponymous dinosaurs lived on it, with whom homo sapiens co-existed peacefully. Until recently, "Answers in Genesis" was headed by its founder and long-time president, Ken Ham, who appears frequently in the film. Ham is a tireless promoter of creationism and has participated in many TV shows and debates, including a famous debate with American science populariser Bill Nye in 2016<sup>10</sup>, which attracted a massive audience and provoked much discussion about the legitimacy of publicly debating pseudoscientific mythologies.

<sup>10</sup> Availabe at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z6kgvhG3AkI [editor's comment].

The second is a probe into the believers of the flat earth theory – one of the most eccentric and patently absurd concepts, which, as the main character, self-appointed leader of the American Flat Earthers Mark Sargent, says, is the genuine queen among all possible conspiracy theories. After all, what could be more spectacular than a mystification lasting for no one knows how long, consisting in carefully concealing from public opinion that the earth is completely flat, surrounded by a special dome, and that the sun and stars are simply large lamps suspended from this dome? The importance of the secrets revealed by the adherents of the flat earth theory is demonstrated by the fact that, as the film carefully documents, their circle is constantly divided internally. Anyone who becomes even slightly more visible immediately becomes suspect. Could it be that he or she is some kind of camouflaged CIA envoy, whose aim is to discredit the ideas of flat-Earth theories, to make them appear to be associated only with an eccentric group of enthusiasts, so that no one takes them seriously? One of the leading characters of "Behind the Curve", Patricia Steere, a popular podcaster and promoter of the flat earth theory, experiences this most acutely, falling victim to a whole series of insinuations and suspicions: from collaborating with some government agencies to concealing her real gender. Eventually, after the shooting was over, Steere disengaged herself from the flat earth movement, cancelling all her social media channels and accounts. In an extended interview she gave to Noel Hadley, which was published as an eBook entitled "Everything that was beautiful became ugly: escaping flat earth with Patricia Steere", she expressed deep disappointment and despair that the community to which she had devoted so

much of her life had so violently and irrationally rejected her. It was, literally, a real tragedy for her.

This is precisely the link that UNESCO experts are unaware of, and that all of us who claim to be committed to rationality and science, who do not order bizarre books from small online bookshops, who do not belong to eccentric Facebook groups, who do not declare a desire to participate in conferences on the harmfulness of vaccines, on the MK Ultra programme or on the influence of the Bilderberg Club on the fate of the world, are often unaware of. It has nothing to do with a question of education or knowledge of the scientific method. Among the staunch creationists and believers in biblical literalism we watch in "We Believe in Dinosaurs" there are also people with doctorates in molecular biology – which demonstrates a truth that has long been well known: the human mind is so flexible that it can reconcile almost anything, including water and fire.

However, the question "how can one believe in all this" ceases to be so pressing if we realise that the characters presented in both of these excellent films form tight, consolidated communities.

And the beliefs they so passionately profess and propagate are not just quaint, anti-scientific nonsense. They are part of a whole complex web of beliefs, symbols and behaviours. What we are dealing with here, then, is not so much alternative viewpoints as entire alternative cultures which – we might add – are the perfect panacea for all the ailments associated with late modernity.

This phenomenon was characterised in detail by the French sociologist Gilles Kepel in his famous book "The Revenge of God", first published in 1991, which, achieved bestseller status – and that of a prophetic work – only in 2001, immediately after

the attacks on the World Trade Center. The thesis of this book was as follows: religious fundamentalisms, the development of which we can observe especially in the second half of the 20th century, are a thoroughly modern phenomenon. Despite the fact that they present themselves as faithful to the most grassroots traditions, as movements returning to long-forgotten and disregarded original meanings and lifestyles, they are in fact strictly contemporary products. This is because the tradition to which they claim to refer is produced by themselves – opposing it as monolithic, radical and consolidated to all the qualities that constitute Western modernity.

What are these qualities? Here is a rough list, which – with minor modifications – can probably be found in every major sociological or philosophical work on modernity. The disintegration of coherent, comprehensive stories about the world; the crisis of institutionalised religions as the main source of meaning and a coherent image of the world; the disintegration of traditional bonds and social hierarchies; the development of science, which presents an image of a world lacking any higher purpose, and of human life as based solely on biological processes and ending at the moment of physical death; loneliness, uncertainty, emptiness, the imperative to succeed in a brutal, ruthless market.

Here is perhaps an answer, and at the same time an apparent panacea for all these ills and ailments characteristic of our times, in the form of fundamentalisms, conspiracy theories and pseudoscientific narratives that are growing today with great intensity.

And this is perhaps the most important thing there: the sense of a consolidated community; collective rituals; a clear division into good guys and bad guys; the conviction that the world really has

a clear and obvious structure, and only some evil forces obscure and complicate it. And then there are the specific hierarchies and institutions, conventions, conferences, mutual support and the feeling of being among one's own people. And above all, what Carl Gustav Jung once wrote about, that it is one of the basic human desires, especially nowadays – although at the same time very difficult to satisfy<sup>11</sup>. Namely – initiation, access to secret, hidden, inaccessible knowledge, submerged in the everyday ambiguity of the majority. And this special, unique, irreducible sense of meaning suddenly penetrating and illuminating the chaos and darkness of individual existence – anonymous and unimportant, fused with billions of other individual lives born and dying on a planet moving in infinite, empty space together with myriads of other such planets, dead, silent, alone.

The image of the world that emerges from modern science – although there are those for whom it is a source of joy and excitement – is a reality stripped of all the qualities with which it was equipped by mythological and religious stories. A reality composed exclusively of matter, whose shape turns out to be the effect of blind, random processes whose direction is not determined by any telos, any providence. Similarly, man and his mind – without exception, is also the final product of countless trials and errors, genetic reshufflings and mutations, following a very simple scenario: to adapt to the conditions, survive long enough to produce offspring and ensure the survival of the species. Of course, I will now hear from science lovers – and

<sup>&</sup>lt;u>11</u> See e.g. C.G. Jung (1997). Wspomnienia, sny myśli (original title: Exinnerungen, Träume, Gedanken. Translated by Reszke, R., Kolankiewicz, L.). Warsaw: WROTA, s. 310

scientists themselves – as has often been the case, that, on the contrary, science has revealed to us areas of existence that were previously shrouded in mythological fog, and only now can we genuinely wonder at the world, only now can we truly see how extraordinary and beautiful life is.

I would reply that it is a matter of taste. And that for many of us, the truth about life as a purely biological phenomenon is simply unbearable. Especially since we have to deal with it in an era of a massive breakdown of bonds, multifaceted and multilevel crises, an epidemic of loneliness and depression, and, at the same time, increasingly brutal economic realities: deepening inequalities, radical gaps between a narrow caste of the richest and the rest.

When churches and traditional religions gradually lose their authority and their "offer" seems more and more incompatible with the needs of modern man, when the world falls out of its framework and everyday life becomes a source of permanent uncertainty, when science, due to the complexity of the subject it studies, begins to resemble a highly hermetic and complicated language, understandable only to very few and only after many years of arduous study, when economic realities are completely at odds with the cultural narrative of individual responsibility for one's own success and increasingly resemble Hobbes's "state of nature"; So when all this happens, conspiracy theories and the close-knit communities around them simply become a genuine salvation.

They welcome with open arms those who already understand. Among those who do not let themselves be deceived by visible harmony, because they know how to see and recognise invisible harmony, which is, after all, many times stronger than the visible one. Among those who do not passively accept the communicated

version of the truth, the courageous and idealistic rebels against the "rulers of this world".

But above all, among those for whom chaos has become the cosmos, who have thrown aside the veils of their eyes and have seen things as they are, who have not seen but have believed. Among those who will not be submerged by any hurricane, who will not be deprived of their dignity by any crisis or bankruptcy, who will not be driven into complexes and feelings of guilt by poverty, who will not be deceived by any politician or banker, who will not be deceived by any "licensed elite". Therefore, among those who, although they do not have power, do have real knowledge, they do not have power, but they have a special control over everything that happens.

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Perhaps the human mind, evolutionarily shaped in small, compact tribal societies, unconsciously applying various heuristic strategies – brilliantly described among others by Daniel Kahnemann in his famous "Thinking Traps" – shaped not to know the world but to survive in it, is simply not prepared to confront reality as it is. He is also not adapted to living in such drastic conditions as those offered by late modernity. So when faced with a choice – loneliness and meaninglessness versus community and sense, he increasingly often chooses the latter.

The text is an excerpt from a book under preparation, which will be published in autumn 2021 by Znak Publishing House.

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THE PSYCHOLOGY
OF POLITICAL
DIVISION, POPULISM,
AND ENMITY - AND
HOW TO COUNTER IT
FOUR STEPS TO TYRANNY

by SIMON GRANROTH



## INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the 21st century, some of us have had an eerie feeling of history repeating itself. Many stable democracies have become increasingly divided, the people – distrustful and anxious. The threat of terrorism, declining economic prospects, and the speed of cultural and technological change are compiling into general concerns about the future, which feels more uncertain than ever. Simultaneously, social divisions based on ethnicity, class, values, and religion deepen as a societal discourse has become ever more polarised.

Meanwhile, the trust in our liberal democratic systems has been undermined by the lack of credible vision and prowess of our political establishments and parties. As a result, people tend to resort to illiberal methods and view extremism as an increasingly attractive tool for change. Some cling to authoritarian leadership figures, while others seek comfort in 'the good old times' or populist and conspiracist narratives. These provide a simple, relatable and comprehendible perspective through which the world can be interpreted and understood. In all-too-recent history, similar beliefs have paved the path to tyranny.

Whether these feelings of distrust and division are well-founded or not, they contribute to hostile attitudes toward perceived outsiders such as immigrants, refugees, sexual-, religious-, cultural-, or ethnic minorities. It cannot be ignored that large numbers are now feeling appeal to the anti-democratic views and simple solutions to complex problems, such as those that conspiracy theories so often provide

This article is intended to provide a psychological framework for analysing and understanding the challenges we are grappling

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with. Even though the scientific method cannot provide us with all the answers, it certainly helps us with tools to better understand the factors that are now at play in our civilisation.

Phenomena such as populism, contempt for liberalism, adherence to extremism and conspiracy theories, and even antivaxxers share many common psychological factors. Arguably there are four main areas of psychological mechanisms that provide explanations to these phenomena: group dynamics, cognitive biases, authoritative tendencies, and morals¹. These are very much a part of each and everyone's primal human nature. As we cannot easily change human nature, it is the fabric of our societies that might need to be revised if we are to counter our inherent self-destructive tendencies, and maybe for once, history will not repeat itself.

## 1. US AND THEM

'Us, and them. And after all – we're only ordinary men.' – Pink Floyd.

One of the most prominent dynamics contributing to a lack of nuanced discourse and enmity between groups is the notion of 'us' and 'them'. Humans are, in general, quick to differentiate themselves and their group from others. As a result, many societal dynamics are grounded in how groups work. Some of these are natural, understandable, and even inherent tendencies

<sup>&</sup>lt;u>1</u> Yudkin D. (2018). **The Psychology of Authoritarian Populism: A Bird's Eye View.** More in Common

that have served a functional purpose during history. In modern society, however, these tendencies contribute to arbitrary division and animosity.

When Jane Elliot first conducted her famous 'brown eyes, blue eyes' experiment back in 1968, she divided her class into two groups arbitrarily based on eye colour. She gave the brown-eyed children extra privileges in class and provided collars to the blue-eyed minority, to clearly identify them as a group. The experiment included, among other things, a scenario where the brown-eyed children were allowed to sit in the front of the classroom, while the blue-eyed children were sent to the back. The brown-eyed children were encouraged not to play with and even ignore blue-eyed children; the blue-eyed children were not allowed to drink from the same water fountain as the other group. At first, there was some resistance among the students belonging to the minority group. But this was countered by Elliot stating that brown eyes were linked to better learning ability.

With time, the majority group began expressing arrogant and unpleasant behaviour towards the minority group. Furthermore, they showed increased learning ability in math and reading tasks. On the other hand, children in the minority group became timid and submissive – and they performed worse in tests.

In another classic experiment, called the Robbers Cave<sup>2</sup>, boys were randomly assigned to groups for a summer camp. These groups existed peacefully among themselves until they were instructed to play team-based games, such as tug-of-war or capture

Sherif, M. (1956, November). Experiments in Group Conflict.
Scientific American 195, 54-59

the flag, in which prizes could be won for the team. After the games, the groups became increasingly hostile and even violent towards each other.

Since then, there have been many similar studies<sup>3</sup> where simple division into groups evoked in-group and out-group dynamics in both children and adults. This phenomenon is called spontaneous enmity<sup>4</sup>, as the groups begin to elicit hostile behaviour towards one another based on arbitrary attributes and divisions.

This enmity was explicitly shown in the famous Stanford prison experiment<sup>5</sup>, which aimed to explore the psychological effects of perceived power by assigning volunteers to be either guards or prisoners in a mock prison setting. The guards in the experiment started to enforce authoritarian measures and even subjected the prisoners to psychological torture and harassment. Meanwhile, the prisoners passively submitted. The whole experiment was terminated after only six days, as it became unbearable to the subjects.

This 'us' and 'them' notion is widely observed in society as the tendency for people to form biased attitudes about both the group they identify with and the 'others'. These attitudes natu-

See e.g. Jackson, J.W. (1993). Realistic Group Conflict Theory:
A Review and Evaluation of the Theoretical and Empirical Literature.
Psychological Record 43(3), 395-415. Baumeister, R.F., Vohs, K.D. (2007). Realistic Group Conflict Theory. Encyclopedia of Social
Psychology. Sherif, M. (1966). In Common Predicament: Social
Psychology of Intergroup Conflict and Cooperation. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 24-61

<sup>4</sup> Experiments in Group Conflict (1956)

<sup>5</sup> Haney, C., Banks, W.C., Zimbardo, P.G. (1973). A study of prisoners and guards in a simulated prison. Naval Research Review 30, 4-17

rally affect our behaviour, as demonstrated in a study<sup>6</sup> where subjects were asked to make a series of decisions based on categorisation. They were asked how they felt about others, and the subjects overwhelmingly rated members of their group as superior to the others.

Furthermore, the subjects were paired with a person from an opposing group to share resources. Each person could choose between the following scenarios: both persons would receive more resources or both persons would receive less while getting more in comparison to the counterpart. The majority chose the latter option in order to differentiate themselves from the other maximally. This shows the significance of the relativity of perceived power – we seem to have a drive, not only to be good but also to be better than others within the frame of reference. Even losing is acceptable, as long as the others lose more.

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The aforementioned can be connected to a phenomenon called the fundamental attribution error<sup>7</sup>, which is the tendency to emphasise situational explanations for behaviour within the in-group, while over-emphasising inherent or personality-based explanations for out-group behaviour. To put this into context, this is the cognitive bias that leads us to believe that people's actions reflect purely onto who they are, rather than their reactions to their environment. For example, if I or someone in the group I identify with behaves badly, I will tend to rationalise it by an

Sidanius, J., et al (2007, April). Vladimir's Choice and the Distribution of Social Resources. Group Processes & Intergroup Relations 10 (2), 257–265

Jones, E.E., Harris, V.A. (1967). The attribution of attitudes.
Journal of Experimental Social Psychology. 3 (1), 1-24

explanation such as 'there was no other choice'. However, if someone from an out-group does the same, one of the explanations could be that they are mischievous by nature or just plain bad people<sup>8</sup>. The truth probably lies somewhere in between, and the explanations are often multifactorial. This is simply our minds jumping to intuitive conclusions.

On a societal level, this is reflected as negative stereotypes and attitudes of 'others', and discursive polarisation – an intergroup bias'. This is the favouring of one's own group over others. It is very natural, but on a cognitive and emotional level it reflects itself in an empathy gap toward outsiders. Humans have a natural empathetic reflex, ability, and even an instinct to relate to others' emotions and suffering. However, this empathy is significantly reduced when it comes to perceived outsiders, and research suggests that people might even experience positive emotions from the misfortune of others¹o. Populism and conspiracy theories feed on these mechanisms. As both often play by the same narrative rules in defining an in-group of 'enlightened' individuals who can see the truth that others, even experts, supposedly ignore.

Bicchieri C., et al (2019). Social Proximity and the Evolution of Norm Compliance. **Electronic Journal** 

<sup>&</sup>lt;u>9</u> Taylor, D.M., Doria, J.R. (1981). Self-serving and group-serving bias in attribution. **Journal of Social Psychology** 113 (2), 201–211

Jackson, P.L., Rainville, P., Decety, J. (2006). To what extent do we share the pain of others? Insight from the neural bases of pain empathy. Amsterdam: Elsevier. Cikara, M., et al (2015). Their pain gives us pleasure: How intergroup dynamics shape empathic failures and counter-empathic responses. Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 55, 110–125. Leach, C., et al (2003, May). Malicious Pleasure: Schadenfreude at the Suffering of Another Group. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 84(5), 932–43

It seems that we, humans, as a species, have evolved to favour the in-group as a means for survival, and that there are several psychological mechanisms, some inherent and others reinforced by learning, that contribute to tribalistic behaviour. In the strife for an empathetic and liberal society, we are bound in a struggle against our nature. For policymaking, these implications require systems that mitigate these human tendencies. How, then, can societal divisions be overcome? Luckily, research has found many factors that increase empathy towards others.

Studies suggest that intergroup bias may be reduced through the process called recategorisation, as the lack of empathy for the outsiders draws from our tendency to make broad intuitive categorisations that contribute to a feeling of out-group homogeneity – 'they are all the same, but we are more nuanced'. Recategorisation occurs through exposure to examples that counter our stereotypes of the out-group. This requires contact and sincere dialogue between groups. Psychologists have identified the necessary conditions for recategorisation to occur<sup>11</sup>.

First, all parties must have equal status during the dialogue. Second, a neutral mediator is recommended, such as an organisation or individual that is seen as unbiased towards one side or the other. Third, the parties involved must have a shared goal. And finally, face-to-face encounters are far superior to any other form of social interaction.

<sup>11</sup> Gaertner, S.L., Dovidio, J.F. (2014). Reducing intergroup bias:
The common ingroup identity model. Hove: Psychology Press. Pettigrew,
T.F. (1998). Intergroup Contact Theory. Annual Review of Psychology
49, 65-85. Hewstone, M.E., Brown, R.E. (1986). Contact and conflict
in intergroup encounters. Oxford: Basil Blackwell

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It seems self-evident that our digital ecosystems, social media, etc., are poorly equipped for these kinds of interactions, and studies have shown that digital, especially anonymous, encounters make us victims of our worst instincts<sup>12</sup>. To mitigate these instincts, we need to find ways in policymaking to facilitate genuine interaction and positive interactions among groups, since separation, physical and mental, yields division, and division fuels enmity.

### 2. CONFIRMATION AND CONFORMITY

'The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, and wiser people are so full of doubts.' – Bertrand Russell.

People will go to lengths to protect their view of themselves and their group, their identity construct, and their narrative. For the sake of mental functionality, this identity must be kept coherent at all times. Our minds are equipped with intuitive defence mechanisms to keep our worldviews and the view of ourselves coherent and centred. This principle encompasses our instincts, intuition, emotions, and cognition, and the key to understanding

Harel, T.O., Jameson, J.K., Maoz, I. (2020). The Normalisation of Hatred: Identity, Affective Polarization, and Dehumanisation on Facebook in the Context of Intractable Political Conflict.
Sage Journals. Matuszewski, M.P., Szabo, G. (2019). Are Echo Chambers Based on Partisanship? Twitter and Political Polarity in Poland and Hungary. Social Media + Society 5(2). Wolleback, D., et al (2019). Anger, Fear, and Echo Chambers: The Emotional Basis for Online Bahavior. Social Media + Society 5(2)

this is the theory of cognitive dissonance<sup>13</sup>. Cognitive dissonance is the psychological state of holding two contradictory believes in mind simultaneously without being able to reconcile them. This creates mental discomfort and attempts to avoid it.

Cognitive dissonance theory explains why it is so difficult to change one's previously established believes. This is exemplified well in political behaviour and voting. For example, a political candidate of choice might violate principles that the voter deems important. Now, the voter must either reject the candidate or change his of her views. Rejecting the candidate would imply that the voter was wrong. Instead, the voter will try to rationalise or simply repress the significance of the candidate's behaviour – a tendency often observed among the supporters of populist leaders.

The same mechanism is at play on the intra-individual level as well. If a person acts against his or her principles, he or she will be compelled to either abandon these principles, which is unlikely, change the perception of self as a good person, or rationalise this behaviour somehow. As an example, a rationalisation for not giving money to humanitarian aid or helping people living in the streets by changing one's view of the subjects, e.g. 'Maybe they do not really deserve that for some reason?'.

There are several defence mechanisms and cognitive biases in place to keep cognitive dissonance out, but they all more or less contribute to attitude inflexibility. In the age of social media and the abundance of information, confirmation bias is the most problematic of these mechanisms.

<sup>13</sup> Festinger, L. (1962). A theory of cognitive dissonance (Vol. 2). Stanford: Stanford University Press

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Confirmation bias<sup>14</sup> is the tendency to avoid cognitive dissonance by seeking out and paying more attention to information that confirms our worldview. Social media algorithms, closed groups, and even group dynamics in real-life contribute to this tendency by enveloping us in a bubble of intellectual comfort. This comfort fuels confidence, as frequently seen in online forums discussing vaccinations or immigrants, etc., where the scrutiny applied to non-conforming ideas is left out for ideas and information that conforms with the conspiracist groups narrative.

To counter confirmation bias, an individual needs frequent exposure to views that dispute their established worldview. This mere exposure to conflicting views will, over time, work in the same way as the recategorisation process that was discussed earlier. However, this works both ways: continuous exposure to the discourse of far-right political parties, hate-speech, or dehumanising attitudes and contempt for science and democracy will normalise them and provoke weaker negative emotion, even in a liberal-leaning individual.

Another way of countering confirmation bias is to facilitate rational thought in a discourse, sometimes called street epistemology. Epistemology is the study of knowledge, and in this case, the study of how one logically arrives at a conclusion. If a one's views are explicitly disputed, the tendency would be to get defensive. This further reinforces predisposed standpoints. However, if a person were to question her standpoint and the logic behind

<sup>14</sup> Ross, L., Lepper, M.R., Hubbard, M. (1975). Perseverance in self-perception and social perception: Biased attributional processes in the debriefing paradigm. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 32(5), 880

it herself, it would create a window of opportunity for change. As such, during a disagreement, it might sometimes be better not to question values and believes, but rather curiously dissect the logic behind it: 'How certain are you of this and how do you know that it is true?' This plants a seed of doubt in our minds, and doubt paired with rational thinking are qualities that ought to be held in high regard in any progressive society.

3. AUTHORITY

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'Blind belief in authority is the greatest enemy of truth.' – Albert Einstein.

The political landscape today is characterised by popular authoritarian personalities and movements all over the world – from Donald Trump to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. To counteract these authoritarian tendencies, we must understand their origin and function. Our cognitive biases, attribution error, and inherent group dynamics make us especially vulnerable to appeals to authority.

Following the Second World War and the Holocaust, there was much research within this field. Classical psychological experiments include Milgrams electric shock study<sup>15</sup>. In this study, subjects were told they would play a teacher's role to a student learning simple tasks. Every time the student made a mistake, the teachers' job was to give the student an electric shock of increasing voltages to facilitate learning. Naturally, the shock was fake, and

<sup>15</sup> Milgram, S., Gudehus, C. (1978). Obedience to authority. New York: Ziff-Davis Publishing

the student was an actor. The experiment was really about the subject's willingness to administer dangerous levels of electricity to an innocent student. One of the main contributing factors was the experiment overseer, who instructed the subject to continue shocking the student, even to potentially deadly levels. Some of the subjects were naturally unwilling to continue, while as many as two-thirds went all the way with the experiment.

This experiment exposed the human tendency to obey authority figures, which serves as a way of outsourcing the responsibility for their actions. As such, the presence of an authority figure that takes symbolic responsibility for one's actions increases the probability of behaviours that might go against our human values, if given a second thought.

Research suggests that people tend to elicit authoritarian dynamics in the presence of a perceived normative threat. This is a threat to group unity or consensus. Also, people are more likely to embrace authoritarianism when they feel insecurity or instability<sup>16</sup>. This increased interest in authoritarian systems during times of perceived instability has been confirmed by previous research<sup>17</sup>. Note that it is the feeling of insecurity that matters, not whether it is objectively justifiable<sup>18</sup>. These phenomena feel

<sup>17</sup> Sales, S.M. (1972). Economic threat as a determinant of conversion rates in authoritarian and nonauthoritarian churches. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 23(3), 420

<sup>18</sup> Feldman, S., Stenner, K. (1997). Perceived threat and authoritarianism. Political Psychology 18(4), 741-770. Haidt, J. (2013). The righteous mind: why good people are divided by politics and religion. London: Penguin.

all too familiar when analysing narratives driven by some of Trump's supporters or the QAnon group, to name a few. Adherence to simple solutions for complex problems and authority figures are clearly seen within both movements.

Conclusively, we must find ways to address facts in order to change emotions. However, the emotions cannot be ignored, and validating people's feelings usually promotes positive dialogue through understanding and empathy, while ignoring them provokes defensiveness and entrenching. This underlines the importance of civil dialogue, and attempts to silence dissent rather than address it, may be doomed only to amplify contempt and polarisation.

## 4. MORALITY

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'Never let your sense of morals get in the way of doing what's right.' – Isaac Asimov.

Human values and morality run much deeper than reason and logic, and this is the thread that knits all of the previous subjects together. It is, perhaps, the most significant factor in understanding the political and societal divisions we see in the world.

One of the most influential moral psychological theories of our time is the Moral Foundations Theory, or MFT<sup>19</sup>. The theory is based on the moral intuitionist model. The model proposes

Graham, J., Haidt, J., Nosek, B.A. (2009). Liberals and conservatives rely on different sets of moral foundations. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 96, 1029. Haidt, J. (2001). The emotional dog and its rational tail: a social intuitionist approach to moral judgment. Psychological Review 108(4), 814. Haidt, J. (2007). The New Synthesis in Moral Psychology. Science 316(5827), 998

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that humans have an inherent set of qualities described as 'an innate preparedness to feel flashes of approval or disapproval toward certain patterns of events involving other human beings'<sup>20</sup>. In other words, we have an evolutionary predisposition to react emotionally to events, especially events involving other humans.

These intuitive flashes then form the basis of our moralisation process and underlie the ethics developed by all cultures. Thus, the human mind does not come as a blank slate, but we are born with tools that later develop into our sense of morality through our experiences. As such, the cultural learning process is preceded by the instinctual drives that allow environmental factors and learning later transform into culture-specific values and norms<sup>21</sup>.

According to this moral intuitionist model, the human mind can be subdivided into two processing systems<sup>22</sup>. The first system is an intuitive, subconscious, and fast system of thought that operates almost without effort. It relies on our psychological constructs and the individual's intuitive understanding of the world. The secondary system of thought, conscious reasoning, is used to provide a rational justification for whatever the first system presents us with. According to this model, a stimulus first elicits a 'gut feeling', a moral intuition about how to feel and react to

<sup>20</sup> Haidt, J., Joseph, C. (2004). Intuitive Ethics: How Innately Prepared Intuitions Generate Culturally Variable Virtues. On Human Nature 133(4), 55-66

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

<sup>22</sup> Comparable with Kahneman, D. (2011). Thinking, Fast and Slow. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux

outside events. This intuition then leads to an intuitive judgement of the situation that elicited the intuition by the first system of thought. This intuitive judgement is then passed on to the secondary system, which often confirms the intuition by post hoc reasoning: 'This feels wrong, so it must be wrong'. Thus, human morality is reactionary and not rational, but rather rationalising.

The Moral Foundations Theory has identified at least five inherent moral dimensions, called moral foundations within the theory. These foundations are based on the moral concerns that individuals express when confronted with moral dilemmas. The foundations are as follows:

Care versus Harm is a moral dimension strongly related to our evolutionary process, attachment systems, and ability to empathise. This dimension supports virtues such as kindness, empathy, and gentleness. Liberal and politically left-leaning people hold this dimension in high regard in their moral reasoning and intuition: 'how can it be wrong if no one was harmed?'<sup>23</sup>.

The moral intuitions and rationalisations regarding *Fairness* versus *Cheating* are related to the evolutionary processes preceding reciprocal altruism and support ideas of justice, universal rights, and autonomy. Originally, this moral dimension included the concept of equality as well, but in 2011 it was revised, based on new data, which endorsed the emphasis on proportionality instead of total equality<sup>24</sup>.

The *Loyalty* versus *Betrayal* dimension was shaped through our history of human tribalism. Virtues that relate to this dimen-

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

sion are patriotism and self-sacrifice for the group. The loyalty dimension is present at any time when people put the good of their group in front of their self-interest<sup>25</sup>.

The *Authority* versus *Subversion* foundation relates to our species' long history of hierarchical social interactions and lies behind virtues such as leadership, devoir to legitimate authority, and respect for traditions. More conservative people tend to feel that this moral foundation is an important one in their moral reasoning and the precursory moral intuition<sup>26</sup>.

The dimension of *Sanctity* versus *Degradation* is founded on empiricism behind the psychology of disgust that underlies many religious concepts of a pure, more noble, way of living – for example, treating your body as a temple that must not be contaminated by 'immoral' activities, such as substances or taboos on sex and sexuality<sup>27</sup>.

Research within the Moral Foundations Theory suggests that self-identified liberals and conservatives have different sets of values and morals and that the theory itself might be the means to facilitate understanding and bridge the gap. Liberals show high degrees of fairness and harm. In contrast, conservatives hold all five foundations equally important. Within this research, liberals are defined mainly by progressive social values, while conservatives uphold more traditional ones. However, in economic value spectrum, liberalism usually correlates with more left-leaning economics, while conservatism tends to be right-

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

<sup>27</sup>\_Ibid

leaning economically<sup>28</sup>. It should be mentioned that the same research in a European context is more pluralistic, but the same principles have been replicated here as well<sup>29</sup>.

The lesson here is that morality and the process of moralisation among conservatives and liberals is different, and people usually believe they are right and want to do good. However, some have argued that the first two, liberal, dimensions are more rational since they are based on principles that most people can agree on and direct physical consequences of actions towards.

From a policymaking standpoint, the MFT provides a framework for facilitating shared understanding and finding what underlying logic and values translate into, the viewpoints an individual might hold. Understanding and appealing to a person's initial moral disposition may be critical in developing working communication strategies for finding common ground in any debate. When debating with conspiracy theorists, for example, gaining a clear view of where their and your fundamental morals differ might be a good starting point for understanding where their motives come from.

## CONCLUSIONS

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This article was intended to provide a psychological framework for analysing and understanding challenges such as division yielded by conspiracy theories and populism.

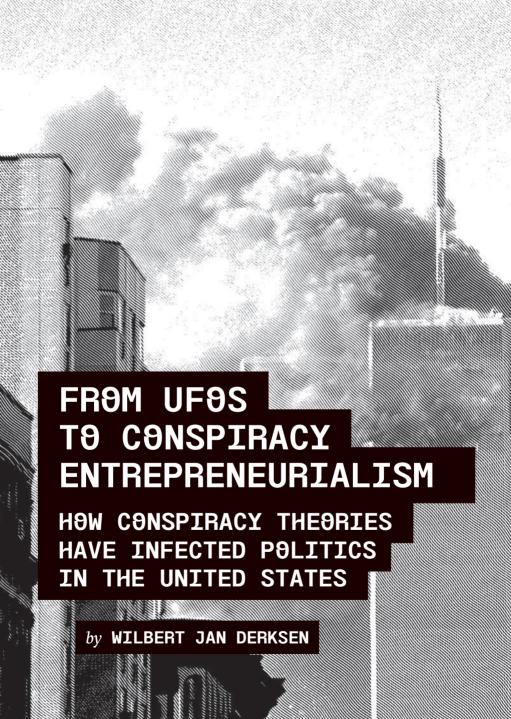
<sup>28</sup> Liberals and conservatives rely on different sets of moral foundations (2009)

<sup>29</sup> Read more Granroth, S. (2020). Moral Foundations and Political Identity Among Military Cadettes. University of Helsinki & Finnish National Defence University

To summarise, the human mind is riddled with mechanisms to protect the in-group, the identities we perceive as our own, and the information we connect to them. As such, conspiracy theorists and populists, as well as you and I sometimes, are very much victims of one's own nature. In fact, we need many of the societal structures that form the basis of democracy and are put in place to explore truth in science, to work against these very instincts.

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Nevertheless, the human mind is bilateral. The same mind that so easily falls into tribalism, enmity, and idiocracy in groups also contains empathy, altruism and genuine curiosity. We need to look past the narrow stories we so often tell ourselves and instead create a clear new vision for mankind. A vision that satisfies our human need for security and stability, while at the same time allowing pluralism, dialogue and progress. To succeed, we ought to pay close attention to intelligently facilitating human empathy, dialogue and the feeling of a common shared goal through our policymaking and democratic platforms.





## INTRODUCTION: THE STORMING OF THE CAPITOL

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On January 6th of his year, the United States witnessed an event unprecedented in its modern history. An angry mob stormed the Capitol Building after attending an inflammatory speech given by the outgoing President Donald Trump. The storming was condemned as a direct assault on Us democracy and resulted in the death of five people<sup>1</sup>. It was the culmination of weeks of protests among a group of Trump supporters who were convinced that the presidential election of 2020 had been rigged. During his final weeks in office, President Trump repeatedly made accusations of electoral fraud and incited his followers to 'stop the steal'. A closer look at those who participated in the storming revealed that many were convinced that not only the election had been stolen, but that it was connected to numerous other conspiracy theories they believed in as well<sup>2</sup>.

In fact, it seems that today the US is experiencing a surge in conspiracy theories, as ideas that used to be on the fringes more and more take a central role in politics. This article will take a closer look at a number of these conspiracy theories and their role in US politics. After a general introduction, a brief overview will be given of important conspiracies that have arisen over the years leading up to Trump's presidency. It will then highlight how

Kallingal, M., Levenson, E., Vera, M. (2021, January 8). What we know about the 5 deaths in the pro-Trump mob that stormed the Capitol. CNN. Retrieved from https://edition.cnn.com/2021/01/07/us/capitol-mob-deaths/index.html

<sup>2</sup> BBC News (2021, January 7). Capitol riots: Who broke into the building?

conspiracy theories have taken a central role in us politics since the 2016 elections and how they have been utilised by both politicians and entrepreneurs. Finally, this article will close by stating the significance of these developments in the us for European liberals and calling for actions to counter conspiracy theories.

### **UFOS AND OTHER STRANGE THEORIES**

Conspiracy theories are of all ages and pop up all around the globe. According to the first settlers in the US, the Native Americans were controlled by the devil himself<sup>3</sup>. Us history is riddled with strange conspiracy theories, and many of them are still believed in today. For example, a common conspiracy in the us is that the government is hiding information about the existence of extra-terrestrials. In 1947 an unidentified flying object (UFO) crash-landed on a farm near Roswell, soon after which, army officials arrived to collect the debris. Although years later it was confirmed to have been a type of balloon used by the us army, it has fuelled conspiracy theories about it being some sort of an alien spacecraft ever since<sup>4</sup>. The Area 51 army base located in Nevada is a source of similar conspiracies, as the government allegedly uses the base to research aliens and their spacecrafts. Although it is now widely assumed that the base is used as a secret military facility to test high-tech military planes, such as the U-2 reconnaissance

Merlan, B. (2019, May 2). Why we are addicted to conspiracy theories. The Guardian. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/may/02/why-we-are-addicted-to-conspiracy-theories

<sup>4</sup> NOS (2017, December 17). **Terugblik: Roswell-incident 1947**. Retrieved from https://nos.nl/video/2208028-terugblik-roswell-incident-1947.html

aircraft (which would explain the 'UFO sightings' in the area over the years), 'ufology' remains quite popular in the US<sup>5</sup>.

Other popular conspiracies in the US include the claim that the first moon landing in 1969 was faked and recorded in a studio, and the theory that planet Earth is hollow (with an entire civilisation living inside) or even flat, as the title of this publication refers to. These types of theories encourage people to see intuition as more important than rationality. Nevertheless, as long as such theories lack any political dimension, they do not form a real threat towards society. In some cases, like with ufology, it could even have positive effects like community building. However, when conspiracy theories contain political elements, it becomes a much different story. Often, such narratives involve a group that is secretly conspiring to manipulate political events and obtain power and/or wealth. Such theories are dangerous because politicians can weaponise them in order to achieve certain political goals, what will be presented in the following paragraphs.

# POLITICAL CONSPIRACIES IN THE COLD WAR ERA: MCCARTHYISM, JFK AND THE CIA

The Cold War was an era in which us politics were dominated by the communist threat coming from outside, as well as inside, of the us. In the 1950s, us Senator Joseph McCarthy headed a campaign in which several anti-communist committees, panels and investigation bureaus were set up to uncover communist loyal-

Pruitt, S. (2020, February 4). Area 51's most outrages top secret spy plane projects. History. Retrieved from https://www.history.com/news/ area-51-top-secret-spy-planes-u2-blackbird.

ists and spies that were conspiring against the Us government. Although there was indeed a communist presence within the country, a lot of people who were scrutinised were innocent of the accused crimes. Many of the accusations made by McCarthy and his companions were unfounded. Nevertheless, they created public hysteria and a culture of fear in which many refused to speak up out of fear of also being prosecuted in this witch-hunt<sup>6</sup>. Although the hearings were later considered as having been damaging to the democratic institutions of the country, they are still a good example of how politicians can capitalise on conspiracy theories in order to create a situation of paranoia where the general public more easily accepts the use of democratically illegitimate tools to combat a perceived threat.

The assassination of the US President John F. Kennedy in 1963 is often referred to as the *mother of all conspiracies*. The number of theories that surround the JFK-assassination is so big that it has inspired (and continues to inspire) countless movies, books and documentaries. Kennedy was fatally shot while driving in the presidential limousine in Dallas, Texas. The assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, was arrested but killed only two days later by the local nightclub owner Jack Ruby. The question that remained was whether Oswald had acted alone, or conspired with other people to carry out the assassination. His murder being so soon after his arrest left many questions unanswered, thereby creating the perfect breeding ground for conspiracy theories to arise. The Warren Commission that was established to investigate the

History (2019, May 16). Joseph McCarthy. Retrieved from https://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/joseph-mccarthy

assassination concluded in 1964 that Oswald had acted alone (as well as Jack Ruby). However, the commission's report has been contested ever since, and many pointed to flaws in the presented evidence<sup>7</sup>.

The author Vincent Bugliosi stated that no less than 42 groups, 82 assassins and 214 accomplices had been accused of being involved in the assassination<sup>8</sup>. Among them are the CIA, the KGB, the mafia, the Cubans and JFK's successor President Lyndon B. Johnson. Over the years, a number of follow-up investigations have been launched by the Us government, such as the 1976 Us House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA) and the 1992 JFK Records Act. Both of which did point out some flaws in the evidence and procedure of earlier investigations. It was determined that all relevant records were to be made public by 2017, but President Trump postponed the release till 2021<sup>9</sup>. Hence, the revelation of new documents this year will likely cause *JFK-conspiracies* to flare up once again.

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As the Cold War was defined by two opposing superpowers trying to undermine each other without resorting to direct confrontation, due to the threat of nuclear annihilation, it became a period in which espionage and intelligence gathering were

<sup>7</sup> History (2018, August 21). Warren Commission. Retrieved from https://www.history.com/topics/1960s/warren-commission

Patterson, T. (2018, March 21). One JFK conspiracy that could be true.
CNN. Retrieved from https://edition.cnn.com/2018/03/21/us/jfk-assas-sination-conspiracy-theories-debunked/index.html.

Watkins, E. (2018, April 26). Trump pushes JFK assassination records deadline to 2021. CNN. Retrieved from https://edition.cnn.com/2018/04/26/politics/jfk-assassination-records-deadline-2021/index.html

integral parts of the US national security policy. Hence, it was in 1947 that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was founded with this goal in mind. During the Cold War days, its primary mission was to combat the communist threat worldwide, resulting in covert operations all over the globe. As the nature of the CIA's activities required to be secret, it is no surprise that this organisation has taken a central role in countless conspiracy theories throughout the decades. It is now publicly known that the CIA has intervened in the domestic politics of numerous countries. Take for example the infamous Operation Condor, in which the CIA conspired with a number of Latin American governments – often dictatorships – to prevent communist takeovers in the region that the US considered to be its 'backyard'. This fact has been used by many anti-American governments today to accuse the US government of meddling in their domestic affairs. For example, the Venezuelan government largely blames their disastrous current economic and political situation on secret operations orchestrated by the CIA to destabilise the country<sup>11</sup>. Next to the CIA, other controversial intelligence organisations such as the National Security Agency (NSA) were also founded during the Cold War era. Their legacy has caused the us government to be accused by US citizens and people worldwide of being the big antagonist in countless conspiracy theories.

Tremlett, G. (2020, September, 3). Operation Condor: the cold war conspiracy that terrorised South America. The Guardian. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/news/2020/sep/03/operation-condor-the-illegal-state-network-that-terrorised-south-america

<sup>11</sup> Kennedy, C. (2020, December 9). Maduro accuses CIA of bribing oil workers. Oilprice.com. Retrieved from https://oilprice.com/Latest-Energy-News/World-News/Maduro-Accuses-CIA-Of-Bribing-Oil-Workers.html

## POLITICAL CONSPIRACIES IN THE POST-COLDWAR ERA: THE NEW WORLD ORDER AND 9/11

When the Cold War ended, and capitalism triumphed over communism, the liberal democracy had proven itself to many to be the only viable economic and political model for sustainable development. The 1990s were indeed an era that saw the liberalisation of markets worldwide, which was accompanied by a rapid process of globalisation, as the world increasingly became a 'global village'. However, many were not so content with this process, as they claimed that it gave too much power to banks, multinational corporations and organisations such as the IMF and the World Bank. Among some of these anti-globalisation activists, the suspicion arose of a sort of worldwide conspiracy that aimed at concentrating power in the hands of a select and incredibly wealthy elite to establish the so-called 'New World Order' (NWO): an all-powerful authoritarian world government that would replace the current system of sovereign states<sup>12</sup>. In the US a number of individuals and groups have been accused of being involved in this conspiracy, such as the Bilderberg Group, the Illuminati and Jewish banking families. In fact, the alleged manipulators behind the NWO vary widely among conspiracy theorists, with some even claiming that it might be the work of aliens. The idea of a conspiring global elite manipulating world politics has long been present within the US, but has thrived especially since the 1990s due to the ongoing process of globalisation.

<sup>12</sup> CBS News (2013, November 5). Why is this "New World Order" ideology spreading? Retrieved from https://www.cbsnews.com/video/why-is-new-world-order-ideology-spreading/#x

Then on September 11, 2001, the US was shocked by the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon building in Arlington. A third attack targeting either the Capitol Building or the White House in Washington, DC was foiled, as the aeroplane passengers rebelled, resulting in a crash before reaching the target. It was established that the Islamist terrorist organisation al-Qaeda led by Osama bin Laden was behind the attack, but soon many conspiracy theorists started to claim otherwise. The most wide-spread theory is that the attacks were a 'false flag' operation orchestrated by the us government to legitimise the installation of a police state in the US and justify military invasions in the Middle East. The subsequent 'War on Terror' proclaimed by President Bush was nothing more than a cover-up to trample civil rights. These narratives state that the attacks were an 'inside job' and claim that the Twin Towers in New York collapsed as a result of controlled demolition, rather than the damage caused by the impact of the planes<sup>13</sup>.

The conspiracy has a worldwide following and even materialised in the so-called '9/11 truth movement'. A 2016 survey revealed that more than half of the Americans believed that the government is concealing information about the 9/11 attacks, making it the most believed-in conspiracy in the country<sup>14</sup>. What has undoubtedly contributed to this fact is that this could be considered the first major conspiracy that originated during

<sup>13</sup> Bell, C. (2018, February 1). The people who think 9/11 may have been an 'inside job'. BBC News

Chapman University (2016, October 11). What aren't they telling us?
Chapman University Survey of American Fears. Retrieved from https://blogs.chapman.edu/wilkinson/2016/10/11/what-arent-they-telling-us/.

the rise of the Internet. For the first time, it was possible for online communities to form around these conspiracies and create and spread information to substantiate such theories<sup>15</sup>.

# PRELUDE TO THE PRESIDENCY OF TRUMP: THE CASE OF OBAMA'S BIRTH CERTIFICATE

During his election campaigns and throughout his presidency, Barack Obama was accused by conspiracists of having forged his birth certificate. According to them, President Obama was not born in the Us, but in Kenya (although other theories state Indonesia). They claimed that this was in conflict with Article Two of the Constitution, which requires a person to be a natural-born citizen of the Us to be eligible to serve as president of the country. During his first presidential campaign in 2008, Obama released his 'short form' birth certificate to counter these theories about his place of birth. Many, however, were still not convinced and believed that the document was fake or edited. Therefore, in 2011 Obama released the original 'long form' birth certificate.

One of the major proponents of this conspiracy theory was Donald Trump. In fact, around 2011 he became sort of its spokesperson, which bolstered his political profile among many believers in the theory. By this time, around half of the Republican voters believed that Obama was born abroad<sup>17</sup>. It was also around this

<sup>15</sup> Read more in Chapters 6 and 7 [editor's comment]

<sup>&</sup>lt;u>16</u> BBC News (2011, April 27). Obama releases 'long form' birth certificate

<sup>17</sup> Serwer, A. (2020, May 13). Birtherism of a nation. The Atlantic. Retrieved from https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/birtherism-and-trump/610978/

time that Trump first hinted at the idea of running for president, due to his sudden popularity within the GOP. When Obama disclosed his full birth certificate document in 2011, Trump saw this as a personal victory<sup>18</sup>. In the end, Trump did not run for president that year, but it had revealed the potential that propagating conspiracy theories had for acquiring political popularity and amassing voters – a strategy that would be a fundamental part of his first presidential campaign four years later.

# THE 2016 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

During his presidential campaign, Trump made a lot of use of conspiracy theories as a tool to blacken his political opponents and to gain popularity. During the race for the Republican nomination, he accused the father of candidate Ted Cruz of having been involved in the JFK-assassination. According to Trump, Ted Cruz's father was with Harvey Lee Oswald shortly before carrying out the assassination<sup>19</sup>. As a candidate, he also insinuated that vaccines could cause autism in children, another major conspiracy theory that is popular in the US<sup>20</sup>. Moreover, he claimed

- 18 ABC News (2011, April 27). Obama releases birth certificate, Donald Trump 'Proud' [video on YouTube]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dnkQ9TABCFM&ab\_channel=ABCNews
- McCaskill, N.D. (2016, May 3). Trump accuses Cruz's father of helping JFK's assassin. Politico. Retrieved from https://www.politico.com/ blogs/2016-gop-primary-live-updates-and-results/2016/05/trump-tedcruz-father-222730
- 20 CBS News. (2015, September 17). 2015 Republican debates: What GOP candidates had to say about vaccines [video on YouTube]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ye7CtNEUm8M&ab\_channel=CBSNews

that climate change was a hoax invented by China to make us manufacturing non-competitive, and accused the sitting President Obama of being the founder of the Islamist terrorist organisation ISIS<sup>21</sup>.

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When Trump was elected as the presidential nominee for the Republican Party, all his focus shifted towards the Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton. Whereas Trump was an outsider with no previous experience in Washington, Clinton had a long track record in the nation's capital as a former First Lady (to President Bill Clinton), senator and Secretary of State. This allowed Trump's campaign to focus on her previous experiences and to play into conspiracies surrounding her political career, as well as her husband's. In the first six months of Bill Clinton's presidency, the deputy White House counsel and long-time friend to the Clintons, Vince Foster, committed suicide. At the time, it gave rise to a conspiracy theory that he had been murdered by the Clintons, since he had information that would be damaging to the president. The narrative was stirred up again by Trump during his presidential campaign, as he claimed that the circumstances of Foster's death were "very fishy" and he stated that he took the murder accusations very seriously<sup>22</sup>. Framing the Clintons as criminals and

<sup>21</sup> Wong, E. (2016, November 18). Trump has called climate change a Chinese hoax. Beijing says it is anything but. The New York Times. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/19/world/asia/china-trump-climate-change.html. Kopan, T. (2016, August 12). Donald Trump: I meant that Obama founded ISIS, literally. CNN. Retrieved from https://edition.cnn.com/2016/08/11/politics/donald-trump-hugh-hewitt-obama-founder-isis/index.html

<sup>22</sup> Bixby, S., McCarthy, T. (2018, February 9). Trump: suicide of Bill Clinton's counsel Vince Foster 'very fishy' – as it happened.
The Guardian. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/

stone-cold killers by hinting at the so-called 'Clinton Body Count' conspiracy and other theories of criminal conduct was an integral part of the Trump campaign and gave rise to chants like 'lock her up!' by the crowds attending Trump's campaign rallies. Trump also fuelled theories about Hillary Clinton's health, stating that she was not fit enough to serve as president<sup>23</sup>.

One of the most bizarre theories floating around during the elections was the so-called Pizzagate theory. After Clinton's campaign manager John Podesta was hacked, WikiLeaks obtained a large number of e-mails that it then published online. A conspiracy theory surged about these e-mails containing coded messages talking about a comprehensive human trafficking and paedophile network, with its headquarters located in the Comet Ping Pong pizzeria in Washington. Supposedly, many high officials from the Democratic Party were involved, with Hillary Clinton at the very head of this organisation. The theory probably originated on internet for such as 4Chan and 8Chan and then spread through social media channels like Twitter and Facebook. It became evident that this seemingly far-fetched theory was taken dead serious by some followers when the restaurant started receiving hundreds of death threats. One individual even went to the restaurant with a firearm, to 'self-investigate'. He pointed a gun at one of the employees and even fired shots in

 $<sup>{\</sup>tt live/2016/may/23/campaign-president-2016-live-updates-trump-clinton-sanders-polling}$ 

<sup>23</sup> Kurtzleben, D. (2016, August 18). Trump adds fuel to conspiracy theories questioning Clinton's health. NPR. Retrieved from https://www.npr.org/2016/08/18/490390614/trump-adds-fuel-to-conspiracy-theories-questioning-clintons-health

the restaurant (though nobody was hurt in the end)<sup>24</sup>. Although Trump himself never explicitly corroborated the theory, individuals related to the campaign and his campaign advisor, who later became the National Security Advisor, Michael Flynn hinted to the theory through social media by insinuating that Clinton was involved in money laundering and sex crimes with children<sup>25</sup>.

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The campaign of Trump also hired the services of Cambridge Analytica. This company used personal data (including that of Facebook profiles) of voters to construct their psychological and political profiles. This would help the campaign in microtargeting specific voters through social media. By overwhelming them with disinformation, their political views could be manipulated, which could then influence the final result of the elections<sup>26</sup>. Another factor contributing to the spread of conspiracy theories online was the Russian involvement in the election through the use of so-called internet trolls. As the Russian government favoured Trump's presidency over Clinton's, it initiated a cyber campaign targeting American voters by boasting Trump and attacking Clinton, often through the spread of fake news stories and conspiracy theories<sup>27</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> Bruney, G., Sebastian, M. (2020, July 24). Years after being debunked, interest in Pizzagate is rising – again. Esquire. Retrieved from https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/news/a51268/what-is-pizzagate/

<sup>25</sup> Bender, B., Hanna, A. (2016, December 5). Flynn under fire for fake news. Politico. Retrieved from https://www.politico.com/sto-ry/2016/12/michael-flynn-conspiracy-pizzeria-trump-232227

<sup>26</sup> Lanting, B. (2018, May 2). Cambridge Analytica sluit deuren als gevolg van Facebook-schandaal. De Volkskrant. Retrieved from https:// www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/cambridge-analytica-sluit-deuren-als-gevolg-van-facebook-schandaal~b7eb750f/

<sup>27</sup> National Post (2017, November 2). 'Hillary is Satan': Ten ads that Russian trolls posted during the 2016 U.S. elections. Retrieved from

While Trump's campaign certainly made overwhelmingly more use of conspiracy theories for political gains, neither Clinton's campaign was innocent of utilising such an armour. When Bill Clinton faced allegations of sexual misconduct by Monica Lewinsky in 1998, Hillary Clinton stated it was a part of the so-called 'vast right-wing' conspiracy<sup>28</sup>. According to this theory, conservative right-winged media and political enemies conspired against the Clintons to smear their name. During the 2016 campaign, Hillary Clinton once again dug up the narrative, stating that it was now out in the open and better funded than before by multibillionaires who wanted to run the country<sup>29</sup>.

#### **CONSPIRACY ENTREPRENEURIALISM**

The 2016 presidential campaign made evident that conspiracy theories were no longer solely present at the edges of American politics, but they had become an important factor in determining the outcome of elections. One of the individuals responsible for this shift was Alex Jones with his InfoWars platform. Already in the late '90s, Jones had started broadcasting shows where he propagated conspiracy theories, first on the radio and later via the Internet. After 9/11 he became a prominent voice

https://nationalpost.com/news/world/hillary-is-a-satan-ten-ads-that-russian-trolls-posted-during-the-2016-u-s-election

<sup>&</sup>lt;u>28</u> Carroll, J. (1998, January 28). Hillary condemns 'right-winged conspiracy'. The Irish Times. Retrieved from https://www.irishtimes.com/news/hillary-condemns-right-wing-conspiracy-1.129233

<sup>29</sup> Condon, S. (2016, February 3). Hillary Clinton: The vast, right-wing conspiracy is "even better funded" now. CBS News. Retrieved from https://www.cbsnews.com/news/hillary-clinton-the-vast-right-wing-conspiracy-is-even-better-funded-now/

of the '9/11 truth movement'. As the Internet grew bigger, so did his audience. InfoWars became one of the major right-winged media outlets along with other sites such as Breitbart News, run by Trump's Chief Strategist Steve Bannon. During the 2016 elections, Jones often welcomed guests who were involved in Trump's campaign, such as Roger Stone, a long-time advisor to Trump. Together, these individuals created a narrative in which they framed themselves to be on the frontlines of a true culture war raging in the US, where they and Trump were battling the 'corrupt' mainstream media to present the real truth to their viewers.

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The impact that Jones had by promoting Trump among American voters should not be underestimated. InfoWars attracts millions of visitors each month and at the time also had a large presence on social media channels like YouTube and Facebook. Jones played a major role in promoting theories such as the one about Obama's birth certificate and Pizzagate. As more people started to move away from traditional media outlets like CNN and Fox News, in preference to internet outlets, conspiracy theories became increasingly mainstream. Moreover, the algorithms of social media channels had an amplifying effect on such theories, as clicking on one link resulted in the presentation of more similar videos and articles. Hence, these online echo chambers further polarised us politics, as users were presented with their own personalised online reality where their political biases would always be confirmed and where fake news stories could spread like wildfire due to the absence of any fact-checking.

Alex Jones is often called a 'conspiracy entrepreneur'30. Next

<sup>30</sup> PBS (2020, July 28). United States of Conspiracy. Retrieved from https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/united-states-of-conspiracy/

to promoting conspiracy theories, the InfoWars website also contains an online store where visitors can buy a range of products related to the platform. These products are intensively promoted in all content that the website produces. In 2014 Jones disclosed during a court case that he received more than 20 million dollars in revenue per year<sup>31</sup>. Hence, although platforms like InfoWars present themselves primarily as news websites, their business model uses these news stories to promote and sell products online. To keep audiences engaged (and thereby sell more products), the conspiracy theories promoted on these platforms often tend to get more and more extreme. When in 2012 a gunman killed 26 people, 20 of which were children, at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut, Jones bolstered the theory that this attack was a hoax, staged by actors to strengthen gun control laws in the country. This conspiracy inspired followers of Jones to molest the parents of the murdered children, who even received death threats due to their alleged involvement in the perceived hoax<sup>32</sup>. Jones later distanced himself from the story, but in 2019 he was convicted and required to pay a fine of 100.000 dollars to one of the suing parents<sup>33</sup>.

<sup>31</sup> Steel, E., Williamson, E. (2018, September 7). Conspiracy theories made Alex Jones very rich. They may bring him down. The New York

Times. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/07/us/politics/alex-jones-business-infowars-conspiracy.html

<sup>32</sup> Frontline (2020, July 28). This Sandy Hook father lives in hiding because conspiracy theories fueled by Alex Jones. PBS. Retrieved from https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/this-sandy-hook-father-lives-in-hiding-because-of-conspiracy-theories-fueled-by-alex-jones/

<sup>33</sup> Trotta, D. (2019, December 31). Infowars founder who claimed Sandy
Hook shooting was a hoax ordered to pay \$100,000. Reuters. Retrieved

The big tech companies who broadcasted InfoWars came under attack for allowing the spread of Jones' conspiracies and thereby feeding the political polarisation in the country and damaging the democratic process. In 2018, Apple, Facebook and YouTube responded by banning InfoWars from their platforms due to allegations of hate speech, which they stated was against their rules of conduct<sup>34</sup>. Despite this ban, the website is still active and receives millions of visitors each month; thus, its influence on public opinion in the Us likely remains quite significant<sup>35</sup>.

# US POLITICS IN THE 'POST-TRUTH ERA'

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During the first days of the Trump presidency, his campaign strategist and councillor Kellyane Conway coined the now-infamous term 'alternative facts'. All throughout his presidency, Trump continued to frame traditional media outlets as fake news, which encouraged his followers to obtain the information elsewhere on the Internet. It gave rise to the claim that us politics had entered the 'post-truth era', where everyone could adhere to their own 'fact'. This political climate, where there was no longer one objective truth that people could agree on, is a central reason why conspiracies have experienced such a surge lately.

from https://www.reuters.com/article/us-texas-lawsuit-alex-jonesidUSKBN1YZ1BB

- 34 Chappell, B., Tsioulcas, A. (2018, August 6). YouTube, Apple and Facebook ban Infowars, which decries 'mega purge'. NPR. Retrieved from https://www.npr.org/2018/08/06/636030043/youtube-apple-and-facebook-ban-infowars-which-decries-mega-purge?t=1612443489541
- 35 SimilarWeb (2021, January). Infowars.com. Retrieved from https://www.similarweb.com/website/infowars.com/Hoverview

The recent Qanon theory can be seen as the successor to the Pizzagate *conspiracy*. Again, it surfaced first around 2017 on internet fora like 4Chan and 8Chan. The main idea is that during his presidency, Trump was fighting a secret battle against the so-called deep state, which is formed by Satan-worshipping paedophiles in government, business and the media<sup>36</sup>. A person who refers to himself as Q claims to be a high-ranking intelligence officer within the government and is leaving the so-called 'Qdrops' on the Internet – coded messages about the ongoing secret war<sup>37</sup>. The narrative became really popular in 2020, right around the time of the presidential election campaign. Over time it has mutated, adding elements from other well-known speculations such as the JFK, NWO and 9/11 conspiracy theories.

When in that same year the corona pandemic hit the US, it provided even more fuel for conspiracists to underpin their theories. Conspiracies related to the pharmaceutical industry had already been omnipresent in the US for a long time. For example, Big Pharma was accused of concealing the cure for cancer and approving the release of vaccines that could cause autism in children. Now, with corona, wealthy philanthropists like Bill Gates and George Soros – frequently named in theories such as QAnon – were accused of conspiring with pharmaceutical companies to profit from the crisis, to implant tracking microchips using vaccines or even to kill a large part

<sup>36</sup> Wendling, M. (2021, January 6). QAnon: What is it and where did it come from? BBC News. Retrieved from https://www.bbc.com/news/53498434

<sup>37</sup> Roose, K. (2021, February 4). What is QAnon, the viral pro-Trump conspiracy theory. **The New York Times**. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/article/what-is-qanon.html

of the population<sup>38</sup>. Also, the lockdown measures that were taken by the authorities were perceived as an orchestrated power grab by the government to curtail civil rights and deploy mass surveillance technologies. Ideas like those of the World Economic Forum, to utilise the corona crisis as a 'great reset' for the world economy in order to rebuild it in a more sustainable way, were interpreted by conspiracists as a proof that the New World Order (NWO) is now on its way to being installed<sup>39</sup>.

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Next to the corona crisis, the country also experienced a surge in racial tensions after the Black Lives Matter protests throughout the year. By the time presidential elections came up in November 2020, US politics had reached its boiling point. In this context of heightened tension and chaos, the country found itself even more divided than four years earlier, which allowed crazy conspiracies to roam free. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, many voters chose for the option to vote by mail. Beforehand, polls had already revealed that Democrat voters were more likely to vote by mail than Republican voters. Hence, President Trump repeatedly stated that voting by mail was vulnerable to fraud<sup>40</sup>. As the votes that were cast by mail proved to be decisive in the de-

<sup>38</sup> The Conversation (2020, September 15th). Coronavirus and conspiracies: how the far right is exploiting the pandemic. Retrieved from https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-and-conspiracies-how-the-far-right-is-exploiting-the-pandemic-145968

Graham, J. (2021, January 2). What is 'the Great Reset' and why does it scare some conservatives? Descret News. Retrieved from https://www.descret.com/indepth/2021/1/2/22203108/great-reset-world-economic-forum-politics-conservative-conspiracy-parler-america-first

<sup>40</sup> BBC News (2020, August 16). Trump says universal mail-in voting would be 'catastrophic'. Retrieved from https://www.bbc.com/news/world-uscanada-53795876

feat of Trump by the recently sworn-in President Joe Biden, it was no surprise that Trump immediately started to contest the validity of the election results. This 'stop the steal' campaign ultimately culminated in the storming of the Capitol Building by Trump supporters, many of whom firmly believed in conspiracy theories like OA non<sup>41</sup>.

Over the years, conspiracies have moved away from the fringes and clawed their way into the heart of us politics. It is unlikely that this will change in the coming years, even though president Biden seems more keen on preventing the glorification of such narratives than his predecessor is. Especially in the Republican Party, it has become clear that conspiracy theories are now a major problem. At the time of writing this article, Georgia congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene has been expelled from two committee assignments due to her stated belief in *conspiracies* like QAnon<sup>42</sup>. The most worrying fact is that these theories can incite people to commit acts of violence, as we have already seen it happen in the us during the last years. For this reason, the FBI has now designated conspiracies like QAnon as a domestic terrorism threat<sup>43</sup>.

<sup>41</sup> Biesecker, M., et al (2021, January 11). Who are they? Records reveal Trump fans who stormed the Capitol. AP News. Retrieved from https://apnews.com/article/us-capitol-siege-trump-supporters-8edfd-3bb994568b7cdcd2243ad769101

**<sup>42</sup>** RTL Nieuws (2021, February 5th). Amerikaans parlementslid gestraft om verspreiden complottheorieën. Retrieved from https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/nieuws/buitenland/artikel/5212880/amerikaans-parlementslid-republikein-marjorie-taylor-greene-vs

<sup>43</sup> Vanderzielfultz, V. (2020, August 4). Conspiracy theory trends: QAnon. Homeland Security Digital Library. Retrieved from https://www.hsdl. org/c/conspiracy-theory-trends-qanon/

### CONCLUSIONS: WHAT DOES THIS MEAN

# FOR EUROPEAN LIBERALS?

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To think that the recent conspiracy epidemic that the us is experiencing is only limited to this country would be very naive. Especially in Europe, we consume a lot of media produced in the US. Our cinemas are filled mostly with Hollywood movies, we watch Netflix series and documentaries, and the us elections often get more news coverage than the elections of our neighbouring countries. Especially on the Internet, US-produced content is frequently absorbed by Europeans. Hence, it should come as no surprise that conspiracy theories propagated through us media outlets have also sprouted in Europe. When we look at the phenomenon of conspiracy entrepreneurialism, for example, we can see that European counterparts are then using the exact same business model used by people like Alex Jones. In the Netherlands, Robert Jensen has taken up the role as a doomsayer, using his online platform to discuss domestic and international conspiracies through clickbait videos, and then using this content to incite people to buy merchandise and donate money44.

Moreover, the Us elections have revealed that in a polarised society the vote-by-mail procedure can act as a catalyst for conspiracy theories and lead to accusations of fraud. Even if the procedure is deemed a hundred per cent safe, the mere distrust that people feel towards it is enough to contest an election result and cause

<sup>44</sup> Haijtema, A. (2020, July 3). Als bijbelse onheilsprofeten verkondigen talkshowhosts Jones en Jensen hun waarheid. De Volkskrant. Retrieved from https://www.volkskrant.nl/foto/als-bijbelse-onheilsprofeten-verkondigen-talkshowhosts-jones-en-jensen-hun-waarheid~be450022/

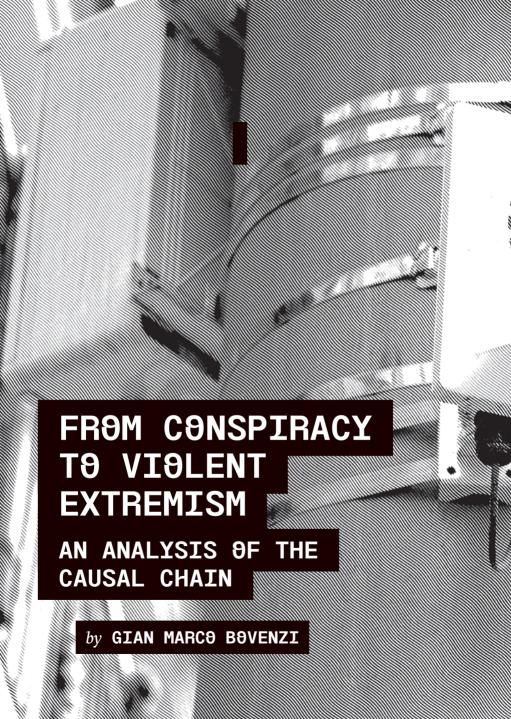
civil unrest. This is a fact that should be taken into account in the upcoming national elections in European countries that will also have to take place in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, not only in the Us we have seen that conspiracies can lead to security threats. The EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator has warned of growing radicalisation among conspiracists that could lead to future terrorist attacks<sup>45</sup>.

What the American case also shows us, is that conspiracies are not bound to any specific political ideology. Although recently there is a large focus on conspiracies on the right side of the spectrum, they are also very much present among the left. It is not one side, but the fringes, or extremes, of both sides where these conspiracies generally reside. However, when political polarisation drives people towards these fringes, these conspiracies take an increasingly centre stage. This is exactly what we have seen in the US and what we can also expect to happen in Europe if the trend of polarisation continues. Issues like the coronavirus pandemic will likely aggravate such polarisation within European countries.

The US is not only the place where many conspiracies originate, but also the country that largely shapes the infrastructure allowing them to spread. As mentioned before, social media plays a crucial role in the proliferation of conspiracy theories. US companies like Twitter, Facebook and Google (plus its subsidiary YouTube) have recently started to be held accountable by the US government for such practices. Nevertheless, European countries

<sup>45</sup> Counter Terror Business (2020, September 3). Conspiracy theories may spawn new forms of terrorism. Retrieved from https://counterterrorbusiness.com/news/03092020/conspiracy-theories-may-spawn-new-formsterrorism

should not passively await the outcomes of such investigations. The EU can play an important role by creating policies similar to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and draw up standards these companies must comply with in order to do business on the European market. This could, for example, tackle the algorithms that these companies use that amplify conspiracy theories. As liberals, we stand for an open market in which companies can operate freely without too much hindrance from any government intervention. However, when these companies threaten to undermine the democratic process and even create security risks in countries, it is time to take action.





#### 1. INTRODUCTION

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The Covid-19 pandemic represented a very stressful, sudden and unforeseen event, hitting social and political systems, modifying the past style of life<sup>1</sup>, and altering our sense of safety in daily life<sup>2</sup> – without creating new ones.

The intrinsic uncertainty characterising the Covid-19 pandemic has led to the need for answers, and this frame represents the perfect ground on which conspiracy theories could arise<sup>3</sup>. As a consequence, new threats of terrorist waves could emerge if these theories will culminate in extremism and then in violence<sup>4</sup>: the causal chain that can lead to the worse scenario is complex and multidimensional, and it needs to be quickly addressed with an interdisciplinary approach. This has to be done primarily by the policymakers, who are responsible for containing the threat either for the safety of the citizens or for the maintenance and preservation of the democratic institutions.

The causal chain analysis – conspiracy theories, extremism, violence and terrorism – is the central theoretical means to develop policies to effectively address the issue, since it allows us to identify the drivers on which the policies have to act.

- 1 Due to the preventive measures to limit contagions.
- Because of the always different degree of contagiousness within and between the countries.
- 3 European Commission (2020). **Identifying conspiracy theories.**Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/corona-virus-response/fighting-disinformation/identifying-conspiracy-theories\_en
- <u>4</u> Bartlett, J., Miller, C. (2010). The Power of Unreason: Conspiracy Theories. Extremism and Counter-Terrorism. London: Demos

Following that logical pattern, firstly the chapter faces the general topic of conspiracy theories: in fact, the first step to address threats deriving from conspiracy theories is knowing how to recognise them. Then, it addresses the issue of how conspiracy theories evolve into extremism and violence, and the role of the Internet in spreading misinformation; additionally, it briefly looks at a country-specific (Italian) example of mistrust and conspiration during the Covid-19 pandemic; finally, catching the drivers on which the phenomenon depends on, the chapter can suggest some policies to address the threat.

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#### 2. DEFINITIONS

Conspiracy theory is "the belief that events are secretly manipulated behind the scenes by powerful forces"<sup>5</sup>. In its fight against misinformation during the Covid-19 pandemic, the European Commission has listed in detail some of the features of conspiracy theories hidden behind this apparently simple definition:

- 1 An alleged, secret plot.
- 2 A group of conspirators.
- 3 "Evidence" that seems to support the conspiracy theory.
- 4 They falsely suggest that nothing happens by accident and that there are no coincidences; nothing is as it appears, and everything is connected.
- 5 They divide the world into good or bad.
- 6 They scapegoat people and groups.

<sup>5</sup> COMPACT (2020). Guide to Conspiracy Theories. Retrieved from https:// conspiracytheories.eu/\_wpx/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/COMPACT\_Guide-2. pdf

From this list, we can draw a clearer framework to understand better the phenomenon we are dealing with: from points 1 and 2 above, we can explain what a conspiracy theory is. From points 3 and 4, we can draw what makes a theory a conspiracy one. And from points 5 and 6, we can understand how conspiracy theories can lead to violence and terrorism.

Following this logical thread, we proceed below with the analysis of these three items.

# 3. THE CONSPIRACY THEORY

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The Covid-19 pandemic has seen a rise in harmful and misleading conspiracy theories<sup>6</sup>, and recognising them is not always a straightforward work.

In fact, we first need to distinguish between real conspiracies and conspiracy theories. The first ones come from a healthy scepticism of official accounts that provide a logical explanation of events that are difficult to understand, and that works out by carefully considering available evidence and committing themselves to internal consistency. For example, Volkswagen conspired to cheat emissions tests for their diesel engines; the U.S. National Security Agency secretly spied on civilian internet users. We know about these conspiracies through internal industry documents, government investigations and healthy scepticism, which made it possible to uncover the conspiration. Instead, what distinguishes conspiracy theories from genuine efforts to uncover actual conspiracies is that a conspiracy theory

example, the belief that the 9/11 terrorist attacks were an "inside job"; a vast majority of Americans believe that the government

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covered up the truth about the JFK assassination; or also, despite the evidence of the birth certificate, some have claimed and still

is not the most plausible account of events based on the available evidence, but this doesn't prevent them from blossoming<sup>7</sup>. For

believe that Obama was not born in the United States8.

It is worth noting that we are not discussing here the truth of any given explanation. For our purposes, following Keely's approach, "given our epistemic situation [...] we are in the same situation as Hume. As Thomas Huxley observed, Hume cannot say that miracles have never happened, only that, even if they have, we have no warrant to believe them"<sup>9</sup>.

Moreover, we shouldn't confuse conspiracy ideation with ignorance. As Lewandowsky et al. explain, the latter is the absence of relevant knowledge, and it can affect the decision making processes as well. Still, the effects of ignorance may be "less severe than those arising from reliance on misinformation". As further explained, in a self-conscious absence of knowledge, people "often turn to simple heuristics when making decisions". Lewandowsky stresses how "ignorance rarely leads to strong support for a cause, in contrast to false beliefs based on misinformation, which are often held strongly and with (perhaps

<sup>7</sup> The Power of Unreason: Conspiracy Theories. Extremism and Counter-Terrorism (2020)

Lewandowsky, S., Cook, J. (2020). The Conspiracy Theory Handbook. Retrieved from https://www.climatechangecommunication.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/ConspiracyTheoryHandbook.pdf

<sup>&</sup>lt;u>9</u> Keeley, B.L. (1999). Of conspiracy theories. The Journal of Philosophy 96(3), 109-126

infectious) conviction. For example, those who most vigorously reject the scientific evidence for climate change are also those who believe they are best informed about the subject"<sup>10</sup>. Nevertheless, there exists as well a sort of "ignorance by choice", that is, the unwillingness to gather the right and useful information as to remedy the absence of relevant knowledge. Such form of "ignorance" – believing simply alleged logical explanation without verifying them – might represent perhaps as an equally strong driver for unwise decision–making.

So, both types of people, those who believe in conspiracy theories and the "ignorant" ones, make assumptions in support of things they are unaware about.

Two primary drivers are common within the vast amount of existing literature on this subject. These drivers – points 1 and 2 of the European Commission's definition – could make a theory a conspiracy one. They represent the ground on which points 3 and 4 of the same definition could run. As we see, the two drivers are strongly reflected in the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic framework, bundled in with the lack of trust and the psychological motives.

# 4. FROM THE UNEXPLAINED TO THE CONSPIRACY THEORY

#### 4.1. LACK OF TRUST

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A fundamental element that makes conspiracies possible and harmful is the lack of trust, addressing points 1 (to recall, a con-

Lewandowsky, S., et al. (2012). Misinformation and its correction: Continued influence and successful debiasing. Psychological science in the public interest 13(3), 106-131

spiracy theory involves a secret plot) and 2 (a conspiracy theory includes conspirators) of the European Commission's definition of conspiracy theories.

In fact, in light of the preceding analysis, conspiracy theories are not automatically triggered. As the European Commission's definition suggests, a conspiracy theory involves a group of conspirators acting secretly to others' detriment. In the Covid-19 context, this element has been identified in those responsible for managing the pandemic: the public policymakers<sup>11</sup>.

Conspiracy theories exploit a lack of trust in the official producers of knowledge. Bartlett and Miller<sup>12</sup> state that this is a typical situation of a complex, highly specialised world in which we have to refer to experts for our answers; in this context, we have no personal tools to verify their claims, but we must trust in their competence and fairness. Moreover, it is worth noting that they also outline that trust is an irreducible component of uncertainty when delegating a task to someone else, which applies to the Covid-19 situation.

Trust is a kind of gamble<sup>13</sup>, and it plays a crucial role in promoting transactions between people, through building an environment of cooperation and coordination; in the same way, trust in public institutions is an essential prerequisite of a healthy democratic society, making it possible for people to get on with

<sup>&</sup>lt;u>for</u> For example, conspiracies concerning the 'endogenous' origin of the pandemic, the vaccine safety or the aim of controlling the movement of individuals through infection-tracking programs.

<sup>12</sup> The Power of Unreason: Conspiracy Theories. Extremism and Counter-Terrorism (2020)

<sup>13</sup> Parker, S., et al (2008). State of Trust. How to Build better Relationships between Councils and the Public. London: Demos

their everyday lives. Therefore, trust in the government is valuable since public institutions' legitimacy is built on it, and it is crucial for social cohesion<sup>14</sup>.

Parker et al. showed that when citizens evaluate the goodness of institutions, they take into account their outcomes and personal interactions within their staff and the process through which decisions are taken. Thus, people's level of trust of institutions depends on three drivers: services supplied, interpersonal relations, and decision making. And "the alternative to trusting is either for us to disengage from a social relationship or to attempt to use fear, control and power to force the other party to behave in a way we find trustworthy" <sup>15</sup>.

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This point is fundamental: the lack of trust leads to a loosening of the relationship between the government and citizens; in this shortcoming, new *extra-governmental* relationships of trust can be built, and these will be based on new beliefs, which are not necessarily grounded.

Nowadays, there is an emerging consensus that the erosion of people's trust in government is paving the way for political polarization, fostering the rise of populist movements – movements people usually think that the ongoing threat of conspiracy theories derives from. However, conspiracy thinking may also come from the ideological extreme wings and more "non-extremists" voters, such as conservatives, liberals, or left-wing voters. The quantitative analysis carried out by Lewandowsky

<sup>14</sup> OECD (2020). **Trust in Government.** Retrieved from http://www.oecd.org/gov/trust-in-government.htm

<sup>15</sup> State of Trust. How to Build better Relationships between Councils and the Public (2008)

et al. showed that what they called "worldview" affects people's opinions about a number of controversial issues such as genetically modified (GM) foods, childhood vaccinations, government regulation of businesses, climate change and so on. In the refusal to accept scientific evidence, political orientation plays a widely differing role among the issues examined<sup>16</sup>. In light of this, it is preferable to consider "conspiracist ideation as a cognitive style rather than a potential personality trait because if conspiracist ideation is considered at a cognitive level, its analysis can reveal why it is antithetical to scientific reasoning in several ways"<sup>17</sup>. This considered, worldview polarization increases proportionally with the level of education and literacy, and "the opposition reflects a cognitive style rather than a deficit of knowledge or ability".

Above being said, the common thread linking the various worldviews and extremist mutation is neither the type nor how

As the authors show, the analysis's puzzling results are: "among American Conservatives, but not Liberals, trust in science has been declining since the 1970's. Climate science has become particularly polarised, with Conservatives being more likely than Liberals to reject the notion that greenhouse gas emissions are warming the globe. Conversely, opposition to genetically-modified (GM) foods and vaccinations is often ascribed to the political Left although reliable data are lacking. There are also growing indications that rejection of science is suffused by conspiracist ideation, that is the general tendency to endorse conspiracy theories including the specific beliefs that inconvenient scientific findings constitute a 'hoax'" (Lewandowsky, S., Gignac, G.E., Oberauer, K. (2013). The role of conspiracist ideation and worldviews in predicting rejection of science. PloS one 8(10)).

<sup>17</sup> Lewandowsky, S., Gignac, G.E., Oberauer, K. (2013). The role of conspiracist ideation and worldviews in predicting rejection of science. PloS one 8(10)

extreme the idea is, but the lack of trust in institutions combined with particular cognitive processes typical of misinformation linked to conspiracy theories. As Bartlett and Miller state,

perhaps the broadest impact of conspiracy theories is on the relationships between the government and the communities it serves. Through the promotion of cynicism, mistrust and suspicion conspiracy theories help create the tears in the social fabric that extremists exploit. [...] The consequences, however, are often the same: pointing to forces beyond our control, articulating an enemy to hate, sharply dividing the group from the non-group and, sometimes, legitimizing violence<sup>18</sup>.

Thus, violence has its roots here.

#### 4.2. PSYCHOLOGICAL MOTIVES

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The psychological motives address points 3 (a conspiracy theory provides evidence that seems to support itself) and 4 (a conspiracy theorist falsely suggest that nothing happens by accident and that there are no coincidences; nothing is as it appears, and everything is connected) of the European Commission's list.

It has been seen that trust is often epistemologically even more important than empirical data or logical argument because the data and the argument are available only through trust<sup>19</sup>. In fact, theorists are absolute in refusing the "official" account, and

<sup>18</sup> The Power of Unreason: Conspiracy Theories. Extremism and Counter-Terrorism (2020)

Hardwig, J. (1991). The role of trust in knowledge. The Journal of Philosophy 88(12), 693-708

the incoherence of their belief often leads to contradiction. Conspiracy theorists can simultaneously believe in ideas such as that Princess Diana was murdered and that she faked her death<sup>20</sup>.

As Douglas *et al.* showed<sup>21</sup>, on the one hand, "conspiracy theories appear to provide broad, internally consistent explanations that allow people to preserve beliefs in the face of uncertainty and contradiction"<sup>22</sup>. On the other hand, "conspiracy beliefs may be in part a product of biased assimilation – accepting information that confirms one's views and scrutinising information that disconfirms one's views". Psychologically, people with low self-control consider conspiracy theories as narratives allowing them "to feel that they possess a better account".

This cognitive explanation shows that people appear to be drawn to conspiracy theories when – compared to non-conspiracy explanations – they promise to satisfy important social and psychological motives that can be characterised as *epistemic* (e.g., the desire for understanding, accuracy, and subjective certainty), *existential* (e.g., the desire for control and security), and *social* (e.g., the desire to maintain a positive image of the self or group). This approach leads to a sort of auto-endorsement dynamic, leading to the conclusion that the more substantial the evidence against a conspiracy, the more the conspirators must want people to believe their version of events. Furthermore, resistance to contrary evidence could make the rejection of "truth" particularly troubling, amplifying rejection rather than fostering its acceptance.

<sup>20</sup> Guide to Conspiracy Theories (2020)

<sup>21</sup> Douglas, K.M., et al (2019). Understanding conspiracy theories. Political Psychology 40, 3-35

<sup>22</sup> The Conspiracy Theory Handbook (2020)

Concluding, as defined by points 3 and 4 of the European Commission's definition, in a context of uncertainty and doubt about some events, conspiracy theorists provide an alternative explanation to the official one – unacceptable to their point of view – believing in a version of the fact coherent to them, because the causality is too hard to accept by other people. As several studies show, conspiracy theories tend and help to reduce the complexity of reality, and are able to reduce the uncertainty it generates<sup>23</sup>. Every attempt to discredit conspiracy theories is viewed as further support of their "truth".

#### 5. FROM CONSPIRACY TO EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM

As not every conspiration is a conspiracy theory, they do not necessarily lead to extremism or violence. In fact, many extremist groups do not even believe in conspiracy theories<sup>24</sup>. Since "extremism" is a relative term, meaning "someone or some group that expresses significant dissent from prevailing norms"<sup>25</sup>, this is not necessarily something negative. However, members of very different extremist groups frequently believe in conspiracy theories, even when such theories do not constitute their "of-

<sup>23</sup> Bessi, A., et al (2015). Science vs conspiracy: Collective narratives in the age of misinformation. PloS one 10(2), e0118093

As Bartlett & Miller list, some examples of groups that don't identify themselves in significant conspiracy theories are: the Animal Liberation Front, the Earth Liberation Front, ETA, various "hacktivist" collectives, King Mob, Armed Free Love, Black bloc, Red Action, the Continuity IRA, the Fire Revolutionary Cells and the Real IRA (Bartlett, J., Miller, C. (2010). The Power of Unreason: Conspiracy Theories. Extremism and Counter-Terrorism. London: Demos).

<sup>25</sup> The Power of Unreason: Conspiracy Theories. Extremism and Counter-Terrorism (2020)

ficial" ideology: this belief serves as a "radicalising multiplier" holding together the groups and sometimes leading to extreme and violent manifestations.

It would be premature to suggest that conspiracy theories can, in any way, predict the emergence of violence. Still, they rather serve as a factor that could lead to extremism, then turning extremism to violence. Thus, as stated before, the presence of points 1, 2, 3 and 4 of the EC's definition of conspiracy theories, represents a "radicalising multiplier" magnifying and exacerbating existing dynamics of extremism in three ways (points 5 and 6 of the EC's definition):

- They exacerbate demonologies 'the other' or the enemy that the group defines itself against (point 5);
- They delegitimize and condemn voices of dissent and moderation as being a part of the conspiracy (point 5);
- They are a spur to violent action: a rhetorical device to justify the killing of innocents, often to "awaken" the people from their acquiescent slumber (point 6).

Thus, in this case as well, extremist groups consider the step to undertake violent action as a big one. The acknowledgement about how and why some individuals turn their behaviour into violent one is the most important question in the terrorism studies, and conspiracy theories acting as a "multiplier" could help us understand this step.

As the OECD pointed out, the Covid-19 crisis exacerbates existing inequalities, with potential impact on public disengagement, polarization and social unrest<sup>26</sup>. Reasonably, this context

<sup>26</sup> OECD (2020). Building a New Paradigm for Public Trust [webinar series]. Retrieved from http://www.oecd.org/gov/webinar-series-building-a-new-paradigm-for-public-trust.htm

has amplified the "in-group/out-group" dynamics (point 5), the discredit of the official voice exploiting the deficit of trust (point 5), and it has enforced the idea that the result can justify the means (point 6): the three central drivers towards the threat of terrorism have been activated, and as a consequence, it urges an intervention of the policymakers' on these drivers.

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# 6. THE ROLE OF THE INTERNET

As several studies showed, conspiracy theories are found on the Internet – a natural means for their diffusion, which happens for various reasons. Firstly, conspiracy theorists have a higher commitment than others to share and post information that is – according to their system of beliefs – neglected by mainstream media and scientific news<sup>27</sup>. This is coherent with studies showing how consumers of conspiracy theories are more prone to "like" and share conspiracy posts on Facebook<sup>28</sup>. Instead, the World Wide Web allows them to rapidly spread rumours and conspiracy theories that often quickly elicit a large social response<sup>29</sup>.

Secondly, the easy availability and wide diffusion among users of online social media allow aggregation around common interests and worldview. Consequently, selective exposure to content becomes the primary driver of content diffusion that generates the formation of homogeneous clusters<sup>30</sup>.

<sup>27</sup> Science vs conspiracy: Collective narratives in the age of misinformation (2015)

<sup>28</sup> The Conspiracy Theory Handbook (2020)

<sup>29</sup> Del Vicario, M., et al (2016). The spreading of misinformation online. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 113(3), 554-559

<sup>30</sup> Ibid

Thus, we can observe a significantly higher topical similarity compared to non-linked users. This correlation is observed for several activities, like tagging and group affiliation, and occurs in all the datasets considered<sup>31</sup>.

A similarity between members of social groups, or between individuals sharing a social link, is known as homophily<sup>32</sup> in social networks literature. Homophily phenomena can be present because of the selection mechanisms (individuals create social links preferentially with other individuals sharing a certain degree of similarity) and social influence (linked individuals influence each other and become more similar). In this way, homophily allows self-endorsement dynamics, typical of conspiration and its evolution in extremism. This is coherent with the findings pointing out the existence of a relationship between beliefs in conspiracy theories and the need for cognitive closure.

As also illustrated by Grimes<sup>33</sup>, "conspiracy theories can spread rapidly online in polarised echo-chambers, which may be deeply invested in a particular narrative and closed off to other sources

<sup>31</sup> Aiello, L. M., et al (2012). Friendship prediction and homophily in social media. ACM Transactions on the Web (TWEB) 6(2), 1-33

As often discussed in social sciences, the observed homophily can emerge for different reasons, which are summarised in two scenarios: link selection and social influence (McPherson et al. 2001; Leenders 1997; Shalizi and Thomas 2010). The former scenario considers that social links are preferentially created between individuals who are already similar and choose each other for establishing the social link precisely because they share some degree of similarity. In the latter scenario, individuals become more similar over time because they influence each other. Disentangling these scenarios is a delicate matter that requires longitudinal data sets, as social influence implies a temporal evolution of a relationship (Ibid).

<sup>33</sup> Grimes, D.R. (2016). On the viability of conspiratorial beliefs. PloS one, 11(1), e0147905

of information". As a mere example of how such ideas may be strong, he provides a Californian study on parents in which it was found that countering anti-vaccination misconceptions related to autism was possible with clear explanation, but that for parents resolutely opposed to vaccination attempts the use of rational approach further entrenched them in their views.

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The Covid-19 pandemic represents a perfect context for this dynamic to run in, because of the wide diffusion of social networks – typical of the 21st century – which has allowed an uncontrolled use of them³4; the consequence of the quarantine – which involved more time spent on social networks; the uncertainty – which has increased the need for safety and answers. The outcomes of the Internet use by the conspiracy theorists' are a higher speed of spread of the conspiracy theories and empowerment of the ideas behind the theories. As we have seen before, these are the two main drivers the policymakers need to fight.

# 7. CASE STUDY

#### 7.1. TECHNOPHORTA

The term "technophobia" refers to a heightened anxiety level induced by Information Technology (IT). In their pioneer study, Maurer and Simonson<sup>35</sup> define computer anxiety as "the fear or apprehension felt by an individual when using computers, or when considering the possibility of computer utilization", further

<sup>34</sup> The Conspiracy Theory Handbook (2020)

<sup>35</sup> Maurer, M.M., Simonson, M.R. (1984). Development and validation of a measure of computer anxiety. Retrieved from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED243428

explaining that nevertheless there are forms of rational fears associated with the use of computers (job displacement, increased exposure to radiation from terminal screens) that exist, "the fears that were being addressed in this study were fears that could be called 'irrational' fears (e.g. impending doom sure calamity because of contact with computers)". Usually, this fear is related to the irrational fear of computers, robots, artificial intelligence, weapons, and other such things that seem advanced in scientific thought<sup>36</sup>.

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This standard definition needs to be further clarified; in fact.

the addition of the suffix 'phobia' in this context has led to misunderstanding, carrying with it as it makes the suggestion of people rearing back in alarm at the sight of a palm pilot or a computer monitor, as those people with a specific phobia of snakes, for instance, may do. Research examining the extent of aversive reactions to technology highlights a sliding scale from 'uncomfortable user' through to 'phobic', with around 5% falling into this latter category, reporting symptoms such as sweaty palms and heart palpitations<sup>37</sup>.

This definition sheds light on the fact that the degree of aversion against technology may vary considerably, and technophobia can be apparent, even in individuals who are using computers.

<sup>36</sup> Di Giacomo, D., et al. (2020). Technophobia as emerging risk factor in aging: Investigation on computer anxiety dimension. Health Psychology Research 8(1)

<sup>37</sup> Thorpe, S.J., Brosnan, M.J. (2007). Does computer anxiety reach levels which conform to DSM IV criteria for specific phobia? Computers in Human Behavior 23(3), 1258–1272

This feature makes technophobia somewhat different from other phobias, usually the latter being characterised by the avoidance of the phobia's source. This is an unavoidable trait of the problem because computers are a major component of information systems (IS) and there are applications of computers in IS where human interaction is inevitable (e.g., banking, manufacturing, reservation and inventory system), and in which human intervention is critical for monitoring proper operation of the computer programs<sup>38</sup>.

In light of the various degrees of reaction – related in particular to the irrational share of the fear – and the continuous and unavoidable stimulus to which people are exposed, "it remains a problem and extends beyond the fear of the technology to a distrust and fear of computer experts and 'technocrats'"<sup>39</sup>. In fact, there also exists an indirect problem related to those who manage technology and those who could exploit its feared negative implications. The above–mentioned issue of 'trust' is rooted in this framework.

Technophobia associated with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has enhanced the spread of these ideologies (such as the spread of Covid-19 allegedly caused or strengthened by 5G technology), leading the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator of Council of the European Union, in its note *Terrorism in Times of Corona: The development of the terrorist threat as a result of the* 

Read more Brosnan, M. (1998) Technophobia: The psychological impact of information technology. London: Routledge. Brosnan, M.J., Thorpe, S. J. (2006). An evaluation of two clinically-derived treatments for technophobia. Computers in Human Behavior 22(6), 1080–1095. Desai, M.S., Richards, T.C. (1998). Computer anxiety, training and education: A meta analysis. Journal of Information Systems Education 9, 49–54

<sup>39</sup> Ibid

*Covid-19 crisis* (May 2020) to define extremist technophobes as a "potential new form of violent extremism".

In light of what we have seen so far, let us report the following country-specific example (Italy). In this case, technophobia manifests as the use of computers – or technological devices – as an instrument to infringe upon the fundamental right to privacy, with the consequence that such devices are being used to 'control' individuals

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## 7.2. APP IMMUNI

As an example of conspiracy theories connected to technophobia, some have identified the recent implementation of the contact-tracing App Immuni (literally, 'Immunes'), created by the company Bending Spoons, as a means of the government to spy on citizens' lives without their consensus<sup>40</sup> – more formally speaking, as a governmental instrument infringing upon citizens' fundamental right to privacy (despite the green light given by the Italian privacy ombudsman). The app, created to monitor and track the potential spread of the Covid-19 virus, works quite simply – and, most of all, its use is voluntary: as reported in detail on the website of the Italian Ministry of Health<sup>41</sup>. It is based on Bluetooth technology and, once it is downloaded to one's device, "all that

Tremolada, L. (2020, May 28). Il complotto (che non c'è)di Google e
Apple che ci spiano senza consenso. Il Sole 24 Ore. Retrieved from
https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/il-complotto-che-non-c-e-di-google-e-apple-che-ci-spiano-senza-consenso-ADsqFqT

<sup>41</sup> Ministerio della Salute (2020). Immuni contact-tracing App: available on all devices. Retrieced from http://www.salute.gov.it/portale/nuo-vocoronavirus/dettaglioNotizieNuovoCoronavirus.jsp?lingua=italiano&me nu=notizie&p=dalministero&id=4849

is required is some information, such as the town of residence, and the system will function automatically. The smartphones it is present on will exchange automatically generated codes [...] in an anonymous way to make it possible to trace who is at risk in the case in which someone contracts the virus". Once a positive case is registered by health facilities, "exclusively with the consent of the positive-tested individual", the health operator inserts a code (that does not correspond to personal data of the user) into the system. Only at that point, the Immuni system sends an automatic notification to those users who have been in close contact with the new positive case.

And what about the data? As specified again by the Ministry of Health, data are stored exclusively on individual devices. Moreover, "the system does not trace movements, only close contacts between smartphones", and collected data can be shared only with the explicit authorization of the user.

Although the government has launched several awareness campaigns<sup>42</sup>, scepticism and conspiracy arose among the population, especially those identifying Immuni as a potential tool to control and track citizens' movements.

A very interesting article appeared in one of the major Italian daily newspapers *Il Sole 24 Ore*<sup>43</sup> titled "The (inexistent) conspiracy of Google and Apple spying on us without our consensus",

<sup>42 &#</sup>x27;Immuni: Here's what you need to know about using Italy's contact-tracing app' (2020, October 6). The Local. Retrieved from https://www.thelocal.it/20201006/immuni-heres-what-you-need-to-know-about-using-italys-contact-tracing-app

<sup>43 &</sup>lt;u>Il complotto (che non c'è)di Google e Apple che ci spiano senza consenso (2020)</u>

which highlights several conspiracy theories linked to the App Immuni:

The alleged automatic download of the app on Android devices, without the authorization by users; the claim is spread through the device-to-device chain letter that alerts individuals to turn off geo-localization, Bluetooth and Wi-Fi on their devices, in order not to be tracked by Google.<sup>44</sup>

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- The company Bending Spoons, chosen by the government to create the mechanisms of the app, allegedly holds among its stakeholders several "important and powerful families and groups", such as Berlusconi, Benetton and several unspecified Chinese holdings<sup>45</sup>.
- An incomplete part of the app's source code is openly shared on GitHub: therefore, this paves the way for potential hackers to manipulate it, disclosing the app's vulnerability to cyberbreaches and subsequent data distortions.

In conclusion, conspiracy theories emerged in relation to the risk that the App Immuni could represent a threat to citizens' right to privacy. This is in line with the widespread and growing distrust towards social media as an instrument of control and limitation

<sup>44</sup> Also highlighted in Tellini, A. (2020, May 30). Complotto Immuni, alcune teorie affermano che l'app sia già installata. Focus Tech.

Retrieved from https://focustech.it/2020/05/30/immuni-android-privacy-complotto-283490

Pezzali, R. (2020, May 26). Immuni, uno sguardo al codice sorgente delle app. Niente GPS né dati personali, l'allarme privacy è pretestuoso e esagerato. Digital Day. Retrieved from https://www.dday. it/redazione/35545/immuni-uno-sguardo-al-codice-sorgente-delle-appniente-gps-e-niente-dati-personali-lallarme-privacy-e-pretestuoso-eesagerato

of individuals' freedom: according to SurveyMonkey's polling<sup>46</sup>, 56% of the interviewed people affirmed to distrust Google, 41% to distrust Apple, 67% to distrust Facebook (especially after the Cambridge Analytica facts). Such a wave of distrust might refer to the fear that governments gather citizens' data to *spy* on them, to control and orient individuals' behaviours.

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The following sentence, retrieved from the website<sup>47</sup>, unveils what, according to some followers of conspiracy theories, justifies the willingness of the governments to control individuals' privacy: If you are giving every piece of information about yourself to the enemy, then they have the power to think accordingly and counter our every move with a smarter move before we even attacked them with it. Think about it? [...] they have the potential to separate terrorists from the clusters of common people by analysing their actions and pasts. They believe that they can stop these attack by predicting their future moves, thus trying to save millions of lives. But, hiding behind this aim they cannot gives excuses on invading the privacy of everyone which itself is a very big crime.

This concluding example unveils the potential danger conveyed by such message: incitement to hate; lack of trust; the willingness to control for mysterious objectives; fostering the use of violence; and, most generally, all of the elements mentioned in the chapters above.

<sup>46</sup> Vanian, J. (2018, July 17). How Data Privacy Blunders and Conspiracy Theories Helped Fuel the 'Techlash'. Fortune.com. Retrieved from https://fortune.com/2018/07/17/techlash-brainstorm-privacy-conspiracy/

<sup>47</sup> https://hackernoon.com/what-is-government-stealing-from-you-a772b8c7df0b

## 8. CONCLUSIONS AND POSSIBLE POLICY SOLUTIONS

Historically, the conspiracy phenomenon looked differently and, most importantly, it had different sources and spreading patterns, causing varying degrees of threat. As we have seen, conspiracy theories are rooted in distrust of the institutions and, compared to some form of healthy scepticism, at the same time they inspire a generalised, irrational and cynical mistrust: they are either source or cause of the problem.

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These drawbacks do not entail that the government cannot do anything to improve the relationship with the citizens to avoid, or at least decrease, the threat of mistrust.

As the OECD highlights, "trust is important for the success of a wide range of public policies that depend on behavioural responses from the public" AB. This is particularly overt in the Covid-19 context, where the duty of quarantine, hygiene and obligation to wear masks, and vaccinations' campaign – to give just a few examples – is playing a crucial role in the fight against the virus.

Moreover, this is particularly true in the fight against the terrorist threat linked to conspiracy theories, since "the feeling of mistrust is most acute when it comes to counter-terrorism and security measures. It is in relation to counter-terrorism and security that the level of trust in the State and its agents is vital. Research has consistently shown that successful counter-terrorism policing depends on a positive relationship between the police and the community it is trying to work with"<sup>49</sup>.

<sup>48</sup> Trust in Government (2020)

<sup>49</sup> Power of Unreason: Conspiracy Theories. Extremism and Counter-Terrorism (2010)

We have seen that people judge their government based not only on the outcomes of its work but also on the processes that lead to them, as they are important, considering that "people will often accept negative outcomes if they believe that the decision-making process was carried out in a fair way"<sup>50</sup>.

In this respect, Parker et al. present six key criteria for establishing this kind of 'procedural fairness' that policymakers may take into account when they operate:

· Consistency – equal treatment across people and time;

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- *Bias suppression* the avoidance of personal interest and ideological bias by public officials;
- · Accuracy utilising up-to-date, accurate information and opinion;
- *Correctability* the provision of opportunity for review, appeal or redress;
- *Representativeness* ensuring that all citizens can be involved in decision making or that a representative view has been taken;
- · Ethics decisions must conform to fundamental moral values.

The application of these criteria can improve the trust in the government's management. It is obvious that transparency and accountability are essential preconditions to achieve the goal.

However, fighting conspiracy theories undermining the trust in institutions and the effectiveness of their policies, "is something that, by definition, is almost impossible for government to do"<sup>51</sup>. In fact, as we have seen, conspiracy theorists fall into the self-endorsement dynamic due to which every attempt to dis-

<sup>50</sup> The State of Trust. How to Build better Relationships between Councils and the Public (2008)

<sup>51</sup> Power of Unreason: Conspiracy Theories. Extremism and Counter-Terrorism (2010)

credit the theories makes them stronger. This is particularly true if the party providing the explanation of the event is the subject of the event itself. Thus, as the public choice theory shows, there are situations in which public remedies may be inappropriate or entirely unnecessary, and this seems to be the case: we can think of this problem in terms of 'state failure' as a counterpart of the 'market failure'<sup>52</sup>.

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That means that it becomes unavoidable, to a certain extent, to 'delegate' some activities: private, independent, or autonomous institutions have to take part in the fight actively. This could be done by actively checking the government activity and publicly accounting it, promoting education against misinformation and internet misuse, identifying and tackling wrongful and distorted "fake" news.



HATE-BASED CONSPIRACY
THEORIES IN TIMES
OF UNCERTAINTY

by ANA G. JUANATEY, LAIA TARRAGONA



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Uncertainty could well be the word that best defines the current times. Disinformation and fake news have become the new normal, and while not a new phenomenon, nowadays, they spread easily and fast on the Internet. All this is a fertile ground for conspiracy theories as well as for hatred. In addition, the Covid-19 virus has aggravated the sense of uncertainty and lack of control. It is the perfect context, not only for new conspiracy theories specifically related to the pandemic but also for revitalising old and hateful ones.

In this setting, conspiracy theories are contributing significantly to the spread of hate speech, a form of discourse that includes the denigration and/or stigmatisation of a person or group of persons on grounds such as their religion or ethnicity, and which is ubiquitous in Western societies, both online and offline. As the experience of the fascist regimes in the first half of the 20th century have shown, particularly in the European continent, the combination between conspiracy theories and hate speech forms a dangerous cocktail that helps to justify different forms of inhuman treatment, from discrimination to annihilation, and that it is particularly dangerous when it is propagated by people in power. Probably the most notorious and tragic example is the case of antisemitic conspiracy theories, such as the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, a fabricated text that was used as a significant part of Nazi propaganda and which largely contributed to the Holocaust<sup>1</sup>. At present, new versions of old antisemitic conspiracy

<sup>&</sup>lt;u>1</u> Cohn, N. (2020). **El mito de la conspiración judía mundial**. Madrid:
Alianza Editorial

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theories based on the same ideas as the Protocols still circulate, as well as the new ones targeting other groups, such as the Great Replacement theory.

These conspiracy theories that spread hate have transcended minority circles and are now present not only in right-wing extremism but also in mainstream political discourse. This is deeply troubling, since the fact that these theories are spread by people with power and influence contributes largely to their legitimisation and their dissemination potential. Studies show that a large part of the population believes in these theories. This is not a minor issue. As history has proven, these conspiracy theories pose great danger, as they are aimed at undermining democracy and building social distrust and have a massive impact on minorities, fuelling discrimination against them. Moreover, the dissemination of hate-based conspiracy theories may also lead to violence, as some perpetrators of hate crime and terrorist attacks are supporters of such theories. In that sense, the Utøya attack in 2011 in Norway, perpetrated by a believer of conspiracy theories of ethnic replacement2, worked as a wakeup call for European societies.

Against this background, this paper will explore the link between hate speech and conspiracy theories – a connection largely overlooked in the academic literature – focusing particularly on the use of these theories by the extreme-right. As we will see, a common element of the most disseminated hate-based conspiracy theories nowadays is the bottom-line idea that the

See Fekete, L. (2012). The Muslim conspiracy theory and the Oslo massacre. Race & Class, 53(3), 30-47

so-called 'white' population is threatened. Therefore, even though resorting to conspiracy theories is not unique to the extremeright, their connection with hate speech surely makes them more attractive to that part of the ideological spectrum. To explore this connection and its potential dangers, first, we delve into the specific role of conspiracy theories in the dissemination of hate speech, which is closely linked to the old-time mechanism of scapegoating. Second, we analyse the dangers posed by these conspiracy theories, ranging from fuelling prejudice, discrimination, to hate crime and terrorism. Third, we examine the actors that are behind these conspiracy theories. Finally, we propose some ideas about how hate-based conspiracies theories can be tackled in the age of disinformation.

## 2. HATE SPEECH AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

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According to the European Commission, conspiracy theories are defined as "the belief that certain events or situations are secretly manipulated behind the scenes by powerful forces with negative intent"<sup>3</sup>. Similarly, Jolley, Meleady and Douglas consider that "conspiracy theories explain the ultimate causes of significant events as the secret actions of malevolent groups, who cover-up information to suit their own interests"<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation/identifying-conspiracy-theories\_en

<sup>&</sup>lt;u>4</u> Jolley, D., Meleady, R., Douglas, K.M. (2020). Exposure to intergroup conspiracy theories promotes prejudice which spreads across groups. **British Journal of Psychology** 111(1), 17–35

On the other hand, hate speech is not an easy concept to define, but for the purpose of this study, we consider the most generally accepted definition within the European context: ECRI's notion of hate speech, understood as "any form of expressions that spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance". In the context of Europe, the groups that are usually discriminated against and targeted by hate speech include, *inter alia*, non-white people, migrants and refugees, LGBTI people and religious or ethnic minorities such as Muslims, Jews, or Roma people<sup>6</sup>.

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A conspiracy theory intersects with hate speech when these 'powerful forces' or 'malevolent groups', the alleged conspirators, coincide with the groups targeted by hate speech. Thus, a Hate-Based Conspiracy Theory (hereinafter, 'HBCT') may be defined as a conspiracy theory that pinpoints at a particular group, on the

- Following the definition of ECRI, the European Commission against

  Racism and Intolerance, hate speech includes expressions such
  as "the advocacy, promotion or incitement of the denigration, hatred or vilification of a person or group of persons, as well as any
  harassment, insult, negative stereotyping, stigmatization or threat
  of such person or persons and any justification of all these forms
  of expression.' ECRI considers a non-exhaustive list of personal
  characteristics or status that includes: 'race, colour, language,
  religion or belief, nationality or national or ethnic origin, as well
  as descent, age, disability, sex, gender, gender identity and sexual
  orientation". ECRI General Policy Recommendation No. 15 on Combating
  Hate Speech, 8 December 2015. Retrieved from https://www.coe.int/en/
  web/european-commission-against-racism-and-intolerance/recommendation-no.15
- Read more about different targets of hate speech in all EU members states in Hodun, M. (Ed) (2020). US/THEM. Hate Speech at the Service of Politics. Warsaw: Projekt: Polska. Available at https://www.liberalforum.eu/publications/us-them/ [editor's comment]

basis of its personal characteristics such as race, ethnic origin, religion or belief, among others, as the main 'conspirators' or as groups that have a relevant role in the conspiration.

In a similar vein, Samantha Hay has recently proposed in the US context the concept of 'hateful falsity', which she defines as "demonstrably and materially false conspiracy theories that incorporate expressions of hate on the basis of race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, sex, and gender identity". According to her, hateful falsities proliferate easily in the age of the Internet, as social media and technology offer "isolation and a limited supply of information". This is related to the perceived danger of echo chambers, as the endless volume of content available on the Internet allows individuals to 'cherry-pick' what information they are exposed to, reinforcing their existing biases and prejudice. In the case of HBCTs or hateful falsities, they indeed reinforce existing prejudices, which may contribute to the success in the use of scapegoating mechanisms.

## 2.1. PREJUDICE AS THE BASIS FOR HBCTS

It is well-established in the literature that hate speech is based on prejudice and that frequent exposure to it increases prejudicial

Hay, S. (2019). "Alternative Facts" and Hate: Regulating Conspiracy Theories That Take the Form of Hateful Falsity. S. Cal. Interdisc. LJ 29, 659-683

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 158

Grimes, D.R. (2017, December 4). Echo Chambers Are Dangerous - We Must Try to Break Free of Our Online Bubbles. The Guardian. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/science/blog/2017/dec/04/echo-chambers-are-dangerous-we-must-try-to-break-free-of-our-online-bubbles

thinking<sup>10</sup>. Similarly, prejudice is often the basis of scapegoating, which may be defined as the process of blaming a particular outgroup for negative events that affect the in-group. Scapegoating is very recurrent throughout history; in a seminal study in 2011, Campbell described the critical role of scapegoating in the communication of hate throughout human history, from blaming Eve in the Genesis to the scapegoating of Jews throughout the centuries in Europe and the Middle East<sup>11</sup>. At present, it continues to be a mechanism commonly used by hate speech promoters to stigmatise groups of people<sup>12</sup>.

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As seen above, the out-group is pointed at as the main 'conspirator' or a group key to the conspiracy and thus is given a central role in HBCTs. In this sense, the concept of 'otherness' and the construction of the 'other' are key, both in hate speech and HBCTs. These represent the out-group as the extreme representation of otherness, erasing any resemblance with the in-group, thus dehumanising it completely. In this way, as described in sociology, the out-group is assigned the category of a 'monster'<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;u>10</u> See e.g. Soral, W., Bilewicz, M., Winiewski, M. (2018). Exposure to hate speech increases prejudice through desensitization.
Aggressive behavior 44(2), 136-146

<sup>11</sup> Campbell, C. (2012). Scapegoat: A history of blaming other people. New York: Abrams

Waltman, M.S., Mattheis, A.A. (2017). Understanding hate speech. In Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication. Retrieved from https://oxfordre.com/communication/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228613-e-422

<sup>13</sup> Izaola, A., Zubero, I. (2015). La cuestión del otro: forasteros, extranjeros, extraños y monstruos. Papers: revista de sociología 100(1), 105-129

As it is widely known for its tragic consequences, a group that has been particularly pointed at in conspiracy theories in modern Europe are the Jews. Probably the most notorious example is the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, a fabricated antisemitic writing that pictured Jews as a powerful group with a plan for global domination. This libel of obscure origin<sup>14</sup> appeared in Russia in 1903 and was presented as the true transcript of an alleged meeting of a powerful group of Jewish leaders, showing their intention of controlling world events. From Russia, it disseminated widely in Europe and internationally in the first decades of the 20th century. Despite being uncovered as false in 1921 by the British newspaper The Times, convincingly demonstrating that it was a fake that plagiarised a variety of unrelated earlier texts, it was still extremely influential and commonly used by the Nazis as anti-Jew propaganda during the 30s and the Second World War<sup>15</sup>.

Nowadays, the Protocols are still widely available in numerous languages on the Internet, and it still fuels modern antisemitic conspiracy theories<sup>16</sup>. In fact, at present, many variations of antisemitic conspiracy theories that claim that there is a plan of global domination by the Jews still circulate on the Internet, such as the Zionist Occupation Government, or those involving the Rothschild family, and in the last years philanthropist George

<sup>14</sup> In 1999, a Russian historian, Mikhail Lepekhin, discovered that Matvei Golovinskii, a journalist who worked for the secret czarist police, the Okhrana, was the responsible for the authorship of the Protocols. Hagemeister, M. (2008). The Protocols of the Elders of Zion: Between history and fiction. New German Critique 103, 83-95

<sup>15</sup> El mito de la conspiración judía mundial 2020

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

Soros. Lately, these theories are also being merged with QAnon conspiracy theory<sup>17</sup>.

### 2.2. POLITICAL MOTIVATION

The example of the Protocols and how they have been used shows another central characteristic of HBCTs: they are politically motivated. In the context of Europe, hate speech has been widely used as a communicative tool by political actors to dehumanise minority groups<sup>18</sup>. Similarly, according to Cassam, conspiracy theories are always a form of political propaganda<sup>19</sup>. In the case of HBCTs, the political purpose is to blame the out-group as the one responsible for events or situations affecting the in-group in order to generate an emotional response that may lead to action.

Nowadays, a clear example of this political motivation is the use by the far-right of one of the most notorious HBCTs: the Great Replacement<sup>20</sup>. This conspiracy theory suggests that the 'native' European population, white and Christian, is being 'replaced' by

- Media Diversity Institute (2020). QAnon and the Growing Conspiracy Theory Trend on Social Media. Retrieved from https://static1.square-space.com/static/5ee500d316a2470c370596d3/t/5f1813b4c9031f13d52ad2 5f/1595413465022/QAnon+Report.pdf
- <u>18</u> García Juanatey, A. (2020). Spain: Growing Toxic Environment.
  In Hodun, M. (Ed). **US/THEM Hate Speech at the Service of Politics**.
  Warsaw: Projekt: Polska, 239–245. Retrieved from: https://www.liberalforum.eu/publications/us-them/
- 19 Cassam, Q. (2019). Conspiracy theories. Cambridge: Polity Press. See also https://iai.tv/articles/how-do-conspiracy-theories-come-about-auid-1235
- 20 In 2011, the French writer Renaud Camus published a book with the title The Great Replacement (Le Grand Replacement). However, similar ideas of 'replacement' have been circulating for decades

non-European people, particularly Muslims, through different mechanisms such as migration and demographic growth, often with the complicity of pro-multicultural elites<sup>21</sup>. According to Kölher, the Great Replacement nowadays is a common narrative among extreme-right groups, which has raised alarms of police authorities such as Europol, particularly since the New Zealand terror attack in 2019<sup>22</sup>. These groups use various methods to disseminate these theories, including "dehumanising racist memes, distorting and misrepresenting demographic data, and using debunked science"<sup>23</sup>.

The Great Replacement is also closely associated with the Eurabia theory, popularised in the 2000s and having a similar narrative of global elites intending to 'Islamisise' Europe, as well as with the White Genocide theory in the United States. The latter, popular among white supremacists, claims that the 'white race' is being substituted by the non-white population and that Jews are behind the replacement<sup>24</sup>, thereby also adding to the mix elements of antisemitic conspiracy theories.

<sup>21</sup> Davey, J., Ebner, J. (2019). The Great Replacement: The violent consequences of mainstreamed extremism. Institute for Strategic Dialogue 7

<sup>22</sup> See https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/advisory-network-terrorism-and-propaganda-workshop-%E2%80%9Cdefining-global-right-wingextremist-movement%E2%80%9D.

<sup>23</sup> The Great Replacement: The violent consequences of mainstreamed extremism (2019)

**<sup>24</sup> Ibid**, p. 6

## 3. THE DANGERS OF HBCTS: PREJUDICE,

## **DISCRIMINATION, AND EXTREMISM**

One of the features central to describing HBCTs is the harm they inflict. By focusing on and blaming a given group (such as Jews, Muslims, or others), increased prejudice, discrimination and ultimately violence against those groups is an intended consequence of HBCTs. In this sense, from the perspective of hate speech literature, it is widely acknowledged that hatred expressed based on a person's immutable characteristics, ethnic background, or religious identity causes harm<sup>25</sup>. More specifically, according to Hay, the harm caused by what she terms 'hateful falsities' is antisocial behaviour, which may result in aggression, verbal assaults, and violence<sup>26</sup>.

In relation to this, the concept of 'dangerous speech', coined by the author Susan Benesch, could be a useful tool to analyse how dangerous HBCTs are. Dangerous speech is defined as "[a]ny form of expression (e.g. speech, text, or images) that can increase the risk that its audience will condone or commit violence against members of another group"<sup>27</sup>. Interestingly, certain rhetorical patterns, such as dehumanisation or threats to group purity, are some of the hallmarks of a dangerous speech. These are easily found in HBCTs in the form of, for example, fears of an alleged invasion or the in-group (white) being replaced. Other variables included in the framework proposed by the author are the influence of the

<sup>25</sup> J. Waldron (2012). The harm in hate speech. Cambridge: Harvard University Press

<sup>26</sup> Alternative Facts (2019)

<sup>27</sup> Benesch, S. (2020). Dangerous Speech: A Practical Guide, Dangerous Speech Project. Retrieved from https://dangerousspeech.org/guide/

speaker, an audience that is receptive to the messages, the social or historical context and the means of spreading the message. As we will see, all these are also pertinent in the case of HBCTs.

## 3.1. PREJUDICE AND DISCRIMINATION

While further research is needed on the consequences of conspiracy theories, the close association between HBCTs and prejudice has already been established in several studies<sup>28</sup>. For instance, psychology researchers Jolley, Meleady and Douglas have shown that exposure to this type of conspiracy theories, which focus on blaming a specific group, leads to more prejudice towards such a group. Moreover, the same study demonstrated that not only prejudice increases against the alleged conspirator, but also against other groups, unrelated to the specific conspiracy theory. In this way, an 'attitude generalisation effect' takes place, extending prejudiced attitudes to many groups<sup>29</sup>. In the particular case of antisemitic conspiracy theories, exposure to them not only increased prejudice against Jewish people but also against other out-groups such as Asians or Arabs.

Likewise, belief in HBCTs also leads to increased discrimination towards the implicated groups. Thus, believing in antisemitic conspiracy theories leads not only to more prejudice but also to discriminatory acts such as lower inclination to vote for a Jewish candidate<sup>30</sup> or to hire someone who is Jewish, for example.

<sup>28</sup> Among others, Douglas, K.M., et al. (2019). Understanding Conspiracy
Theories. Political Psychology 40(S1), 3–35

<sup>29</sup> Exposure to intergroup conspiracy theories promotes prejudice which spreads across groups (2020)

<sup>30</sup> Ibid

In fact, studies point at belief in HBCTs as a predictor factor for discriminatory behaviour against the involved group<sup>31</sup>.

In this way, HBCTs are found at the base of the pyramid of hate<sup>32</sup>. This image depicts different behaviours based on bias against groups, following by a scale of threat. It is used to show, in a very graphic way, how the most dangerous or threatening levels are always founded on the lower levels, that is on prejudice, stereotypes, etc. In this sense, HBCTs are found as the basis of discriminatory acts and acts of physical violence.

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## 3.2. HBCTS AND EXTREMISM

In the last years, scholarship has established the link between conspiracy theories and political extremes, which reinforce one another. While this is true for the left and right political extremes, as we will see, the connection seems to be a lot stronger in the far-right<sup>33</sup>.

From the point of view of literature on violent extremism, HBCTs may be crucial in the process of radicalisation. As argued by Berger, conspiracy is one of the crisis narratives employed by violent extremists<sup>34</sup>. It is common to mix different HBCTs. For instance, the Great Replacement has been connected to the Kalergi Plan, which argues that influential Jewish figures, such as academics and poli-

<sup>31</sup> Bilewicz, M., et al. (2013). Harmful Ideas, The Structure and Consequences of Anti-Semitic Beliefs in Poland. Political Psychology 34(6), 821–839

<sup>32</sup> Pyramid of Hate, ADL: https://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/documents/pyramid-of-hate.pdf

<sup>33</sup> Van Prooijen, J.W, Krouwel, A.P.M, Pollet, T.V. (2015). Political extremism predicts belief in conspiracy theories. Social Psychological & Personality Science 6(5), 570-578

<sup>34</sup> Berger, J.M. (2018). Extremism. Cambridge: MIT Press

ticians, are deliberately conspiring to replace the white European and American population<sup>35</sup>. These different theories may help to "exaggerate the perceived existential threat" and contribute to conveying "a sense of urgency, which can inspire extreme actions"<sup>36</sup>.

In the same line, research has shown that conspiracy theories are very often found in extremist groups and, particularly, HBCTs are abundant in far-right extremism<sup>37</sup>. HBCTs act as a glue, helping to hold the group together and reinforcing the prejudiced views, and in some cases pushing the group further into extremism and sometimes to violent actions. Hence, conspiracy theories function as a 'radicalising multiplier'<sup>38</sup> in extremism. That is, believing in a conspiracy theory reinforces the dynamics of the group in three ways: by intensifying the demonisation of the 'other' group (considered to be the conspirator), by dismissing any type of criticism towards the group (if anything, this would instead reinforce the idea that there is a conspiracy against the group), and by creating a sense of necessity to act and that violence is the only path available<sup>39</sup>.

Ultimately, HBCTs, in the form of replacement and antisemitic conspiracy theories, can be traced to several terrorist acts that

Ward, J. (2018, April 19). Day of the trope: white nationalist memes thrive on Reddit's r/The\_Donald. Southern Poverty Law Center. Retrieved from https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/04/19/day-trope-white-nationalist-memes-thrive-reddits-rthedonald

<sup>36</sup> The Great Replacement: The violent consequences of mainstreamed extremism (2019)

<sup>37</sup> Political extremism predicts belief in conspiracy theories (2015)

<sup>38</sup> Bartlett, J., Miller, C. (2010). The power of unreason: Conspiracy theories, extremism and counter-terrorism. London: Demos

<sup>39</sup> Ibid

have taken place in the last years, in countries such as Norway, New Zealand, United States, or Germany. In July 2011, two attacks were carried out in Oslo and Utøya island, in Norway, by a right-wing extremist<sup>40</sup>, killing 77 people and injuring many others. The perpetrator of the massacre believed in the above mentioned theory of Eurabia, thinking that there was a Muslim conspiracy to take over Europe and Islamisise it, with the agreement of left parties. Similarly, the Great Replacement theory *inspired* the perpetrator of the terrorist attack in Christchurch, New Zealand, in March 2019, in which 51 Muslim worshippers were murdered<sup>41</sup>. Similarly, in October 2018, 11 people were killed in the attack against a Synagogue in Pittsburgh. The man who carried out the attack believed that Jews were behind a plan to bring immigrants to the United States to replace the white population. These are just a few examples<sup>42</sup>.

## 4. THE ACTORS BEHIND HBCTS

## 4.1. THE ROLE OF THE FAR-RIGHT AND POPULIST MAINSTREAM LEADERS IN THE PROMOTION OF HBCTS

While the exact author and origins of each conspiracy theory are not always known, the far-right and populist leaders play a key role in the promotion and spread of HBCTs. The association of

- 40 The Muslim conspiracy theory and the Oslo massacre (2012)
- 41 See Polakow-Suransky, S., Wildman, S. (2019, March 16). The
  Inspiration for Terrorism in New Zealand Came From France. Foreign
  Policy
- 42 Other attacks linked to HBCTs in the last years are the El Paso shooting in the US in 2019 or the attack in Hanau, Germany, in 2020, among others.

conspiracy theories with the far-right has already been mentioned. According to the relevant research on the field<sup>43</sup>, the coincidence in psychological traits, such as the need to manage uncertainty, may be a factor that favours that prevalence.

Likewise, the need for 'othering' – by pointing to an out-group as the conspirator – would coincide in both – the far-right and HBCTs. In this sense, the idea of a Jewish plot to control the world remains nuclear to the far-right across the United States and Europe. Similarly, the Great Replacement theory is at the base of the Generation Identity, a far-right movement that has expanded throughout Europe in the last two decades. Thus, it seems that these ideas of the white population being at risk of being replaced are nowadays extremely popular within this movement and, as previously mentioned, in fact work as an 'ideological glue' of the far-right worldwide<sup>44</sup>, thus increasing its dangerousness.

On the other hand, some *mainstream* populist leaders have also been key in the spread of HBCTs, by making explicit and implicit references in their speeches to elements of such theories. For example, Donald Trump and several Republican members of the Us Congress<sup>45</sup> made references to the conspiracy theory that claimed that Georges Soros was behind the migrant caravan of Hondurans that were walking to the United States in the autumn

<sup>43</sup> Douglas, K.M., at al (2019). Understanding Conspiracy Theories.
Political Psychology 40(S1), 3-35

<sup>44</sup> The Great Replacement: The violent consequences of mainstreamed extremism (2019)

<sup>45</sup> Heath, B., et al. (2018, October 2018). How a lie about George Soros and the migrant caravan multiplied online. USA Today. Retrieved from https://eu.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/nation/2018/10/31/george-soros-and-migrant-caravan-how-lie-multiplied-online/1824633002/

of 2018. A *New York Times* article<sup>46</sup> published in October 2018 linked that theory to different violent events, such as a "mass shooting in a Jewish synagogue, an attempted bombing of a Jewish philanthropist, and likely acts of violence on Mexicans and Central Americans". Similarly, references to antisemitic theories, and specifically to the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, were made by a close advisor to Trump<sup>47</sup>.

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Europe is no exception. Members of far-right parties such as Wilders in the Netherlands, Le Pen in France, or Vox leaders in Spain, refer, more or less explicitly, to the aspects of the Great Replacement theory. Further than that, it has become common for some mainstream populist leaders to make references to George Soros in different conspiracy theories. Prime Minister of Hungary Viktor Orbán accused him of supporting immigration within a plan to change Hungarian society. At the time, Prime Minister of Slovakia Robert Fico also used a reference to Soros in an attempt to delegitimise the massive protests that were held in the country and finally overthrew his government, implying that he was behind an alleged plot<sup>48</sup>. In Italy, in 2018, then the Interior Minister, Matteo Salvini accused the philanthropist of

<sup>46</sup> Peters, J.W. (2018, October 29). How Trump-Fed Conspiracy Theories About Migrant Caravan Intersect With Deadly Hatred. New York Times. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/29/us/politics/caravan-trump-shooting-elections.html

<sup>47</sup> See Whitfield, S. (2020, September 2). Why the 'Protocols of the Elders of Zion' is still pushed by anti-Semites more than a century after hoax first circulated. The Conversation. Retrieved from https://theconversation.com/why-the-protocols-of-the-elders-of-zion-is-still-pushed-by-anti-semites-more-than-a-century-after-hoax-first-circulated-145220

<sup>48</sup> Read more on the gray pages about plots [editor's comment].

being behind NGOs that rescued migrants at sea, pointing at him as the responsible for filling "Italy and Europe with migrants"<sup>49</sup>, with clear references to the theories of replacement<sup>50</sup>.

As it has been argued<sup>51</sup>, such use of conspiracy theories as a political tool by mainstream politicians is damaging to democracy, as it contributes to diminishing trust in institutions and polarising society. Given that conspiracy theories are increasingly present in the political sphere, it is also relevant to investigate their association with ideology from the point of view of conspiracy believers.

## 4.2. WHO BELIEVES IN HBCTS?

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HBCTs would not go too far without an audience that is ready to accept them. To understand why conspiracy theories, and specifically HBCTs, are so successful and expand so fast, it is important to understand which psychological traits believers might have. This is perhaps the area of conspiracy theories that has received the most attention in research. In the end, understanding what conspiracy theories (potentially) offer to their supporters is key to devising strategies to tackle them.

<sup>49</sup> OSF (2018, July 5). Open Society Foundations Urge Italian Minister Matteo Salvini to Stop Repeating False Statements. Retrieved from Open Society Foundations Urge Italian Minister Matteo Salvini to Stop Repeating False Statements – Open Society Foundations

<sup>&</sup>lt;u>50</u> Cervi, L., Tejedor, S., Alencar Dornelles, M. (2020). When Populists Govern the Country: Strategies of Legitimization of Anti-Immigration Policies in Salvini's Italy. **Open Access Journal** 12(23), 1-1

Flenta, P. (2020). Conspiracy theories as a political instrument: Utilization of anti-Soros narratives in Central Europe. Contemporary Politics 26(5), 512-530

Significantly, Douglas, Sutton and Cichocka organise the motives that drive people to believe in conspiracy theories into three groups: epistemic, existential and social motives<sup>52</sup>. Epistemic motives refer to rationales such as a need to understand and make sense of events, also in a way that allows people to maintain their beliefs by discarding evidence on the contrary. Related to that are existential motivations - they refer to the need to have a sense of control. Apparently, people are more inclined to believe in conspiracy theories when those control needs are threatened. Lastly, social motives refer to the need to be part of a social group and have a good image of one's own group. However, preliminary research suggests that in fact conspiracy theories do not fulfil these needs, rather the opposite<sup>53</sup>. In any case, these psychological traits, particularly the epistemic and existential motives, help explain why contexts of uncertainty are fertile ground for conspiracy theories.

Particularly interesting for the case of HBCTs are the social motives, as the cognitive process of blaming and distrusting an out-group reinforces oneself image and that of the in-group. Here, there is the conviction of the better worthiness of the in-group, as well as the feeling that the out-groups do not acknowledge this. This has been defined as 'collective narcissism'<sup>54</sup> and helps to grasp the psychological motives that drive HBCTs to exist. This

<sup>52</sup> Douglas, K.M., Sutton, R.M., Cichocka, A. (2017). The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories. Current Directions in Psychological Science. Journal of the American Psychological Society 26(6), 538–542

<sup>53</sup> Ibid

<sup>54</sup> The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories. Current Directions in Psychological Science (2017)

need of some individuals to differentiate the in-group from the out-group (the 'other', such as Jews or Muslims) is also typical in hate speech proponents<sup>55</sup>.

# 5. HOW TO TACKLE HBCTS IN THE AGE OF DISINFORMATION

Debunking conspiracy theories has proven to be largely ineffective. Because of the nature of conspiracy theories – as alternative explanations of the official 'truth' – efforts by governments to debunk conspiracy theories are met with utter distrust, as they are generally seen as proof of the *conspiracy* itself. In fact, direct confrontation of HBCTs by institutions could be counterproductive<sup>56</sup>. Some strategies suggest the potential of counting on former believers of conspiracy theories for debunking efforts, who may act as trusted messengers for the community of conspiracy believers<sup>57</sup>.

Therefore, to challenge HBCTs effectively, efforts should be, above all, preventive rather than reactive. Within this framework, it may be useful to differentiate between two types of measures: on the one hand, measures aimed at preventing hate-based conspiracy belief, which may include promoting human rights education, critical thinking, and digital and media literacy among the

<sup>&</sup>lt;u>55</u> Read more about the psychology of political division in Chapter 2 [editor's comment].

<sup>56</sup> The power of unreason: Conspiracy theories, extremism and counterterrorism (2010), p. 5

<sup>&</sup>lt;u>57</u> Lewandowsky, S., Cook, J. (2020). The Conspiracy Theory Handbook. Retrieved from http://sks.to/conspiracy

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general population; and, on the other, measures aimed at reducing the propagation of HBCTs, which would involve promoting responsibility in both traditional media and social media.

## 5.1. PREVENTING CONSPIRACY BELIEF

AMONG THE GENERAL POPULATION

As it was explained above, belief in HBCTs is grounded in prejudice. Therefore, confronting HBCTs involves being aware of different ways to tackle prejudicial thinking, which may include a different array of educational measures, particularly promoting critical thinking and digital and media literacy.

On the one hand, education seems key to tackling prejudicial and conspiratorial thinking. According to Van Prooijen, education may undermine the reasoning processes and assumptions reflected in conspiracy belief<sup>58</sup>. More concretely, it has been argued that analytic thinking reduces belief in conspiracy theories<sup>59</sup>. In the particular case of HBCTs, citizenship education, which focuses on preparing individuals to be informed and responsible citizens also through the study of human rights, appears to be particularly relevant. This type of values-based education has been pinpointed as an effective tool to tackle hate speech, particularly as it raises awareness on freedom of speech and the responsibilities and social implications that emerge from it<sup>60</sup>. Together with that,

Van Prooijen, J.W. (2017). Why education predicts decreased belief in conspiracy theories. Appl. Cogn. Psychol 31, 50-58

<sup>&</sup>lt;u>59</u> Swami, V., et al. (2014). Analytic thinking reduces belief in conspiracy theories. **Cognition**, **133**(3), 572–585

Gagliardone, I., et al. (2015). Countering online hate speech. Unesco Publishing

some authors have highlighted the role of emotions in tackling hate speech and disinformation, particularly stressing the importance of dealing with the 'affective dimension of democratic education' in the classroom<sup>61</sup>.

Furthermore, in current times, media literacy and digital literacy are also key to preventing hate speech<sup>62</sup> and HBCTs, particularly equipping youngsters and other vulnerable groups with appropriate tools to detect misinformation, false information, or fake news. Also, news media literacy, aimed at empowering news consumers to seek useful and accurate information to help them make informed decisions about society and politics at large, may also be crucial, as it has been demonstrated that the greater the knowledge about the news media, the lower the likelihood of conspiracy theory belief and endorsement, even for conspiracy theories that are aligned with their political ideology<sup>63</sup>.

#### 5.2. REDUCING THE PROPAGATION:

## THE MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

Measures to reduce the propagation of HBCTs are also crucial, both concerning traditional media and social media. In reference to the traditional media, news outlets are key actors, as they may either give exposure to HBCTs or act as effective fact-checkers and de-bunkers. Following the Christchurch mosque

Estellés, M., Castellví, J. (2020). The Educational Implications of Populism, Emotions and Digital Hate Speech: A Dialogue with Scholars from Canada, Chile, Spain, the UK, and the US. Sustainability 12(15), 6034

<sup>62</sup> Countering online hate speech (2015)

<sup>63</sup> Craft, S., Ashley, S., Maksl, A. (2017). News media literacy and conspiracy theory endorsement. Communication and the Public 2(4), 388-401

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attack in New Zealand in 2019, experts have criticised that mainstream political parties and media commentators often use the same rhetoric as right-wing extremists, thus promoting "a toxic political environment that allows hate to flourish" 64. Similarly, in a study focused on young Europeans, Mieriņa and Koroļeva have found an association between the frequent view of media channels and a rise in negative attitudes towards all kinds of minorities, leading to the conclusion that the media may be "at least partially responsible for the recent spread of xenophobic and far-right sentiments across Europe", in the sense that the media have failed precisely in their role of "educating youth and dispelling prejudice" 65. Therefore, mechanisms that stress press responsibility and media ethics should be strongly promoted.

On the other hand, the impact of social media on the propagation of hate speech, as well as on radicalisation, is under scrutiny. It is widely known that extremist groups use the Internet to spread propaganda and ideological frameworks<sup>66</sup>. Thus, private sector companies such as social media hold an important responsibility

<sup>64</sup> Barton, G. (2019, March 16). Christchurch attacks are a stark warning of toxic political environment that allows hate to flourish.
The Conversation. Retrieved from https://theconversation.com/christchurch-attacks-are-a-stark-warning-of-toxic-political-environment-that-allows-hate-to-flourish-113662.

<sup>65</sup> Mierina, I., Koroleva, I. (2015). Support for Far Right Ideology and Anti-Migrant Attitudes among Youth in Europe: A Comparative Analysis. The Sociological Review 63(2),183-205

<sup>66</sup> Schils, N., Verhage, A. (2017). Understanding how and why young people enter radical or violent extremist groups. International Journal of Conflict and Violence 11, 473–473

in tackling the spread of violent extremism<sup>67</sup> and should react accordingly. In regard to authorities, Kallis et al. recommend using "the online presence of these movements to identify the ideology and networks and designing interventions that work offline to counter those messages received in the online space"<sup>68</sup>. As a result, effective policies should be based on constant monitoring of extremist groups and protecting potential victims. In this sense, tracking the promotion and spread of HBCTs on social media can work as an early warning system and alert of possible violent events. Likewise, it seems key to demand from social media companies that their algorithms are reformed to stop amplifying extremist content<sup>69</sup>, of which HBCTs are an important source of.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

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While HBCTs have existed for a long time, the current pandemic and its future consequences are the perfect breeding ground for hatred and conspiracy theories to proliferate and spread even more. Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic at the beginning of 2020, conspiracy theories have gained visibility, and HBCTs are no exception. Initial studies already show how the far-right is taking advantage of the pandemic to spread HBCTs to further

<sup>67</sup> Kallis, A. A., Zeiger, S., Öztürk, B. (Eds) (2018). Violent Radicalisation & Far-Right Extremism in Europe. Ankara: SETA Publications

<sup>68</sup> Ibid

<sup>69</sup> The Great Replacement: The violent consequences of mainstreamed extremism (2019)

their aims and gain supporters<sup>70</sup>. In a way, the Covid-19 pandemic is acting as a trigger for HBCTs and other conspiracy theories. As an example, new HBCTs started to circulate, some claiming that Muslims are spreading the coronavirus to attack Western values, others alleging that the coronavirus does not exist and that it is all a part of a Jewish plot.

In this context, exploring and understanding the specific type of conspiracy theories based on hatred, the HBCTs, is key for several reasons. Not only do these reinforce, spread and multiply prejudice and the ensuing discrimination, but also this type of conspiracy theories has been linked to several terrorist attacks and even cases of genocide. The harm caused by HBCTs is clear and affects the groups that are targeted (mostly Muslims and Jews) as well as society at large, by undermining democratic and egalitarian values and human rights.

It would be a mistake to dismiss this as a fringe phenomenon. Data shows that conspiracy theories, in general, have become all too popular. Thus, a survey by the Pew Research Center<sup>71</sup> revealed that 25% of citizens in the United States believe that there is some truth in conspiracy theories related to Covid-19.

<sup>70</sup> Commission for Countering Extremism (2020). Covid-19: How hateful extremists are exploiting the pandemic. Retrieved from https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-how-hateful-extremists-are-exploiting-the-pandemic

Mitchell, A., et al. (2020, June 19). 3. Most Americans have heard of the conspiracy theory that the COVID-19 outbreak was planned, and about one-third of those aware of it say it might be true. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from https://www.journalism.org/2020/06/29/most-americans-have-heard-of-the-conspiracy-theory-that-the-covid-19-outbreak-was-planned-and-about-one-third-of-those-aware-of-it-say-it-might-be-true/

And, again, HBCTs are no exception. In a recent survey carried out in nine countries, the results showed that the large numbers of people believed in a variation of the Great Replacement conspiracy theory<sup>72</sup>. Notwithstanding the limitations of this type of surveys, the results are worrying.

To tackle that, a holistic approach is required. More research is needed on conspiracy theories, particularly on those that cause harm to society and specifically to certain groups. It is also key to understand further how HBCTs operate, spread, and feed into extremism. Likewise, measures to limit the spread of such conspiracy theories, both in the traditional media and social media, are essential, and debunking efforts must continue. Having said that, given the difficulties exposed above, the focus should be on providing citizens with tools to prevent and fight against HBCTs, through education and the empowerment of civil society. The game is lost if we rely only on reactive measures, because hate speech, conspiracy theories and HBCTs will always spread too fast to catch them. Ultimately, it is essential for governments to address the root causes of inequality, as this is at the basis of growing frustration that provides a fertile ground for HBCTs to thrive on.

<sup>72</sup> Specifically, that Muslim immigration was part of a plan to make Muslims a majority in the country. https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2018/12/14/brexit-and-trump-voters-aremore-likely-believe-co



THE POPULARITY OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES AS A SIGN OF STATE CRISIS

by ANNA MIERZYŃSKA



Conspiracy theories are a plague of our time that has been gaining strength, particularly in countries where the citizen's trust in authorities and institutions is low. This plague spreads thanks to the crises (economic, health, political) and popularity of the social media, where anyone can easily find people with similar views and the most unbelievable narratives of today's world.

Before the coronavirus pandemic outbreak, one could see believing in an alternative reality as harmless lunacy. The health crisis has shown that if such theories spread, they directly influence people's behaviours. They, in turn, believing in conspiracies, could be a real danger to public health, state security or public order. Their actions could go against the foundations of democracy; such people can also be easily used for undemocratic political goals.

Conspiracy thinking makes it difficult to create strong interpersonal relationships and bring about violence, just like in the case of followers of the American QAnon movement, which FBI qualified in 2019 as a potential terrorist threat¹. Facebook groups created by people believing in QAnon have been deleted for the very reason: inciting and celebrating violence². We are faced with a growing socio-political problem, and counteracting it requires broad, systemic actions, tackling the reasons for people's susceptibility to this kind of theories, not only their circulation.

Winter, J. (2019, August 1). FBI document warns conspiracy theories are a new domestic terrorism threat. Yahoo! News. Retrieved from https://news.yahoo.com/fbi-documents-conspiracy-theories-terrorism-160000507.html

Frenkel, S. (2020, August 19). Facebook Removes 790 QAnon Groups to Fight Conspiracy Theory. The New York Times. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/19/technology/facebook-qanon-groups-takedown.html

## THE WORLD IN ORDER AND PSYCHOLOGICAL COMFORT GUARANTEED

Conspiracy theory is a particular kind of narrative that is meant to explain a certain event, situation or phenomenon in contradiction to the commonly accepted, official version. It is based on the belief (not always stated outright) that the most important information about public matters is hidden due to secret dealings of people or groups, which cooperate to gain benefits for themselves, against the community's interests. Beliefs circulated in this way are not corroborated by any believable evidence, although they can be expressed by perceived authorities<sup>3</sup>.

Why is this kind of narrative so attractive in the time of crisis? Because it puts the world into the order following the rules known by the audience, and as a result diminishes the feeling of uncertainty, which is hard to bear for long periods. Although they are sometimes unbelievable, they (seemingly) bring back the feeling of security – even when they aim to prove that there is a paedophile conspiracy of the world leaders against the humanity or prophesize a war with an alien race of reptilians. The audience feels secure because they feel that the rules of such a world are familiar; it's easy to establish who is good and who is bad; the enemy is visible and has a name.

Such explanations would lose their appeal if citizens could

Wood M. J., Douglas K. M. (2013), What about building 7? A social psychological study of online discussion of 9/11 conspiracy theories, Frontiers in Psychology 4. Brotherton, R., French, C., Pickering, A.D., (2013). Measuring Belief in Conspiracy Theories: The Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale, Frontiers in Psychology 4

trust the state and its institutions in the time of crisis. But they do not, they prefer to search for something to help them deal with the situation on their own. The popularity of alternative narratives also distinctly indicates a crisis of trust in authorities.

Conspiracy theories have been known for centuries; the concept itself was introduced in the second half of the 20th century, and most of the research was done in its last years. At the time, it seemed that it is a marginal phenomenon, concerning small groups and having no influence on societies as a whole. The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic changed the situation. It turned out that social media platforms are a perfect tool for spreading stories about alleged conspiracies. This is further enabled by the development of the so-called filter bubble<sup>4</sup>, which means the creation of closed communities with people of similar views. People who disagree with the opinions of the majority are easily isolated and removed. Those who are left, talk only with like-minded users of the platform, which on the one hand gives them psychological comfort, but on the other hand prevents them from verifying their beliefs.

# SOCIAL MEDIA MAKES IT EASIER TO LIVE IN AN ALTERNATIVE REALITY

The connection between the spread of conspiracy theories and social media was analysed in 2020 by researchers from King's

<sup>4</sup> Parisel, E. (2011). Filter Bubble. What the Internet is Hiding for You. London: Viking

College London. They ran three online questionnaires<sup>5</sup> among the British. They have shown a significant correlation between belief in Covid-19 conspiracies and using social media as the main source of information about the virus. It was the greatest in respondents who pointed to YouTube as their source of information; Facebook took second place. Using those platforms was, in most cases, linked to two narratives: doubts as to the existence of coronavirus and belief that the symptoms of Covid-19 are actually the symptoms of an illness triggered by 5G technology.

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The data on the growing number of people under the influence of alternative narratives comes from monitoring social media platforms. During spring lockdowns, researchers from Pakistani Islamia University of Bahawalpur<sup>6</sup> have noted an increase of 20% up to 87% (depending on the world region) in the use of those platforms. In Italy, which in March of 2020 was deep in the pandemic crisis, about 46 thousand Twitter posts with imprecise or incorrect information were published every day of that month. Many stories appeared at that time. For example, the pandemic was triggered by 5G technology, mosquitoes carry coronavirus, and to recover from it, one has to drink cow's urine or just a glass of hot water.

Allington, D, et al. (2020). Health-protective behaviour, social media usage and conspiracy belief during the COVID-19 public health emergency. Psychological Medicine 1-7. Retrieved from https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/psychological-medicine/article/health-protective-behaviour-social-media-usage-and-conspiracy-belief-during-the-covid19-public-health-emergency/A0DC2C5E27936FF4D5246BD3AE8C9163

Bin Naeem, S., Bhati, R., Khan, A. (2020). An exploration of how fake news is taking over social media and putting public health at risk. Health Info Libr J. Retrieved from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/ doi/full/10.1111/hir.12320

On the 20th of April 2020, Belgium's State Security Service published a report presenting conspiracy theories circulating in the country. 'Knights of Flanders', a far-right group, spread a narrative according to which coronavirus was created from the flu vaccine. Another far-right group claimed that Covid-19 is spread by Muslims immigrants. According to fake news, Covid-19 positive Muslims were instructed to "cough in the faces of nonbelievers". Of course, the means of spreading such content was primarily social media.

#### **FAKE NEWS CAUSED PANIC**

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However, at the beginning of the pandemic in Europe and the USA, fake news and conspiracy theories were spread not only through open communication channels – but many were also circulated using Internet messengers or slightly forgotten SMS'es – short telephone messages. They were in the form of the so-called chain letters, so the author was unknown. Who is writing, published an article with findings showing<sup>8</sup> that messages with very similar content were sent in the same way in at least three countries: the USA, Poland and Ireland, at a similar time – between 13th and 20th of March. Their structure was similar to that of conspiracy narratives; they usually mentioned the 'one in the know', who

<sup>7</sup> VSSE (2020, April 21). Le danger caché derrière le COVID-19. Retrieved from https://vsse.be/fr/le-danger-cache-derrière-le-covid-19

Mierzyńska, A. (2020, March 21). SMS-y o "stanie wyjątkowym" nie tylko w Polsce, ale i w Irlandii i USA. Kto chciał wywołać panikę? OKO.press. Retrieved from https://oko.press/falszywe-wiadomoscio-stanie-wyjatkowym/

knows more than others and warns against coming threat. Those in the know were – depending on the version and the country – high-ranking officers, friends with access to classified information, a well-informed journalist, a member of secret service or just a high-ranking official. It was often suggested that very soon the army will enter cities and citizens will be cut off from the world. Such messages, sent at the time when citizens were most disoriented, usually after the first lockdown was introduced at any given country, could spark real panic, as well as escalating behaviours such as the excessive purchase of food or withdrawal of money from cash machines.

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Although structurally similar to conspiracy theories, this kind of fake news did not generate broad narratives about the world. This is in contrast to the most widely spread theories regarding the origins of Covid-19. The first story, for example, that COVID-19 was created in Chinese laboratory in Wuhan, gave rise to others, adjusted to current events. This way, the crisis reality has been *explained*. According to the analysis from EU StratCom TaskForce, in the spring of 2020 the most popular narratives in the European Union were as follows:

- the story about Bill Gates, in which he has planned the pandemic and now wants to implant people to control them<sup>9</sup>;
- the narrative about the virus being a biological weapon, created by the USA (or NATO) to depopulate the world<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;u>9</u> EU vs Disinfo (2020, April 17). Pro-Kremlin media and the "Gate of Hell". Retrieved from https://euvsdisinfo.eu/pro-kremlin-media-and-the-gates-of-hell/

EU vs Disinfo (2020, April 9). Repeating a lie does not make it true. Retrieved from https://euvsdisinfo.eu/repeating-a-lie-does-not-make-it-true/

In this first phase of coronavirus pandemic the misinformation about the illness came from varied sources, including politicians, world leaders, celebrities, doctors, scientists, conspiracy theorists and, of course, Internet users.

This kind of conspiracy theory was popular even in Africa, even though this continent hasn't suffered from the pandemic as much as other parts of the world<sup>11</sup>. According to the researchers<sup>12</sup> from the Polytechnic Ibadan Department of Mass Communication in Nigeria, some Nigerians believed Covid-19 to be a man-made biological weapon – but Chinese, instead of American. They found that warnings from the government and media about the threat of coronavirus were exaggerated and manipulated. Those narratives were spread using social media, and Nigerians believed in them because trust in political leaders and traditional media is very low in their country. This correlation is noticeable worldwide: the lower the trust in political leaders and state structures, the stronger the need to search for information outside of official channels, often resulting in taking conspiracy theories at face value.

## ANTI-VACCINE GROUPS HAVE GROWN STRONGER

In the next months, pandemic narratives merged with existing theories, especially about the harmfulness of vaccination and 5G technology, and evolved adjusting to the current needs. In

<sup>11</sup> WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19). Avaialable at: https://covid19.who.int/

<sup>12</sup> Olatunji, O.S., et al. (2020). "Infodemic" in a pandemic: COVID-19 conspiracy theories in an African country. Soc Health Behav.

Retrieved from https://www.shbonweb.com/text.asp?2020/3/4/152/294533

late 2020 and early 2021, the most important were anti-vaccine theories and QAnon ideology (popular in the USA).

Anti-vaccine movements are not new, but up until now, they concentrated on the vaccination of children. Covid-19 vaccine presented new opportunities. For example, many narratives appeared that the vaccine is produced from aborted fetuses (this argument is especially significant for Catholics), that it contains microchips, which world leaders will use to control citizens, and even that the RNA particles in vaccines change human's genetic code. However, perhaps the most popular story turned out to be about the health hazard of the vaccines – in the anti-vaccine groups, slogans about the 'medical experiment on humanity' became very popular.

Those statements fell on fertile ground. Many people have been disoriented by the pandemic. Additionally, some vaccines were created based on a new gene technology, which is difficult to understand without specialised knowledge. Those factors resulted in uncertainty, which is just a step away from alternative interpretations of what is happening. It is no surprise that the antivaccine movement has grown. In the second half of 2020, Center for Countering Digital Hate monitored the English-speaking part of the Internet<sup>13</sup>. Experts identified 409 key accounts spreading anti-vaccine content on the Internet. It turns out that they have 58 million followers – quite a huge number! To show their influence in scale, the following comparison can be used – this is almost as many followers as Italy's entire population (60 million citizens).

13 CCDH (2020). The Anti-Vaxx Industry. Retrieved from https://www.counterhate.com/anti-vaxx-industry

During the Covid-19 pandemic, researchers from Center for Countering Digital Hate<sup>14</sup> observed the greatest increase of 'anti-vaxxers' on YouTube channels they monitored – 5,8 million followers. The total number of followers on these channels was 21,3 million. Instagram took the second place – the number of followers of the monitored accounts grew 1 million over this period, reaching 7,3 million. Facebook placed third with an increase of 935 thousand, resulting in the entire number of anti-vaccine followers reaching 29 million. The number includes only the content created in English; nevertheless, this kind of narrative is popular in multiple countries. In December 2020, the author of this article analysed the most popular Facebook accounts posting anti-vaccine content in Polish. Just the 25 accounts with the greatest reach had 1,66 million followers. This number equals the population of Warsaw, the capital of Poland.

We are faced with a broad scope of influence on large communities, and this influence can be dangerous. If a large number of citizens of a given country forgoes vaccination, there would be no so-called herd immunity in that area. Stopping the pandemic would be practically impossible. Currently, we don't know if such a situation will come to pass, mass vaccinations have only started recently, but anti-vaccine activists strive hard to make it happen.

## CONSPIRACY THEORIES CAN BE EASILY USED IN POLITICS

Conspiracy thinking can become a tool in politics. The Instagram account of Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the leading representative of

14 Ibid

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the anti-vaccine movement, has gained 336 thousand new users during the pandemic. Kennedy is primarily popularising conspiracy theories linking vaccines with attacks on Bill Gates and 5G technology threats. He's active not only in the USA but also accepts invitations from anti-vaccine groups in other countries. On the 18th of December 2020 he took part in a remote session of the Parliamentary Committee for Safety of Protective Vaccination of Children and Adults in Polish Sejm. The Committee was established by MPs from far-right party Confederation (Konfederacja)<sup>15</sup>.

During his online appearance, Kenedy directly called for opposing compulsory vaccination and compared people taking part in mass vaccination to cattle in slaughterhouses. He appealed: "And all my friends in Poland and all my friends in Europe: I heard you let's stand shoulder to shoulder and I will be with you there, on the barricades. We need to keep our boots on and go on, go down with our boots on when we have to"16. His call is an indirect appeal to oppose the government. It shows how easily belief in conspiracy theories can be used in politics.

Another conspiracy theory had motivated part of the people storming the US Capitol in Washington on the 6th of January 2021<sup>17</sup>, when members of the US Congress ratified presidential election results. This conspiracy is called QAnon. Its followers believe that the world is ruled by criminals, mostly paedophiles,

<sup>15</sup> Konfederacja Korony Polskiej (2020, December 18). Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=726088668014292

<sup>16</sup> Available at https://www.facebook.com/466186134168406/ posts/839934100126939

<sup>17</sup> Read more in Chapter 3 [editor's comment].

who are closely connected and care only about their interests, willingly sacrificing health and even the lives of ordinary citizens. According to QAnon, the only person capable of stopping this elite mafia was Donald Trump.

This theory originated in the USA in 2017, on the social media platform Reddit. The leader of the movement is anonymous Mr. O. who sends his followers coded information on social media - they believe that O has access to confidential data. We can find here classic and the most appealing elements of conspiracy theories: secrecy, an unknown source with access to confidential materials, codes which have to be deciphered and a hero - Donald Trump. It is then not surprising that QAnon followers did not want to believe in Trump's loss in the elections, and were then ready even to storm the Capitol to prevent the change in the United States' presidency – for them, it meant saving the world.

At first, QAnon was a niche narrative, but it grew more radical with time and became an extremist, religious-political ideology, which allowed violence. Members of this movement have created their communities on social media, mostly Facebook. Marc-Andre Argentino from Canadian Concordia University has analysed them. According to his findings, in 2020 the number of OAnon members on the Internet grew 581%. In July of 2020, there were 179 QAnon groups on Facebook, with more than 1,4 million members and 120 sites with 911 thousand likes<sup>18</sup>. When Facebook decided to

spiracy-theories-152815

<sup>18</sup> Argentino, M.A. (2021, January 7). QAnon and the storm of the U.S. Capitol: The offline effect of online conspiracy theories. The Conversation. Retrieved from https://theconversation.com/ganonand-the-storm-of-the-u-s-capitol-the-offline-effect-of-online-con-

close those information channels, due to growing threat, followers moved to less restrictive social platforms.

Another researcher, Alex Kaplan, counted 62 QAnon supporters in the pre-election to the United States Congress (most were republicans); almost 600 thousand voted for them. Twelve of them took part in the election, and one person gained a seat in the House of Representatives. What's more, Donald Trump retweeted QAnon followers on his own Twitter, and former National Security Advisor, Michael Flynn used a hashtag characteristic for QAnon in his posts.

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## THREATS, RADICALISM AND VIOLENT ATTACKS

Already in May of 2019, in their official report, the FBI has shown that QA non is a threat to public security. In July of 2020, The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point published an article<sup>19</sup> by two Canadians, Amarnath Amarasingam and Marc-Andre Argentino, in which they described cases of crimes or acts of violence committed by people under the influence of QA non. Among them was the case of Jessica Prim. This 37-years-old dancer was arrested on the 29th of April 2020, in New York, after she drove onto a pier in a car full of knives. She streamed her drive on social media, threatening to kill Joe Biden for his alleged part in the activities of paedophile conspiracy – in line with the QA non theory. The authors highlight that Prim has radicalised very quickly:

<sup>19</sup> Amarasingam, A., Argentino, M.A. (2020). The QAnon Conspiracy Theory: A Security Threat in the Making? CTC Sentinel 13(7). Retrieved from https://ctc.usma.edu/the-qanon-conspiracy-theory-a-security-threat-in-the-making/

she first came across QAnon most likely on the 9th of April 2020. Twenty days later, she was already threatening with violence.

Her radicalisation had, of course, personal basis, stemming from her previous experiences; this process would not occur in the same way with other followers. However, we can't control whom the conspiracy theories on social media reach. Among the audiences, there may be relatively emotionally-stable people, as well as those easily susceptible to radicalisation, just like Jessica Prim. Under the influence of conspiracy theories, they might become a danger to everyone around them.

Just half a year after the article was published, QAnon followers have stormed the US Capitol. This compelled many American institutions and media to start treating the warnings against this movement seriously. It is common, not only in the USA, to dismiss people believing in conspiracy theories. They are seen as lunatics, who can be ignored, rather than people with real power to change the situation. But the threat to state security, the foundations of democracy or – in the case of anti-vaccine groups – to public health are not the only problems stemming from the popularity of alternative narratives.

In autumn of 2020, 26 interviews with relatives and friends of people who believe in conspiracies have been conducted by the author of this article<sup>20</sup>. They have shown that the deeper one's belief in conspiracy theories, the more difficult it is to keep in contact with them on a previous level. Interviewees spoke of communication difficulties and distance from family and friends. Sometimes, aggression appeared in the relationships,

Mierzyńska, A. (2020, October 25). ALTERNATYWNI. Kiedy teorie spiskowe niszczą prawdziwe życie. OKO.press. Retrieved from https://oko. press/alternatywni-kiedy-teorie-spiskowe-niszcza-prawdziwe-zycie/

or they were entirely broken. Among the analysed cases, there were people who because of conspiracy theories have lost jobs or had a negative influence on the health of their relatives, for example, deciding not to vaccinate their children or persuading their elderly parents not to vaccinate themselves against Covid-19 or ignore the health restrictions.

There are already support groups for people left and hurt by QAnon followers on social media – the most well-known on the Reddit platform<sup>21</sup>. At the beginning of February of 2021, it had 125 thousand members. The need for emotional support is enormous – unfortunately, most of the people experiencing the consequences of believing in an alternative reality never receive it.

## REBUILDING TRUST AS THE SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM

Conspiracy theories in the crisis time of the pandemic, due to their popularity, resulted in problems, which appear in various areas of socio-political life. Creating conspiracy theories is nothing new, and thus social media are not responsible for the appearance of such content; nevertheless, they facilitate their spread. In this case, they can also be used to limit their availability. For social media to serve this role, and ensure freedom of speech for the Internet users at the same time, we need external, transparent legal regulations that would answer, in a straightforward manner, the question of what can be done on the platform and what should not. The decisions about banning accounts and entire communities should not depend entirely on social media owners.

However, this is only a part of what needs to be done. To deal with the problem, we need systemic solutions, focused on causes, not symptoms. Currently, we have the tendency to concentrate on technical questions (for example, discussing whether we should block accounts spreading dangerous content or not). The popularity of conspiracy theories has a deep psychological basis. To decrease the need for alternative explanations, we should, primarily, rebuild trust in the state and public institutions. The lack of trust is the main reason why, in the time of crisis, citizens look for explanations outside of the official information sources. Regaining trust is a long process, but necessary if we want to really change the attitudes of conspiracy theorists.

Another element would be creating systemic help both for the followers of conspiracy theories and their families. Specialised programmes should be offered to voluntary support people in leaving alternative reality, and inform relatives how to live with conspiracy theorists and not lose contact with them.

Thirdly: an educational offensive is necessary, on the one hand, to reach Internet users with real information on the most pressing matters, on the other hand, teach them how to distinguish truth from falsehood in online publications.

Only after introducing those measures, we can go back to technical aspects and discuss who should be affected by limits on social media platforms. Unfortunately, it seems that the world is going in a different direction right now. Authorities are focused on the symptoms, not the causes – social media platforms, not people who post alarming content there. In my opinion, this does not offer a chance of solving the problem of the spread of conspiracy theories or limiting the process of radicalisation among online users.





At first sight, it seems like 2020 was a fruitful year for conspiracy theories. However, given that they have been around for a long time, one might conclude the Covid-19 pandemic that started in Wuhan opened the Pandora's box of conspiracy theories and presented them to the broad public with its darkest face. The fact that coronavirus started in China was a perfect corroboration for all the existing political narratives and conspiracy theories already connected to China. This is something that was especially important when used by the United States President Donald Trump. In one of his first addresses regarding the novel virus, he decided to name it the 'Chinese virus'1. That classification, whose sole purpose was to connect the deadly disease to the entire nation and engage further theorising about the interconnection between the virus and China, is merely one of many nationalistic political gestures Trump used when trying to pin the United States of America against other nations. And, as per Joseph E. Uscinski, he has been prone to endorsing conspiracy theories and using them for his (geo)political goals for years<sup>2</sup>.

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We may assume that this statement had an influence on the wide popularisation of the conspiracy theory about the coronavirus

Moynihan, D., Porumbescu, G. (2020, September 16). Trump's 'Chinese virus' slur makes some people blame Chinese Americans. But others blame Trump. The Washington Post. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/09/16/trumps-chinese-virus-slur-makes-some-people-blame-chinese-americans-others-blame-trump/

LSE USCenter (2016). If Trump's rhetoric around conspiracy theories follows him to the White House, it could lead to the violation of rights on a massive scale. Retrieved from https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2016/03/30/if-trumps-rhetoric-around-conspiracy-theories-follows-him-to-the-white-house-it-could-lead-to-the-violation-of-rights-on-a-massive-scale/

SARS-COV-2 variant having 'escaped' from a Chinese laboratory, with the result that this conspiracy theory was one out of the ten most-represented conspiracy theories globally in 2020<sup>3</sup>. It is very interesting to follow the development of that case and see how influential a conspiracy theory, and even one word, can be even on global institutions. At the beginning of 2021, the World Health Organization (WHO), in cooperation with the Chinese government, has organised a research expedition to trace the source of coronavirus. One of the hypotheses they were testing was that the virus has leaked from the laboratory. Evidence is showing that this hypothesis is the least possible one in relation to the source of the virus<sup>4</sup>, but it badgered the imaginations all over the world so much.

From Trump's thesis about the Chinese virus to the WHO research, all these events on the timeline show how big of an influence can conspiracy theories be on the decision-making, political mobilisation, institutional agenda, science and rethinking political ideology. There are many questions that should be asked here: Is real immunity of politics to conspiracy theories possible? How do conspiracy theories influence political ideology and vice versa? Are politicians ready to face conspiracy theories in their political activities?

Lynas, M. (2020, April 20). COVID: Top 10 current conspiracy theories. Cornell Alliance for Science. Retrieved from https://alliance-forscience.cornell.edu/blog/2020/04/covid-top-10-current-conspiracy-theories/

Connor, R. (2021, February 9). Coronavirus: WHO fails to find animal source of COVID-19. DW.com Retrieved from https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-who-fails-to-find-animal-source-of-covid-19/a-56508989

#### TWO CHAIRS

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The general perception is that conspiracy theories are far more represented in the extreme political ideologies – those on the political margins, such as far-left and especially in the far-right political agendas<sup>5</sup>. There is one very topical research by Sutton and Douglas from the previous year, which confirms and broadens the above-stated thesis. This research states that conspiracy theories are represented in the whole ideological spectrum and are also likely to contribute to ideological polarisation, prejudice, and grievance. On the psychological level, this research recognises the interconnection between believing in conspiracy theories and uncritical following of extreme political ideologies, and that "belief in conspiracy theories clearly represents not only an attitudinal disposition but a tendency to subscribe to normatively weak beliefs, and is the outcome, like ideological orientations, of cognitive styles and cognitive limitations"<sup>6</sup>.

Meanwhile, approximately at the same time when the above-mentioned researchers made their conclusion, there was public opinion research conducted in the Western Balkan region (WB) regarding the influence and representation of coronavirus conspiracies in the region. This research was conducted by the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG) under the title *The Suspicious Virus: Conspiracy and Covid-19 in the Balkans*. Its goal

Van Prooijen, J.W., Krouwel, A.P. Pollet, T.V. (2015). Political extremism predicts belief in conspiracy theories. Social Psychological and Personality Science 6(5), 570-578

Sutton, R.M. Douglas, K.M. (2020). Conspiracy theories and the conspiracy mindset: Implications for political ideology. Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences 34, 118–122

was to see the degree to which conspiracy theories are represented in the society and the real numbers in reference to their influence; tracing of key patterns of interconnection regarding the conspiracy theories representation was also done. Research showed that more than 75% of WB citizens surveyed believe in one or several of six Covid-19 theories; meanwhile, in the parts of Europe, Covid-19 conspiracies are supported by a quarter to a third of the population<sup>7</sup>. Interestingly, education, age, and gender do not significantly impact these beliefs. The only feature that makes a difference is geopolitical views. Support for conspiracies often aligns with stronger feelings about the USA and China. In other words, in the countries where general public support for the USA is low (e.g. Serbia), the origins of Covid-19 are linked to the US government, and in the countries where general public support for the USA is high (e.g. Kosovo), the origins of Covid-19 are linked to the CPC8.

Results of these both pieces of research can be connected and analysed together. Collective national identity, and tradition, often shapes political ideology in the WB region<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore, the

<sup>7</sup> Rising from 19% in September (https://www.swg.it/observatory). See
also Biostat (2020). Mity o koronawirusie. Retrieved from https://www.biostat.com.pl/news/mity\_o\_koronawirusie\_polacy\_o\_skutecznosci\_ochrony\_przed\_sars\_cov\_2.php . Rees, J., et al (2020). Erste Ergebnisse einer Online-Umf rage zur gesellschaftlichen Wahrnehmung des Umgangs mit der Corona-Pandemie in Deutschland. Bielefeld: Institut für interdisziplinäre Konflikt- und Gewaltforschung

Biber, F. (2020). Sumnjivi virus: Zavere i COVID-19 na Balkanu. Graz: BiEPAG. Retrieved from https://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/ Conspiracies-and-Covid19-in-the-Balkans-Serbian.pdf

<sup>9</sup> Henjak, A., 2005. Determinante ideološke samoidentifikacije hrvatskih birača na parlamentarnim izborima 2003. godine. Politička misao, 42(01), pp.85-110.

correlation between ideology and conspiracy theories is a twoway process. Conspiracies are determining political ideologies and practices; at the same time, political ideologies influence the construction of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories activate with already existing societal perceptions and manage to accelerate and mobilise them.

We can see how that works on the example of a 'flawed democracy' like Serbia, where the political class uses conspiracy theories in a political game with the society, using them for their particular benefit.

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We do not have to look far to find an appropriate illustration to prove that conclusion. We are witnessing that in this very moment (February 2021) Serbia is one of the world leaders in the number of vaccinated individuals per 100.000 citizens; meanwhile, the number of citizens who say that they do not want to be vaccinated is around 50% of the population<sup>12</sup>. These two facts seem unmatchable one to another, and yet the governing party is not losing its popularity. It tries to cater all segments of society. From one side, the right-wing populist government is running a big pro-vaccination campaign, with one of its most important pillars being public vaccinations of top politicians. The Serbian

[editor's comment]

The Economist Intelligence Unit (2021). Democracy Index 2020.

Retrieved from https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2020/?utm\_source=google&utm\_medium=cpc&utm\_name=democracy\_index&utm\_term=latin\_america&utm\_content=general&gclid=CjwKCAiAyc2BBhAaEiwA44-wWw4TAfDSq5d551KqxjKoZTdJm\_r4GXu94yjANRBywB\_VEDRY3\_aCfhoCjUoQAvD\_BwE

EU Delegacija u Srbiji (2021). Godišnji izveštaj o Srbiji 2020. Retrieved from http://europa.rs/godisnji-izvestaj-o-srbiji-2020/

<sup>12</sup> Sumnjivi virus: Zavere i COVID-19 na Balkanu (2020)

Prime Minister Ana Brnabić and the Minister of Labour Darija Kisić got the 'western' Pfizer vaccine in front of the camera. In contrast, Serbian Minister of Police Aleksandar Vulin and Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivica Dačić got the Russian vaccine Sputnik v, also in public. On the other side, the most popular and influential politician in the country, President Aleksandar Vučić, has not been vaccinated in front of the nation. He is visibly distancing himself from the vaccine, which can be interpreted as standing in line with anti-vaxxers.

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The fact that part of the ministers got the western jab and the other part the eastern one is also not without meaning (neither that female representatives took the western product). It is a clear message declaring Serbian geopolitical strategy of playing on the 'two chairs'<sup>13</sup>. The relation between politics, geopolitics, ideology and conspiracy theories is very visible here, and populist politicians know how to play them well to maintain their leader's position regardless of the social costs of their behaviour.

The examples of Trump's 'Chinese virus', WHO research and Vučić (non)vaccination are perfect for showing how politics can control and manipulate conspiracy theories to reach their goals, how conspiracy theories can influence political moves. Equally important is to recognise the tools and methods used in the process of mobilisation and tackle the moral and ideological dilemmas that liberal policies have in this context.

<sup>13</sup> Nikolic, T. (2016, November 26). Serbia won't align with East or West. Al-Jazeera [interview]. Retrieved from https://www.aljazeera.com/program/episode/2016/11/26/tomislav-nikolic-serbia-wont-align-with-east-or-west

Thus, the order of business would be first to reach the highest possible level of awareness about conspiracy theories and then develop a counter-narrative *toolbox* that can be used in campaigns. But how can we determine the best first steps?

#### COUNTERING CONSPIRACY THEORIES BRINGS UP DILEMMAS

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When it comes to engagement with conspiracy theorists online, one can roughly identify two groups of people: those who have decided to engage with them consistently in discussions and those who feel that they should be ignored and left to continue being the subject of ridicule. Unfortunately, the problem is not dichotomous, and there is no 'right' approach amongst the said two; the issue at hand seems to be more complicated. Nevertheless, what would be the correct approach? Well, probably a little bit of both and some more.

The anti-vaccination movement, protests against Covid-19 prevention measures, the Brexit campaign, the entire outcome of Donald Trump's presidential 'life cycle' – from his election campaign for the 2016 United States presidential elections up until the end of his presidency on the 20th of January 2021... These are all examples of major global events that affect millions of lives, both directly and indirectly, connected to conspiracy theories. A lot of these conspiracies have been dismissed by many of us during the early stages of their development as something 'on the fringes' and nothing that cannot be dealt with when it becomes necessary to do so. The outcome of the 2020 United States presidential election and the year 2020, in general, have demonstrated that there was a lesson to learn.

As per the article published by the *Time Magazine*<sup>14</sup> on the 4th of February 2021, co-founder and President of Catalist<sup>15</sup> Laura Quinn has started to research the phenomenon of why something as cut and dry as disinformation in election campaigns started to pose such a broad and deep threat to democracy. The most important outcome of Ouinn's research was that engaging with the content spread by the most prominent figures in conspiracy communities (let us call them conspiracy influencers) and their acolytes only leads to boosting of such content by the platform's algorithm because of an increase in engagement. So, arguing with conspiracy influencers and their followers is not going to be a very fruitful approach, but neither does this mean we have to ignore them completely. According to Quinn, the best way is to advocate for platforms to start enforcing their existing policies on types of malign behaviour of users. It is not an easy approach, but if reports and flags on content that might be misinforming are done co-ordinately, it could result in dangerous and misinforming content to become more easily identified. This happened, for example, when Twitter started to flag some of Donald Trump's content after the 2020 election vote count as disputed and misleading. Although one can argue if the permanent suspension of his Twitter account, considering the outcome that followed, was ultimately good or not, the flagging of his misleading tweets played an important role in handling the post-electoral crisis and

Ball, M. (2021, February 4). The Secret History of the Shadow Campaign That Saved the 2020 Election. Time. Retrieved from https:// time.com/5936036/secret-2020-election-campaign/?utm\_source=facebook&-fbclid=IwAR2tm02HDNijhhvecRoJjv3zPxmM\_sDH-7hlq0H5FQI3QoFdIcZB\_hE0d2E

<sup>15</sup> https://catalist.us/

preventing it from escalating any further. Conspiracy theorists and conspiracy influencers need platforms to control the narrative and influence the masses.

The 'liberal dilemma' that might emerge from this approach is probably the one about whether it endangers the freedom of expression. There is always a personal view on where the thin line after which freedom of speech becomes endangered is drawn, but the compromise is mostly reached in the cases when lives. other freedoms and/or security are endangered. In the case of the most prominent conspiracy theories, a lot of the flagged posts and content labelled as 'problematic' were crossing the line and endangering public health and/or national security. A good example would be the misinformation about the anti-malaria drug hydroxychloroquine as efficient for treating the Covid-19 disease. Information about this has been shared on President Trump's Twitter account on 27th of July 2020 to his then 84 million followers and has spread out massively, despite information about the drug's disproven efficiency already being online. Obviously, this has raised concerns amongst health experts. Twitter removed Trump's retweet, but the information has already spread. A group of researchers has used unsupervised machine learning to identify and characterise hydroxychloroquine-related content on Twitter. In an article published in February 2021<sup>16</sup>, they reported that their study has detected and collected over 2,7 million tweets mentioning hydroxychloroquine during the period of July 21–30, and that 91,1% of them were released after President

Mackey, T.K., et al (2021). Application of unsupervised machine learning to identify and characterise hydroxychloroquine misinformation on Twitter. The Lancet Digital Health 3(2), 72–75

Trump's misinformation retweet. So, this spread of misinformation triggered by one of the most influential people in the world has potentially caused harm to a lot of people due to poor treatment and/or prevention of Covid-19 with hydroxychloroquine.

Although Twitter did (eventually) remove this kind of content and a lot of the profiles spreading it, it does raise the question of whether they were right in doing so. Liu, Yildrim and Zhang<sup>17</sup> argue that, even though this issue possibly concerns freedom of expression, political discourse, personal liberty, civil society, and government regulations, it is at a more basic level – primarily a marketing decision made by the social media platforms' owners, like for any other product or service. Their research showed that most platforms engage in content moderation, but they mostly do it out of self-interest: thus, their moderation methods differ from those of social activists. So, the liberal dilemma on this issue is much more complex, keeping in mind that the topic also introduces the aspect of social media platform self-regulation vs government interventions. The European Commission, for example, has taken a particular interest in the removal of hate speech from social media platforms and has even presented a fact sheet on countering illegal hate speech online<sup>18</sup>.

The compromise European liberals might reach amongst themselves is that we must protect freedom of expression while

<sup>17</sup> Liu, Y., Yildirim, T.P., Zhang, Z.J. (2021). Social Media, Content Moderation, and Technology. arXiv preprint arXiv:2101.04618

Reynders, D. (2020). Countering illegal hate speech online: 5th evaluation of the code of conduct. Brussels: EC Directorate-General for Justice and Consumer. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/codeofconduct\_2020\_factsheet\_12.pdf. Accessed December 27, 2020.

protecting other rights and freedoms as well. Flagging already disputed content as misinformative (like it was done with Donald Trump's tweets) could probably be a method on which all liberals might agree because it relies on facts, it informs, but it also does not opt for a 'bubble of censorship', since everyone can still be aware of the content, but is merely informed about why it is problematic. This probably will not stop the conspiracists from spreading misinformation, but it will at least inform other people that the content is misleading and/or disputed. It should not be thought of as an imposed restriction, but rather as 'informing about disinformation. In this day and age, content can never be fully censored. That being said, the research<sup>19</sup> does suggest that, although flagged tweets do tend to get more engagements, users do engage in further debunking of false information in tweets after they have been flagged. Even if liberals manage to reach a compromise on the approach regarding freedom of expression, more research is still necessary to find the most effective one.

## EXPLORATION OF ALT-TECH PLATFORMS IS NECESSARY TO ASSESS THE THREAT AND STAY AHEAD

Although platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram seem like the most obvious ones to look for conspiracy theorists, since those are the platforms most people are engaged on, very often it is not those mainstream platforms where one might find the origin of a conspiracy – if finding the exact origin is pos-

<sup>19</sup> Zannettou, S. (2021). "I Won the Election!": An Empirical Analysis of Soft Moderation Interventions on Twitter. arXiv preprint arXiv:2101.07183.

sible at all. When it comes to newer conspiracy theories like the Pizzagate or QAnon<sup>20</sup>, or any of the narratives related to the Covid-19 pandemic, besides Twitter, we can trace a lot back to platforms like 4chan or 8chan (now called 8kun), Gab, InfoWars, etc. When Twitter started to enforce its policies against QAnon influencers and supporters, they moved to an alternative platform called Parler. Such platforms, webpages, microblogs, etc., where alt-right extremists and conspiracy theorists can post content freely, are called alt-tech.

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It is argued that alt-tech platforms serve as a recruitment and organising sites for far-right movements<sup>21</sup>, and they are far-reaching. Especially in 2020, it has been noted that people from different parts of Europe and the rest of the world became affiliated to the QAnon community, even though its narrative of Donald Trump being the saviour of the World from Satanist elites was not related as much to their own domestic politics, as it was for the United States' citizens. After the culmination, which resulted in the storming of the United States Capitol in 2021, some of the alt-tech platforms have been taken offline (e.g. Parler) due to encouragement and incitement of violence; nevertheless, a lot of them are still active (e.g. Gab). However, we must keep in mind that whilst alt-tech is integral for organising extremist groups and conspiracy communities, their main target

<sup>20</sup> Aliapoulios, et al. (2021). The Gospel According to Q: Understanding the QAnon Conspiracy from the Perspective of Canonical Information. arXiv preprint arXiv:2101.08750.

<sup>21</sup> Donovan, J., Lewis, B., Friedberg, B. (2019). Parallel Ports. Sociotechnical change from the Alt-Right to Alt-Tech. In Fieltz, M., Thurston, N. (Eds). Post-Digital Cultures of the Far Right - Online Actions and Offline Consequences in Europe and the US. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 49-66

are still the users of mainstream social media platforms. In a 2018 interview<sup>22</sup> with far-right media personality Alex Jones<sup>23</sup>, Gab founder Andrew Torba supported Jones' address to "common sense libertarians" that this is a "war" they must fight "on Facebook, Google, Twitter, everywhere..." and that they have to steer people from those platforms to "Gab.ai, to InfoWars.com, to Drudge Report", because this "war" is even more important than the 2016 United States presidential elections.

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Donovan et al. have made it clear that the far-right and conspiracy influencers engaged on alt-tech platforms have a techsavvy base ready to teach and advise others on those platforms. Together they develop flexible post-digital strategies, which can then move from one platform to another before reaching mainstream social media or even migrating to 'real life' conversations.

Several full-fledged conspiracy schemes can be found online. A good example is a scheme found on Twitter but traced back to a blog of John A. Lancaster<sup>24</sup>, and further to InfoWars and the podcast American Countdown, created by constitutional lawyer Robert Barnes<sup>25</sup>. It is trying to present the geopolitical influence

<sup>22</sup> NewsBlip (2018, March 3). Alex Jones Interviews Andrew Torba of gab.ai [video interview]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=BmiXxPNv6N0

Alex Jones is an American far-right radio show host who has been described by the **New York** magazine as "America's leading conspiracy theorist". He is the publisher and director of the InfoWars website, and NewsWars (after InfoWars was banned from Facebook). He was a speaker at a rally in Lafayette Square Park preceding the 2021 storming of the Capitol Building [editor's comment].

<sup>24</sup> https://johnalancaster.com/2020/06/10/video-share-robert-barneslooks-into-the-origins-of-black-lives-matter/

<sup>25</sup> https://banned.video/watch?id=5ed9b8452b2f240024f48316

of George Soros by tying him to different world leaders, political influencers, as well as other actors, and ultimately to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, in a rather detailed way.

Since 2020, one can say that Bill Gates is taking over the conspiracy scheme 'throne' away from George Soros, since he is now the main protagonist in conspiracies around the origin of Covid-19, as well as those about him using the pretext of vaccination against the SARS-COV-2 for implanting microchips into people. In attempts to find a similar scheme surrounding Mr. Gates, Google searches have only given mainstream sources when searching for results related to the combination of the words 'QAnon', 'Bill Gates' and 'InfoWars'. This shows that conspiracists are well-organised despite cases when algorithms do not favour them as information sources.

Exploring alt-tech platforms for research's sake can give insight into what is being said and prepared by conspiracists. Nevertheless, some cautiousness is necessary. It is essential to keep in mind that the targets of people active on alt-tech are still the users of mainstream social media, whom they are trying to attract to alt-tech forums. That being said, the information found on alt-tech is best used for prevention on mainstream platforms because their campaign circles back to alt-tech through mainstream channels and popular social media and messaging apps.

Recruitment and mobilisation on alt-tech forums and vlogs like 8chan (now 8kun), Reddit and certain YouTube channels usually leads to coordinated radicalisation through encrypted messaging apps like Discord, Telegram, Signal, Viber and WhatsApp, which then continues to be mainstreamed on popular social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok, as well

as in news comments sections, and then circles back to alt-tech forums. This is how they grow their follower bases, according to Julia Ebner<sup>26</sup>, Austrian extremism researcher and author.

## CONCLUSION: DEVELOPING COUNTER-CAMPAIGNS IS STILL DIFFICULT AND REQUIRES CREATIVITY

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As mentioned in the previous chapters, before trying to counter conspiracy theories, one must understand the audiences and trends. One of the main trends is manipulation campaigns. Ebner explains that they are aimed at the so-called 'grey zones' where they can 'red-pill the normies' 27 by hijacking mainstream discussions through creative ways of carefully disseminating disinformation. And before you know it, a discussion is out of control. Manipulation campaigns strategically aim towards achieving polarisations by creating a narrative on a certain topic where people in the 'grey zones', who are the moderate middle, are forced to choose a side in a fabricated binary situation. They use armies of trolls, as well as doxxing techniques, where they intimidate the 'voice of common sense' in a discussion by digging private information on them and publishing it during a struggle for dominance of an imposed narrative. After identifying the main types of campaigns they use - radicalisation, manipulation and intimidation – we have to figure out how to approach

Ebner, J. (2019). Counter-Creativity. Innovative Ways to Counter Far-Right Communication Tactics. In Fieltz, M., Thurston, N. (Eds). Post-Digital Cultures of the Far Right - Online Actions and Offline Consequences in Europe and the US. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag

<sup>27</sup> A slang expression conspiracists and far-right extremists use to describe the process of enlightening/brainwashing the average user on their radicalisation mission.

and respond to such campaigns. Ebner argues that, although risk mitigation is important, it is not enough, and we should seek alternative approaches. Ideally, we would find an integrated intervention model that combines proactive counter-narratives and rapid reaction systems, but for that, in-depth research and understanding of audience segmentation are necessary.

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To start a counter-narrative, or to put it simply, a campaign aiming to inform and jeopardise an existing conspiracy narrative, it is necessary to identify and find the targeted audience. Then, it is imperative to learn everything about that audience, as well as extremist groups the campaign is trying to counter28. After setting goals and budget along with means of funding, it is particularly important to learn about how the target audience is segmented, so that one can start tailoring the content to different subcultures in it. Also, learning about their online habits, in terms of which platforms they use to interact, become informed and exchange messages with others, is paramount. After that, the next step would be to find the 'grey zones' in the narrative one is trying to counter and to use certain 'hijacking techniques' for linking the content of the counter-campaign to the conspiracy posts. People within the audience who are interested in the topic related to a conspiracy theory being tackled by the counter-campaign and are already engaging with conspiracists in a comparatively moderate way are the 'grey zone'. They are the people the counter-narrative should aim to reach and steer away from conspiracy theory campaigns. These are the bases that need to be covered and assessed before the start of the main counter-campaign.

<sup>28</sup> Tuck, H., Silverman, T. (2016). The Counter-Narrative Handbook.

London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue.

The means of hijacking could be the use of the same hashtags or keywords the conspiracists use, for example. Cautiousness is necessary since this can attract not only people moderately interested in the topic but also already radicalised conspiracists and troll armies. If that happens, it is important not to engage with them, but report them to platform administrators if they cross a certain line. It is also vital to offer support to those the counter-campaign is trying to keep on/steer to its side of the discussion if they become the object of doxxing and other forms of intimidation by radicalised conspiracists.

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Another important thing to note is that complicated topics are usually the ones that are the base for conspiracy theories. The reason complex topics create so much room for conspiracy theories is because such narratives simplify them. They make them more attractive and give their audience the feeling they are now a part of a very important discussion, usually reserved for a small, elite audience<sup>29</sup> (e.g. the scientific community when it comes to viruses and vaccines, politicians and world leaders on governments, military, intelligence, security, etc.). Conspiracy theories give their target audiences the feeling that they are 'in on it'. It can be a good approach to use that same method, by combining expert and public figure opinions, especially trying to engage non-political figures, influencers, and thought leaders.

Humour also tends to be a good tool for making a campaign attractive. This can be very important for communicating difficult

<sup>29</sup> Fenster, M. (2008). Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture. Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press

topics already appropriated by promoters of conspiracy theories. For example, in general, meme campaigns and memetic engagement have been disputed to be a potentially effective, yet still underexplored, tool by the United States Government for promoting its policy goals in the online information environment, as a part of a broad influence and/or certain counter-narrative campaigns.<sup>30</sup> It is already being explored as a tool and used by far-right groups in their influence campaigns (e.g. in Finland<sup>31</sup> and Sweden<sup>32</sup>). But, since memes have become an important nexus in influence campaigns online, they can also be used by political actors on other sides of the political spectrum<sup>33</sup>, or possibly in counter-campaigns that tackle conspiracy theories as well.

It is deemed OK to be ironic, sarcastic, or cynical in counternarrative campaigns, but Ebner argues that mocking the audience of the counterpart might be counterproductive, as per research by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), possibly because it might trigger sympathy for conspiracy promotors and devalue the counter-narrative campaign. On the other hand, she says that

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<sup>30</sup> Zakem, V., McBride, M.K., Hammerberg, K. (2018). Exploring the utility of memes for US government influence campaigns. Arlington: Center for Naval Analyses

<sup>31</sup> Hakoköngäs, E., Halmesvaara, O., Sakki, I. (2020). Persuasion Through Bitter Humor: Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Rhetoric in Internet Memes of Two Far-Right Groups in Finland. Social Media + Society 6, 1-11

<sup>32</sup> Askanius, T. (2021) On Frogs, Monkeys, and Execution Memes: Exploring the Humor-Hate Nexus at the Intersection of Neo-Nazi and Alt-Right Movements in Sweden. **Television & New Media** 22(2), 147–165

<sup>33</sup> Penney, J. (2017). Social media and citizen participation in "official" and "unofficial" electoral promotion: A structural analysis of the 2016 Bernie Sanders digital campaign. Journal of communication 67(3), 402–423

examples of self-ironising have shown themselves to be good icebreakers and introductions to a counter-narrative. Because understanding of the jargon, insider jokes, reference points and rancour of conspiracy communities is still narrow, further exploration of certain online subcultures is required to find innovative approaches for countering conspiracies.

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Liberals have a significant role to play in combating conspiracy theories online, starting with counter-campaign on anti-Covid-vaccinations. In-depth research and understanding of the campaign's target audience are important for reaching them and ultimately achieving the planned effect. Since counter campaigns also target (potentially) radicalised individuals, thorough risk assessment is also of utmost importance. For their counter-campaign measures reaction to conspiracy campaigns to be successful, liberals need to think outside of the box and take a small step back from the standard campaign models. Trying to predict a counterpart's behaviour and being ready to leverage and respond if some news or cause of action triggers a co-ordinated conspiracists' response is essential for developing a counter-narrative.

It is safe to say that the awareness of conspiracy theories' danger is on a higher level since 2020, but it is also fair to assume they will keep evolving (e.g. the ID2020 narrative<sup>34</sup>). Just like they have preceded the Covid-19 pandemic, they will outlast it as well. Therefore, we should regard the 'narrative battles' as far from over, as well as further consider how we, the liberals, want to 'play the game' from now on.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas, E. and Zhang, A. (2020). ID2020, Bill Gates and the Mark
of the Beast: how Covid-19 catalyses existing online conspiracy movements. Australian Strategic Policy Institute

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#### Plane crashes

One of the recent examples with far-reaching consequences was the Smoleńsk air disaster from 2010. in which Polish president and 95 others have died, including the First Lady of Poland, the last President-inexile, deputy Marshals of the Polish parliament, 18 MPs and commanding officers of all Polish Armed Forces. Official Polish investigation has shown that the crew was ill-equipped to safely land in difficult weather conditions. According to conspiracy theories spread by leaders of the Law and Justice party (PiS), the air disaster was actually an attack and Putin was responsible for it. Political "investigators" spoke of a TNT explosion inside the plane and tried to prove their thesis during a series of grotesque experiments. PiS used the disaster to create a martyrological political narration to polarise the society and help Kaczyński win the election.



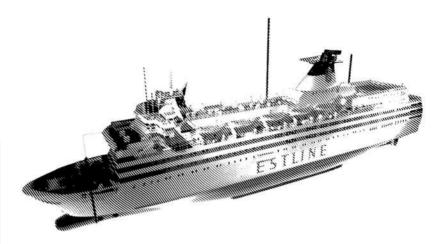
The second symbolic example is Malaysia Airlines flight MH17. Almost 300 (193 from the Netherlands) passengers were killed when the plane was shot down over Ukraine in 2014. The official technical report by the Dutch Safety Board concluded that the plane was hit with a single, Russian-made Buk ground-to-air missile, fired by Russian soldiers or pro-Russian rebels, who mistakenly thought they were targeting a Ukrainian Air Force jet. According to conspiracy theories, it was shot by a Russian fighter jet or by the Ukrainian army. The latter one is linked to the theory that MH17 was mistaken for Putin's jet which was in the area, as NATO wanted to kill the Russian leader. Some even believe that the Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte made an agreement with Kyiv to cover the Ukrainian involvement. An alternative version claims that it was an attempt by the Israeli government to divert attention from its ground operations in Gaza. What is more,



In 1988, Air France flight 296, a chartered flight of a brand-new Airbus A320-111, crashed during the Habsheim Air Show. According to the investigators it was caused by pilot error, but a conspiracy theory says that it was due to a problem with the aeroplane's fly-by-wire, which was later covered by an Airbus and French government plot. The motive was as follows: any fault that could be publicly attributed to this new construction could be financially devastating to Airbus and its shareholders.

In 1980, Itavia Flight 870 crashed near the island of Ustica, killing all 81 people on board. The crash is believed to be an accidental shot down during a dogfight between Libyan and NATO fighter jets. The same year, Portugal's Prime Minister Francisco de Sá Carneiro and Defence Minister Adelino Amaro da Costa were killed in the Camarate air crash. There is a conspiracy theory that it was, in fact, an assassination of the Defence Minister, as he knew about the involvement of important military personnel in arms dealing during the Iran-Iraq war.





At times, spectacular disasters which cost hundreds of lives, happen not in the air but on the sea and give rise to original theories. This is exactly what happened in the case of MS Estonia. It was a cruise ferry that sank en route from Tallinn to Stockholm. 852 people lost their lives. The Joint Accident Investigation Commission concluded that the ferry's design was at fault and the crew were probably underskilled in emergency procedures. Conspiracy theorists claim that MS Estonia was transporting unregistered munitions cargo, as illicit trade in weapons was to be curtailed by new export laws about to come into effect. They say that the ferry collided with a submarine, Soviet or Swedish. The sinking of MS Estonia still captures people's imagination on both sides of the Baltic Sea, and the theories are continuously evolving.

#### Political murders

son out of the USSR...

When an active politician dies, especially in a divided society, one can be sure that the official cause of death will be accepted only by the part of it. The other part, mostly supporters of the killed politician, will surely create alternative theories.

In Sweden, there were two significant political murders in the span of 20 years. The unsolved murder of Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme in 1986 resulted in massive turmoil and confusion. Over the past three decades, one chief investigator after another has failed to solve the case. More than 130 people have falsely confessed to the crime. One of the most popular theories points to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which had been declared a terrorist organization by Palme's government. But there were plenty of other explanations of this murder. And no theory was too hizarre: Palme's wife killed him because of his infidelities: those who killed him are the people who killed JFK; it was feminists together with Scientologists; it was a planned suicide and the trigger was pulled by Palme's son Marten; it was Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky, who had met with Palme to ask for help in getting his own

In 2003, Swedish Foreign Minister Anna Lindh was stabbed in a shopping mall and died the next day. Conspiracy theorists connect this murder with the one of pro-EU British politician Jo Cox (2016). They say that both politicians were murdered by European forces to increase sympathy for the integration and the Euro.

In the case of Sweden, events from 1961 should also be mentioned. It was the year when UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld died in a plane crash on a mission to prevent civil war in newly independent Congo. According to one popular theory, Katangese separatists ordered a Belgian mercenary pilot to shoot down the SG's plane. Others suggest that a white militia group called the South African Institute for Maritime Research (SAIMR) orchestrated the plane crash (with CIA and British intelligence) to be able to spread AIDS among black Africans.

In 1978, Italian PM Aldo Moro was kidnapped and murdered by the Red Brigades after 54 days of imprisonment. Conspiracy theories quickly surfaced, based on the logic of Cold War politics (Moro zealously worked to include the Communist Party in Italy's ruling coalition) and involving accusations against subversive elements in the Italian government, as well as, the secret services of foreign governments, particularly the United States and Israel.

More recently, in 2002, Pim Fortuyn, a populist politician from the Netherlands, was assassinated by an environmental and animal rights activist. He said he murdered Fortuyn to stop him from exploiting Muslims as "scapegoats" and targeting "the weak members of society" seeking political power. One conspiracy theory focused on the network of environmental and "animal rights terrorists", and another on the CIA and BVD (National Intelligence and Security Agency). The agencies allegedly killed Fortuyn because he was a danger for NATO, especially by opposing the purchase of the Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) as a replacement for the outdated F16.



#### Car Accidents

In 2008, far-right leader and Governor of Carinthia (Austria) Jörg Haider was killed in a car accident. At the time of the crash, Haider was driving intoxicated at 142 km/h, more than twice the legal speed limit. According to conspiracy theorists, his death

can be attributed to an attack by the Freemasons. Other theories blame Haider's death on Israeli secret service or the politically and economi-

cally most influential bankers.



#### **Transitions**

Transitions provide fertile ground for conspiracy theorising as they are complex, with widespread consequences that fall beyond the control of most members of society. Such conspiracy theories are especially popular in East-Central Europe, but southern countries aren't free of them either.

Although the transition from communism to democracy in Central Europe is seen as a success and viewed as a role model for other regions of the world, many conspiracy theories were born between the Baltic, Black and Adriatic Seas – about real reasons for and consequences of peaceful revolutions, and rise of the new elites.

The central thesis of the Rózsadomb Pact theory in Hungary was that the local communists, opposition politicians, and religious leaders made an agreement with the Soviet, Israeli, and US secret services on the peaceful transformation in 1991. According to this secret pact, the old establishment could retain their power and avoid any negative consequences. Even more, they agreed on 20 points, including that the judiciary and state money remain in the hands of the former regime leaders. This story closely resembles Polish 'conspiracy in Magdalenka', according to which during heavy drinking in a villa near Warsaw leaders of "Solidarność" and communists agreed on abolition for

communist criminals and destruction of the secret service's archives. What's more, according to this theory, the Round Table Talks were used to sanction previously made agreements on the division of benefits in **Poland**. This theory is the foundation of Law and Justice's identity.

Conspiracy theorists in **the Czech Republic** say that the Velvet Revolution was organised by communist secret services, StB and KGB, and Václav Havel was a Soviet puppet. According to them, the Communist Party only transformed its power into other, less visible forms and still controls society. In a competing version, the transition was organised by Western secret services, such as the CIA, and George Soros. Allegedly, Václav Havel was an agent working for "imperialists". The latter theory is connected to another one saying that the Czech Republic is ruled by a secret group called 'The Castle' and created by Havel.

In **Croatia**, a theory says that the HDZ (Croatian Democratic Union; a dominant party in the country) semi-autocratic government in the early 1990s arranged the Homeland War with Serbian side – the autocratic regime of Slobodan Milošević – in order to divide the territory of former Yugoslavia and serve as a smokescreen to the plundering of the country's riches (wild privatisation). There are various sub-themes to that theory – such as the planned purge of the Serb

population during Operation Storm which ended the war with Croatian victory. Conspiracy theories about the dissolution of Yugoslavia have been present in the political discourse of all its former members. Croat leaders, including the first President Franjo Tuđman, have warned their people that internal and external forces plot against them to re-establish Yugoslavia. 65% of Croats agree with a statement that in the course of aggression against their country some great powers deliberately tried to undermine Croatian independence in order to preserve Yugoslavia.

Moving away from the CEE, in 1974, the Greek colonels ousted the Greek-Cypriot leader of Cyprus, Archbishop Makarios, and Turkey retaliated by invading and seizing a third of the island. According to conspiracy theories, it was not the Greek junta but the CIA (Washington needed the island to track Soviet advances in nuclear technology) and Turks who started the crisis and bear full responsibility. In 2009, when the body of Tassos Papadopoulos, former President of the Republic of Cyprus, was stolen from his grave by a Greek-Cypriot mafia family, a conspiracy theory was born that it was the work of Turkish Cypriots and Turkish nationals. On a divided island such as Cyprus, it's very easy to find theories which put the blame for all the wrongs done to one nation on the other.

The 1981 (six years after the death of the dictator Francisco Franco) coup d'état in **Spain** attempt by Lieutenant-Colonel Antonio Tejero was believed to be orchestrated by the Spanish Secret Services with the Royal House's connivance, as well as representatives of the major political parties and mainstream media. Achieving the objective required both purging the armed forces of its most reactionary elements and frightening the common voter into accepting the monarchy and the two-party system as the institutional 'default position'.

The peace process in **Ireland** also gave rise to multiple theories, for example, that Martin McGuinness, Deputy First Minister for Northern Ireland and a former Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) leader was actually a British spy.

Joining the European Union can be discussed in the context of transition as well. In the early 1990s, Maltese people were concerned about the accession, especially freer economy and inward flow of foreign people.

Narratives appeared, describing consecrated hosts and babies being stolen from churches and hospitals to be offered to Satan. Local newspapers ran headlines about acts of devil worship and 'Black Masses' all over the country. The archbishop of Malta established the Diocesan Commission on Occult and Satanism, involving a number of local exorcists.

#### Terrorist attacks

The bombings at the Atocha station in 2004, in which 191 people were killed and 2050 injured, occurred three days before general elections in which the incumbent José María Aznar's People's Party (PP) was defeated. It was the work of a radical Jihadist cell loosely linked to al-Qaida. The conservative politicians and media still believe it was ETA. If it had been ETA, they say, PP would have won the elections and Spain would be different.

In France, there were various conspiracy theories connected with the gun attack during the Christmas market in Strasbourg (in 2018, three people were killed and 13 wounded). Yellow Vests' channels informed that the government masterminded these deadly shootings to stop their protesters. According to research, Yellow Vests protesters are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories than other French people. After the 2019 Notre Dame fire that severely damaged the cathedral, and was caused by an electrical fault or a cigarette smoked by one of the workers, many of the Yellow Vests were saying that the fire was set by President Emmanuel Macron, who wanted to blame the protesters and make them look bad to society. It should be noted that the more popular conspiracy theory about Notre Dame stated that Muslim attackers started the fire and the incident was linked to 9/11. As a consequence, a former far-right

political candidate who had embraced that conspiracy theory went to a mosque in Bayonne and tried to set it on fire. He shot two Muslim men who confronted him.

During the so-called "years of lead" in Italy (Red Brigades and both left-wing and right-wing terrorism) some people said that many terrorist attacks (e.g. Bologna Station in 1980, the 1969 bombing of Piazza Fontana) had been actually "commissioned" or had seen the involvement of the Italian secret services, allegedly planning a coup d'état. Also, many conspiracy theorists think that some of the Mafia-related assassinations (e.g. Giovanni Falcone, Paolo Borsellino) were masterminded by the government at the time.

The Nijven gang was a group thought to be responsible for a series of violent attacks that occurred in **Belgium** between 1982 and 1985, in which 28 people died and over 20 were injured. Various conspiracy theories link the 'Brabant killers' to political scandals, implying the murders were committed to disguise a targeted assassination. A deathbed confession of a gendarme who allegedly was a member of the group renewed attention to the case in 2017.

In many stories, secret services seem to be even worse than terrorists, playing with lives of average citizens, as in the case of Le Pain Maudit. It was a mass poisoning in **France**, which caused 7 deaths and many serious illnesses in the town of Pont-Saint-Esprit. The majority of academic sources accept ergot poisoning as the cause of the epidemic but according to a conspiracy theory, it was caused by the CIA, which tested LSD on the local population. The CIA plays a very special role as an archvillain in many conspiracy narratives.

## Child exploitation

In 2008 Drasius Kedys accused two people, including a judge, of sexually molesting his underage daughter. The judge and the girl's aunt were found dead in 2009. Kedys became the main suspect and went into hiding. In 2010, he was also found dead. He choked on his vomit after heavy drinking but many Lithuanians believe he was a victim of a global clan of paedophiles. Shortly after the other accused abuser of his daughter (later found innocent) was found in a lake after a motorcycle accident. Later, the girl was held in the house of the father's family, isolated from her mother and kept from going to school. The house was surrounded by an organised and angry crowd of several hundred that has

sustained a 24/7 vigil for months. The Kedys family founded a political party in honour of Drąsius, called the Path of Courage that aims to purge **Lithuania** of "clans of bankers and oligarchs, corrupt officials and paedophile groupings".



The challenger of President Miloš Zeman in 2018 elections in the Czech Republic, Jiří Drahoš, was described by conspiracy theorists as a paedophile and a member of secret societies. It was believed that if Drahoš became president, he would change the law and sell Czech children to human traffickers for prostitution, as well as for organs. Drahoš lost the election.

Bar España is a Spanish version of QAnon. It claims that there is a bar in Benicarló where Spanish and European elites meet to plan kidnappings, sexual abuse and murders of children.

In **Bulgaria**, the National Children's Strategy was supposed to become a document to protect the rights of children, especially those at risk. It was attacked by various conspiracy theorists. They explained that



НА СТРАТЕГИЯТА ЗА ДЕТЕТО 2019-2030! the Strategy was actually paid for by Norway to implement the 'Norwegian model' of the state taking away children from problematic families, which was reinterpreted as an attack against family values. NGOs were accused of planning to sell children to Norwegian gay couples.

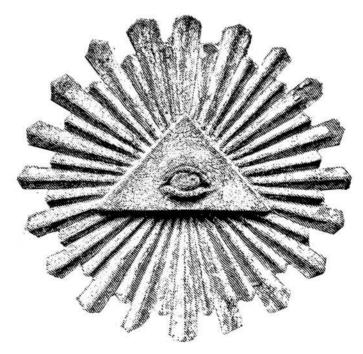
### Secret groups and plots

Probably the most widespread conspiracy theory is the one about a secret group influencing European countries called the Soros Network. 51% of Hungarians are convinced that US investment billionaire George Soros, a Hungarian-born Jew, has a plan to bring refugees en masse to Europe. Most of the rumours surrounding Soros are connected to the Open Society Foundation, frequently portrayed in "truther" circles as a nefarious organisation whose true aim is to weaken individual nations and establish an all-powerful global government. That is something the government of **Hungary** has been officially propagating for years, but it became popular among alt-right and populist circles on the continent. Anti-Fidesz opposition is still frequently dismissed as paid stooges bought by Soros. The European Commission has accused Orbán's government of propagating a "shocking" and "ludicrous conspiracy theory" with an antisemitic message.

One of the weirdest theories of recent years brings us to **Germany**. In 2020, at least 70 artworks and ancient artefacts across three galleries on Berlin's museum island were vandalised with an oily substance. German media have linked the museum island attack to conspiracy theories pushed through on social media channels. One such theory claims that the Pergamon Museum is the centre of the "global Satanism scene" because it holds

a reconstruction of the ancient Greek Pergamon Altar. It was suggested that Angela Merkel, who lives nearby, was using the altar for "human sacrifices".

In **Bulgaria**, there is a conspiracy theory about secret plans for the destruction of the entire nation. It includes attempts to decrease the population of Bulgarians, to lower standards and quality of life or change the population composition (increase the number of ethnic majority). Destructive plans are prepared by foreign advisors and Masons, Templars, Rosicrucians, Rotary Club, Illuminati...



The Epsilon Team is an alleged secret society that supposedly consists of prominent Greeks who possess secret knowledge of extraterrestrial origin. From **Greece** originates also a conspiracy theory called the 'Pythia Plot'. It was a scenario involving the assassination of the former



Conservative Prime Minister Costas Karamanlis by foreign powers, allegedly due to his very close ties with Vladimir Putin (South Stream project). Karamalis was allegedly targeted by Western and Israeli secret services. The conspiracy theory was further developed to explain the fact that eventually Karamanlis was not assassinated: once informed by the Russians, his security elaborated a safety plan; the former PM was changing itineraries constantly and was under strict protection.

In Greece, conspiracy theories were especially popular at the time of austerity policies. According to them, the great Greek financial crisis was a result of external machination, not of domestic and international financial politics, or the power of the markets. According to such narratives, foreign forces, especially Germany, the New World Order, the Bilderberg Group, were trying to destroy Greece – allegedly for being too independent, or as the means to depreciate Greek assets and resources.

#### Nazi

The Great Replacement is a neo-Nazi conspiracy theory which states that the white European population at large is being progressively replaced with non-European peoples through mass migration. Politicians and political commentators have been key in mainstreaming the theory by making explicit and implicit references to it in their speeches or social media activities. It comes from France, and is popular especially in Western Europe, e.g. omvolking is a local variation in Belgium. It has been promoted by politicians of the far-right Vlaams Belang party, but has also poisoned the language of some mainstream politicians, including Christian-Democratic CD&V. Also President of the Czech Republic Miloš Zeman, well known for promoting conspiracy theories, said that the "migration crisis" was the result of a plan by the Muslim Brotherhood to "gain control of Europe". According to Zeman, the Muslim Brotherhood lacked the resources to launch a military invasion of Europe and thus was sending refugees to Islamise Europe via demographic change.

Reichsbürger theory is the claim that the Federal Republic of **Germany** was legally inexistent, assuming that the German Reich still exists. This includes the idea of Germany being merely a limited company (GmbH). It is close to the Fourth Reich theory, a hypothetical future Nazi Reich that is the successor to Adolf Hitler's Third Reich.

### Satirical?

The Bielefeld conspiracy is a satirical conspiracy theory that claims that the city of Bielefeld in **Germany** does not exist, but is an illusion propagated by various forces. A similar theory about Finland used to be very popular online: Finland doesn't really exist, having been made up by Japan and the Soviet Union. The two nations collectively spread the idea that there was a landmass known as Finland on the stretch of ocean, to keep the good fishing between themselves. The Japanese were free to fish as much as they liked there without worrying about international laws, so long as they gave a share to Russia. Followers of the theory claim that the Trans-Siberian railway was built to transport the catch from the Baltic Sea to Japan under the guise of Nokia hardware, which explains why Japan is the biggest importer of the brand's products despite the fact that very few people in the country actually use them.

**ICELAND** 

UNITED



#### Politicians and Conspiracy Theories

One of the most prominent promoters of conspiracy theoriess in politics is Slovenian populist Prime Minister Janez Janša. He is a well-known promoter of the UDBAmafia theory. UDBA-mafia is believed to be a secret group that rules Slovenia. Its members come from the former Yugoslav secret police, UDBa. Janša once said that "the empire uses once left paradigm, once liberal, once right, once capitalist and once socialist. All it takes is just to be. Once through the chamber, once through the party, once through the judiciary, once through the media, just to keep them in power. This is a deep country. This is not a political formation. This is a mafia". Sometimes the group is called "Kučan's clan", after the first president of Slovenia, and alleged to be a mafia-like society from the League of Communists, whose aim is to economically control Slovenia after its independence and assure the wellbeing of their children.

Slovakia's former Prime Minister Robert Fico should also be mentioned here in the context of the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová. They were shot with a 9mm gun in their home in 2018. According to the prosecution's indictment, the murder was ordered by a businessman Marian Kočner (found not guilty by the Supreme Court). Former soldier Miroslav Marček was jailed for 23 years after admitting

to carrying out the killings and another suspect was jailed for facilitating the attack. The then PM Fico spread conspiracy theories that the President Andrej Kiska is controlled by George Soros and he used the murder to organise a coup against his elected parliamentary majority.

After the publication of the so-called Ibiza-Video showing former far-right FPÖ-politicians Heinz-Christian Strache and Johan Gudenus being very open to corruption, conspiracy theories emerged in **Austria** around the origin of the video – who made it, why was it published shortly before the 2019 elections to the European Parliament. According to conspiracy theories, the recorded politicians were victims of chancellor Sebastian Kurz or liberal media.

It seems that Romanian politicians use conspiracy theories extensively. Corneliu Vadim Tudor and his party PRM — Greater Romania Party — spread conspiracy theories that **Hungary** and Hungarian minority try to separate Transylvania from **Romania**. In 2020, even President Klaus Iohannis used the theory for his political benefit, accusing the biggest opposition party, the social democrats, of plotting to "give away Transylvania to the Hungarians". Moreover, there is a story that the terrible quality of roads between Bucharest and Transylvania suggests that there is an international conspiracy to keep the region separate from the rest

of the country in order to facilitate its independence at a later date.

What is more, the story of the disappearance of lawyer Elodia Ghinescu in 2007 was also used by the supporters of conspiracy theories and helped achieve political success. It was a heavily covered missing-person-become-murder case in Romania. As Ghinescu's body was never found and her policeman husband was accused of killing her, the tragedy was extensively used by a talk-show host and TV-owner Dan Diaconescu to popularise dozens of the most bizarre conspiracy theories in his programme. Later, capitalising on his popularity, he funded a populist People's Party that won 14% of the votes in 2012.

In 2019, Edwin Vassallo, nationalist MP and former junior minister from **Malta** posted the image of a "warning" on a banana injected with "blood containing HIV and AIDS" as a way of killing those who



#### Warning 🗥

If you see that your fruit contains red weird colour in it, don't eat it because a groups of people is injecting fruits with blood containing HIV and AIDS. With the aim of killing millions of people around the world. That is Satanism. PLEASE SHARE this post and save others.



**○ ○ ○ ○** 15

24 comments 11 shares

Like

Comment

A Share

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consume it. "That is
Satanism" the post continued. It may look ridiculous but AIDS-related conspiracy theories are still annoyingly popular in Europe and are attractive to a number of antisystemic politicians.

TT HAS TURNED OUT THAT CONSPTRACY THEORIES ARE NOT JUST TRIVIAL STORIES. WHICH CAN BE PUT NEXT TO 'URBAN LEGENDS' AND 'AMERICAN FOLKLORE'. IN THE FAVOURABLE TIMES OF POST-TRUTH AND THE HEGEMONY OF SOCIAL MEDIA. WE HAVE UNDERSTOOD THAT CONSPIRACY THEORIES HAVE AN **ENORMOUS POTENTIAL TO ENGAGE PEOPLE:** ORGANISE AND DIRECT THEIR ACTIONS IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE. IN THOSE FAST-GROWING MOVEMENTS. WHICH ARE BASED ON BELIEFS CONTRADICTING THE WORLD OF SCIENCE, MANY ORDINARY CITIZENS, AS WELL AS PEOPLE WITH ACADEMIC DEGREES. FOUND THEMSELVES AT HOME.

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