Report on Conspiracy Theories in the Online Environment and the Counter-Disinformation Ecosystem in Europe

Researching Europe, Digitalisation and Conspiracy Theories (REDACT)

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REDACT Project Summary

The REDACT project analysed how digitalisation shapes the form, content and consequences of conspiracy theories, including online sociality and offline actions and effects. Rather than seeing digitalisation as a process that has universal outcomes, or conspiracy theories as the same over space and time, REDACT considered online conspiracy theories and counter-disinformation organisations across a range of European countries. The project involved a team of 14 researchers analysing data from Western Europe, Central Europe, the Baltics and the Balkans.

Methodology

Using keywords from a range of conspiracy theory topics and identifying significant accounts, the project gathered 6 million posts from Twitter/X, Facebook, Instagram and Telegram between 2019–2024. The researchers used a mixture of digital methods and close reading strategies to analyse the datasets. They focused on the political, cultural and economic contexts that explain how and why conspiracy theories spread in the online environment across Europe. Each regional team also conducted ethnographic interviews with key members of counter-disinformation organisations across Europe to understand the variety of approaches that are being used to tackle conspiracy theories.

Key Findings

One size does not fit all:

- Regional European histories and experiences with freedom of expression, the media, democratic and epistemic norms, state control, conflict, authoritarianism and propaganda all shape conspiracy theories, even if the basic narratives are sometimes imported from elsewhere.
- Conspiracy theories occupy differing positions on the spectrum between legitimacy and illegitimacy in each region. This means that in some locations, conspiracy theories can be espoused by both those in power and those who want to hold power to account.
- Models imported wholesale from the US for understanding conspiracy theories, the platforms used to share them and the sector tasked with combatting disinformation and conspiracy theories are therefore of limited use.
- The counter-disinformation sector is highly variated across Europe depending on issues such as funding, political priorities, definitions of the 'problem' and the kinds of interventions wanted. It is therefore not useful to think about the counter-disinformation sector in Europe nor their strategies as homogenous.

Conspiracy theories should not be conflated with mis/disinformation:
Any approach that positions them as simply information errors that can be easily corrected by fact-checking misunderstands the relationship conspiracy theories have to identity and belonging.

Conspiracy theories hijack attention:
Conspiracy theories tend to use up all the oxygen on a topic, leaving little room for more nuanced discussion of contentious topics such as immigration. Media coverage of conspiracy theories also gives them more airtime.

Conspiracy theories point to underlying conditions:
Rather than isolated misinformation, conspiracy theories should be understood as symptoms of real – or at least genuinely perceived – grievances and anxieties. They should be understood not as the cause of a crisis in trust but as a symptom of deeper underlying issues. While sharing some broad similarities across Europe, the origins, meaning and significance of online conspiracy discourse vary according to local social, political and media contexts.

Social media is only part of the story:
Conspiracy theories are promoted by a mixture of conspiracy influencers, activist groups, partisan/alternative news media and politicians that operate both online and offline. We must therefore look beyond social media to understand the whole conspiracist ecosystem.

Explicit online conspiracism migrates to unmoderated platforms:
When content moderation is exercised on social media platforms, explicit conspiracism often migrates to unmoderated spaces like Telegram. The question remains whether it is better to monitor and moderate conspiracy discourse in publicly accessible forums or allow it to become more extreme in private or less visible silos.

Grey zones complicate intervention:
Rather than unambiguous misinformation, conspiracy talk is frequently expressed through innuendo, speculation, memes and implication rather than explicit claims – making it hard to identify, regulate or counter.

It's not all FIMI:
While Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference does employ conspiracy theories, in many of our case study regions, they are mostly homegrown (and then amplified by FIMI and mutually reinforced). Conspiracism is central to different forms of identity and can articulate a contestation over political positions and values.

The European counter-disinformation sector is vibrant and diverse:
While some countries benefit from more activity than others, taken as a whole, the European counter-disinformation sector includes a wide array of initiatives.

The European counter-disinformation sector is vulnerable:
While vibrant, the counter-disinformation sector is vulnerable to politicisation, harassment, strategic litigation and, sometimes, its own biases and blind spots. Moreover, as well as funding from nation states and the EU, other funding has come from tech companies and the US. Countries that were reliant on these streams have suffered from shifts in corporate priorities or US foreign policy.

Project-based funding models are not effective:
Current funding streams undercut possibilities for a) long-term thinking; b) collaboration; and c) the ability to swerve quickly to emerging issues and technologies. In addition, in some countries, the precarity of contracts leads to high turnover and insecure work and limits effectiveness.

Social media users play a role in countering conspiracism: Beyond formal initiatives, users actively challenge conspiracy theories online.

Recommendations

1. **Tailor solutions to local contexts:**
   Don't import models of and solutions to conspiracism wholesale from the US. Recognise the importance of local differences across Europe, but do not be afraid to insist on EU-wide minimum standards.

2. **Tackle the underlying drivers of conspiracy theories:**
   Address reasons for low trust and socio-political grievances.

3. **Differentiate conspiracy theories from other forms of misinformation:**
   Treat them as contextually specific identity- and grievance-based phenomena, not just inaccuracies to be corrected.

4. **Create trustworthy institutions:**
   Instead of lamenting falling levels of individual trust, institutions and politicians need to implement initiatives that will make them worthy of trust.

5. **Disincentivise online conspiracism:**
   Address attention economy dynamics and demonetise and resist the amplification of outrage. This requires regulators and platforms to work together for the public good, but it also means investing in alternative narratives and more constructive public discourse.

6. **Look beyond social media:**
   Consider the whole conspiracist ecosystem, including alternative media, political actors and offline circulation.

7. **Don't allow conspiracism to set the terms of the debate:**
   Media neutrality and balance do not mean that forms of denialism or veiled racism should be platformed. Equally, politicians should resist the pull towards conspiracist explanations.

8. **Reform current funding models:**
   There is need for long-term planning, less precarity in the sector, less reliance, in some countries, on funding from the US and platforms, and also greater agility to move to emerging concerns.

9. **Acknowledge that disinformation is a political category:**
   From this starting point, organisations can be transparent about their criteria for decisions about the quality and efficacy of information.

10. **Avoid alarmism:**
    While conspiracy theories are also entertained by those who commit notorious acts of violence, the link between conspiracism and violence is weaker than commonly assumed. Identify the true nature of the problem and respond proportionately.

1. Overview

When it comes to the production, circulation, regulation and meaning of online conspiracy theories, regional specificity is crucial, meaning that 'one size does not fit all'. Universalist, overly general or US-centric approaches to the study of conspiracy theories, the platforms used to share conspiracy theories and the sector tasked with combatting disinformation are of limited use when local histories, politics, regulation and media ecosystems are taken into account. Taking representative countries from regions in Europe – the Balkans, the Baltics, Central Europe, the German-speaking countries and the United Kingdom – REDACT offers a comparative account of online conspiracism, considered in terms of platform preferences, ideological content, aesthetic choices, political context, direction of influence and the role online conspiracism plays in the formation of community and identity.

Instead of treating online conspiracy theories as just another example of misinformation – caused by false information, a lack of information or the dynamics of social media – REDACT argues that they should be seen as a distinct form of digital misinformation. This is because conspiracy theories function as a kind of vernacular knowledge: they reflect and respond to specific political and historical contexts. In particular, regional and supra-regional European experiences with freedom of speech, the press, democratic norms, state control, conflict, authoritarianism and propaganda all shape how these theories emerge and spread online.

2. The Online Conspiracy Theory Environment Across Europe

For each of our target countries/regions/language spaces (UK; Germany, Austria and Switzerland; Latvia and Estonia; Poland and Slovakia; Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia), and on our four chosen platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter/X and Telegram), we scraped posts connected with six conspiracy theory topics (QAnon, the Ukraine war, the Great Replacement, climate change, Covid and gender ideology), together with a seventh category of general conspiracism. In addition, we also collected data for a range of country- and region-specific topics. Our data collection started with keywords and accounts identified by the experts in each location and then we used a snowballing procedure to identify a wider range of conspiracy-related discourse. We collected data for the period 2019–2024, which allowed us to investigate if there were significant changes over time, with the Covid-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and elections in many countries as key moments. Together the datasets included 6 million posts. With CASM Tech (Centre for the Analysis of Social Media), we conducted a pilot study of online conspiracy discourse in Estonia, using semantic mapping and topic modelling methods. The datasets provide a reasonably representative snapshot of conspiracy theory talk in the online environment across Europe, but they are inevitably limited (e.g. YouTube and, increasingly, TikTok play a significant role in spreading conspiracy ideas in many countries, but they are less amenable to the big data approaches we employed).

We deliberately chose issues that were salient to broader political debate in each region, such as the Great Replacement and its connection to immigration, rather than the more stereotypical conspiracy theories (e.g. moon landings) that are the mainstay of many conspiracy belief surveys. For each dataset we created a 'general' and a 'targeted' version: the 'general' datasets included both conspiracy posts and those that used the same keywords, but which were not necessarily conspiracist in outlook (e.g. some were debunking); for the 'targeted' datasets we used various filtering strategies to produce a subset of posts that were more squarely conspiracist. This allowed us to compare conspiracist and non-conspiracist discussions of the same topics and discussion spaces.

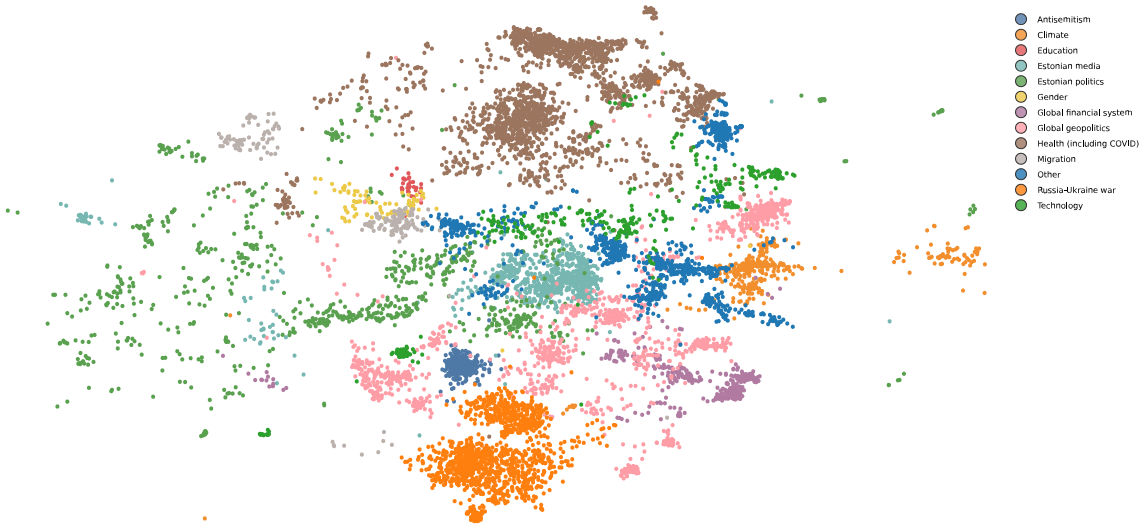


Figure 1: .Semantic map of conspiracy topics in the online conspiracy discourse space in Estonia, courtesy of CASM Tech. https://conspiracy-mapping.streamlit.app.

To analyse the data, we used (1) a suite of digital methods and visualisations (e.g. rank-flow diagrams of the changing saliency of particular keywords over time; social network graphs) and (2) a 'data hermeneutic' approach that involved manual coding of representative samples sorted by the relevant metric of engagement for each platform. The first approach allowed us to produce

an overview of the key topics and actors involved in each region; the second enabled us to draw conclusions about the type of post (e.g. whether the conspiracy theories were implied or explicitly articulated); the type of poster (e.g. ordinary user, partisan media or politician); and the source of the theory (repeating or adapting conspiracy theories from elsewhere or home-grown conspiracy speculation).

Key Findings

- Conspiracy theorising is not confined to either fringe platforms or fringe accounts. In most regions, it is increasingly mainstream and normalised, with political elites weaponising conspiracy discourse to push their agenda; at the same time, grassroots movements are turning to conspiracy narratives to voice their political frustration.

- While there are some broad patterns in common across our chosen countries, there are also myriad differences, which in some cases are a result of content moderation regimes and in others the social status of particular platforms. The online conspiracy scene in Europe is not the same as the current situation in the US and is potentially diverging further.

- There is no single pipeline for conspiracy theories. Different social media platforms and alternative media sites play differing roles. That can change rapidly in response to regulatory and market pressures. However, in many of our target countries, the most explicit articulation of conspiracy theories is on Telegram, often with very little non-conspiracist discussion or push-back on the issue, unlike on more mainstream (and moderated) platforms such as Facebook.

- Conspiracy talk is not confined to the usual online conspiracy entrepreneurs but emanates from a variety of other political and media sources (primarily right-wing populist). Social network analysis revealed significant superspreaders and influencers in each country and on each platform, but it also showed that the majority of accounts have comparatively few followers. There are many connections between them, suggesting a more bottom-up, organic and active spread of conspiracy ideas, rather than a top-down model of a few prominent voices with a passive audience.

- It is a mistake to think of conspiracy theories as a separate, fringe discourse that is confined to recognisable conspiracy topics. First, conspiracist interpretations of current events are now part of the endless churn of social media, pushed to prominence by the recommendation algorithms that favour emotionally charged content that increases engagement. Second, conspiracy theories often feed into a grey zone of potentially legitimate political critique on topics such as immigration and climate change, even if at the surface level they push demonstrably false and misleading information.

- The Covid-19 pandemic was not the complete game-changer for the creation and circulation of conspiracy theories in the online environment, as some commentators have suggested. While the pandemic was indeed accompanied by an identifiable increase in the volume of conspiracy-related discourse in our datasets, in most cases it merely amplified existing trends in conspiracist populism.

- On mainstream platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (before Elon Musk's takeover), the proportion of explicitly conspiracist, implicit and debunking posts in our datasets was roughly equal.

- Our research found that the flow of conspiracy ideas was complex and multidirectional. Even in the case of Covid-19 conspiracy theories (which were often global because of the global nature of the pandemic), none of the countries were merely importing conspiracy narratives wholesale from elsewhere. Instead, in most cases, the narratives either emerged locally or were significantly tailored to resonate with local contexts.

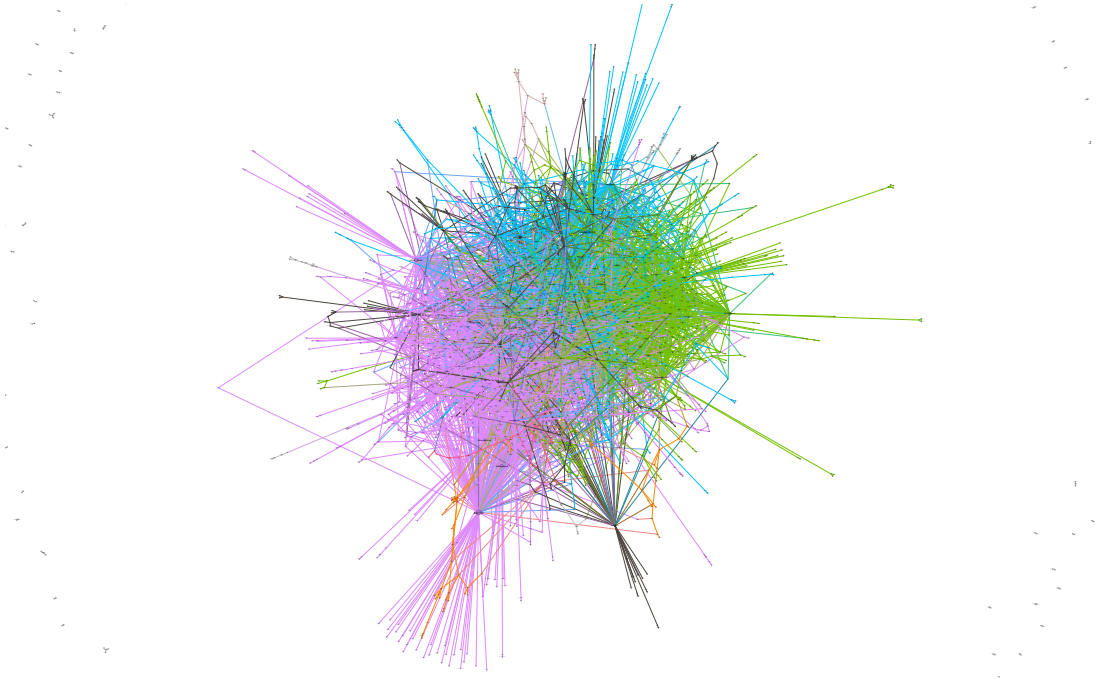


Figure 2: Conversation network visualisation of conspiracy theory influencer accounts on Telegram in German-speaking region.

3. Comparative Case Study: Great Replacement Conspiracy Theories

Since the migrant crisis of 2015, immigration has been an increasingly contentious topic across many regions of Europe, causing some to reach for conspiracist rhetoric as an explanatory framework. The 'Great Replacement' conspiracy theory accuses 'elites' of orchestrating the displacement of local populations in favour of immigrants and/or promoting progressive over traditionally conservative values and ways of life. It is merely one narrative among others that express fears of racial and cultural displacement, but it is one that has proved incredibly versatile, amenable to political mobilisation and online virality. It has been used to exacerbate fears about not only racial and ethnic others, but also the influence of LGBTQ+ communities and proponents of progressive politics. Because the 'Great Replacement' was cited by a number of high-profile mass shooters (most notoriously, the so-called Christchurch Shooter), many commentators feared copycat incidents around the globe. What we found, however, was a more complex picture. Rather than imported wholesale from elsewhere, Great Replacement talk in different regions of Europe responds to regional pressure points and resonates with deeply rooted anxieties about national identity, values and territory.

Key Findings

- The signifier 'Great Replacement' is capacious and, while it harbours similar phenomena, open to re-signification. Its appearance in Eastern and Central Europe in discussions about Ukrainians fleeing the war, for example, means that it is not always tethered to standard understandings of race. The differences between iterations are as important as their similarities and this case study reminds us not to lose sight of context and specificity in discussions of particular conspiracy theories.
- Local histories and contexts influence the resonance of this conspiracy theory. For example, the British history of colonialism, the Nazi focus on racial purity in Germany, the Balkan experience of ethnic conflict in the 1990s and the experience of Soviet-era Russification in countries like Estonia clearly shape the contemporary conversation. Such theories are also greatly influenced by geography – particularly a country's place on the migrant route: whether it is a transition country, a destination country or neither.

Given that EU 'elites' are often positioned as the plotters behind the Great Replacement, a country's alignment with the European project also inflects the conspiracy theory.

- While Great Replacement talk certainly travels online, particularly on channels with lax or no moderation, its most influential disseminators are not social media pundits or the algorithms that amplify them but politicians using every platform available – both online and offline – to leverage anxiety about demographic change. This signals a shifting Overton window, where once-fringe ideas now shape political rhetoric.

- The Great Replacement conspiracy theory shows up the importance of thinking about conspiracy theories as existing on a continuum: they occupy one end of the discourse on a particular topic, in this case immigration and/or cultural values, and nearly always retain a relation to more legitimate, non-conspiracist versions of that conversation. To consider conspiracy theories adequately, we must eschew tight definitions and taxonomies and sit, rather, with grey areas – in the case of the Great Replacement, this means investigating the slippage between conspiracy theories, dog-whistling conspiracy-adjacent talk and 'legitimate' (even if potentially ethno-nationalist) conversations about immigration. As savvy conspiracy content producers become wise to the way that moderation works, and as politicians need plausible deniability in front of certain audiences and regulators, staying vague, stepping back from the conspiracist precipice, is a strategic choice.

- Automated deplatforming (or monitoring) that focuses primarily on a keyword-based approach to individual flagged utterances is in danger of missing the wider cultural and political context from which these specific posts take their meaning.

- The main issue with the conspiracist version of the Great Replacement theory is not only the obvious demonisation of immigrants and the supposed orchestrators of the conspiracy, but also the way that it makes it difficult for more progressive political discussions about the benefits of multiculturalism and the moral and legal obligation to grant asylum to those who need it. From the other side, the Great Replacement conspiracy theory also makes it difficult to have reasoned discussion about the pressures immigration might place on public services. Conspiracy theories threaten to use up all the oxygen on a topic.

- Our datasets contained a great deal of counter-discourse alongside conspiracism. This demonstrates that it is not only counter-disinformation organisations doing such work. Online users clearly care about the quality of the information environment that they participate in and often go to the trouble of correcting the more erroneous claims. While it cannot replace the large platforms' own moderation, such user moderation is important to note. These are the posts that many big data studies setting out to 'find' conspiracy theories leave out of the discussion. Ignoring this would feed into an alarmist approach about online conspiracism and, in the case of the Great Replacement, an overestimation of racist sentiments.

Figure 3: A Serbian Telegram post discussing the 'mass importation of non-white migrants with the aim that they will soon become the majority' as part of Agenda 2030. @ISTINITO, 30 August 2023.

4. Regional Case Studies

Balkans Case Study

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, mainstream media and political elites in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia revived interpretive frames rooted in their own wars of the 1990s. Each nation positioned itself in relation to dominant memories of collective trauma and geopolitical affiliations, invoking nationalism and a renewed sense of existential threat. This framing was reflected in online talk.

- The war's reverberations reactivated the old tension between the defence of territorial integrity and the autonomy – or unification – of constituent parts with their 'motherlands', a divide still shaping politics and media across the region. These patterns demonstrate how dominant political discourses about Ukraine were amplified through references to past traumas and conspiracist polarisation.
- Serbian and Republika Srpska sources mostly portrayed the conflict as the onset of World War III, sometimes as a struggle against or for the 'New World Order', circulating historically informed pro-Russian, anti-NATO and anti-American themes. A notable exception to this was the stab-in-the-back narrative about Putin's claiming the independence of Donetsk and Lugansk on the basis of the International Court of Justice's precedent regarding the independence of Kosovo.
- Such narratives were present to a smaller degree among Croatian and Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina sources, which mostly drew parallels with their 1990s experiences, depicting Ukraine as the innocent victim and equating Russia with Serbia and Putin with Milošević.
- From an initial dataset of over 10,000 posts, an examination of the 100 most-engaged Facebook entries per country shows that two-thirds were conspiratorial, largely originating from fringe Facebook and YouTube channels, though a notable share came from news portals and even public broadcasters.

Figure 4: 'Behind (almost) every war or conflict stands the same dark clique: the "New World Order"." Facebook post, 31 May 2022.

Baltics Case Study

The Baltic team examined how references to George Orwell's *1984* function within Estonian- and Latvian-language conspiracy discourse on Facebook (720 posts, 2020–2023). These posts reactivate a dystopian imagery deeply rooted in cultural memory rather than introducing new arguments. They frame policy changes and global crises as evidence of an emerging system of total control.

- Once something is cast as 'Orwellian', diverse grievances – from the transition to green energy and the war in Ukraine to EU or WHO regulations – are fused into a single framework of creeping authoritarianism.
- Across both countries, *1984* tropes perform distinct rhetorical functions. They amplify ordinary criticism into existential alarm ('Freedom is slavery'), provide a technological lens portraying biometrics and algorithmic moderation as the machinery of 'Big Brother' and serve as delegitimising tools that cast journalists and fact-checkers as the 'Ministry of Truth'.
- Situated in the broader Baltic socio-historical context, this discourse draws persuasive power from collective memory. Allusions to surveillance, censorship and ideological control evoke lived experiences of Soviet occupation, lending conspiratorial framings, emotional resonance and historical credibility.
- Stylistically, these invocations oscillate between irony and literalism. Some posts employ satirical mimicry to mock politicians and experts, while others treat *1984* as a prophetic or literal blueprint being executed by global elites.

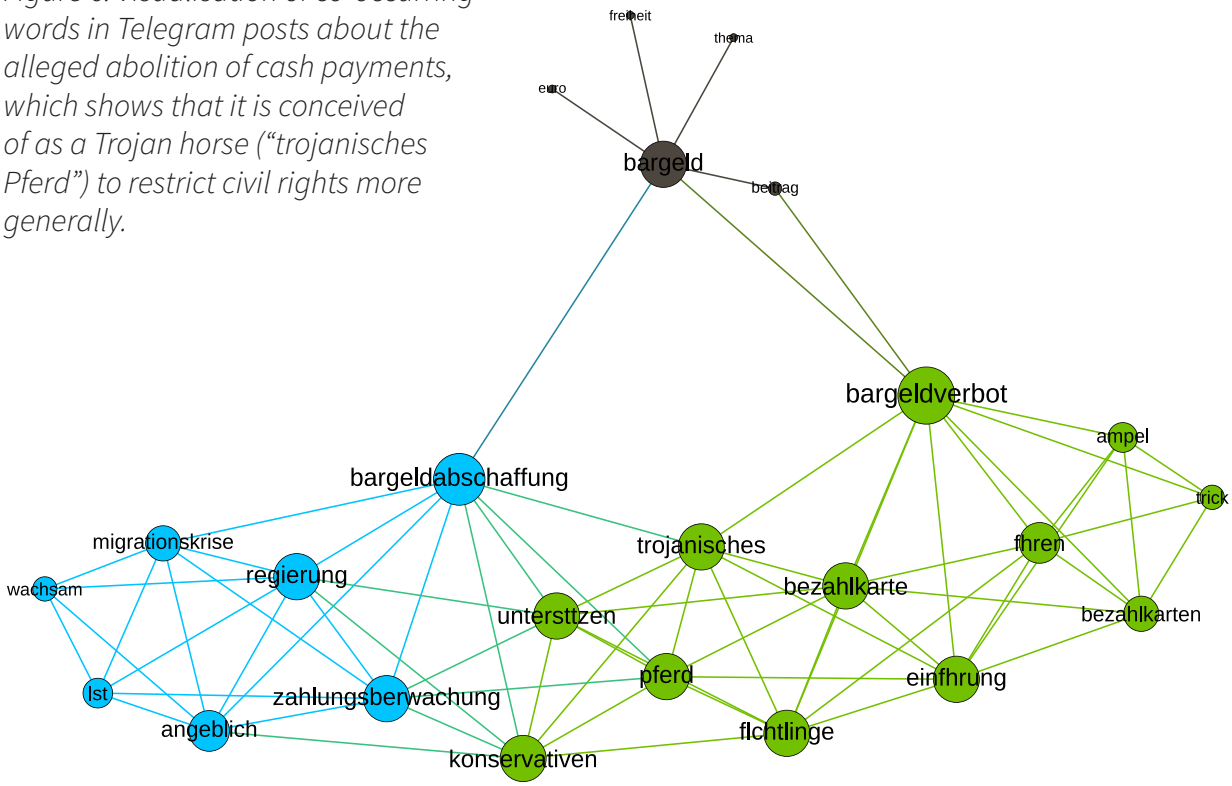
Figure 5: Facebook post shared by Vanglaplaneet (Prison Planet), one of Estonia's longest-running conspiracy portals, promoting a conspiracist resistance movement and T-shirts featuring Orwellian references: 'COVID1984', 'IngSoc: War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, Ignorance is Strength' and 'Prison Planet Spirit of Resistance', 2020.

German-speaking Countries Case Study

Besides the cross-region study on the Great Replacement, the team researched conspiracy theories about the alleged abolition of cash payments.

- Whereas conspiracy theories have increasingly been mainstreamed in other countries, they remain highly stigmatised in the DACH region and especially in Germany.
- Accordingly, even the right-wing Alternative for Germany (AfD) only occasionally articulates them explicitly on mainstream platforms. Most posts from official party accounts are situated in the grey areas of potentially legitimate political critique. They are not conspiracist as such, but can be read that way and, as the comments show, sometimes are.
- Conspiracist discourse occurs online and offline – there is, for example, a considerable book market – and both spaces are inextricably linked. Much online content discusses and advertises these books.
- Conspiracy theories about the abolition of cash predate the pandemic but were greatly increased by it, as cashless payments rapidly became more widespread in these years.
- These conspiracy theories reflect concerns about financial collapse, the disproportionate influence of tech and finance companies, the erosion of social welfare and increasing economic inequality.
- Specific articulations frequently blur the line between social-scientific critique and unjustifiable conspiracist overinterpretation, blaming simultaneously the larger structures and the figureheads of contemporary globalisation.
- Simply dismissing these theories potentially contributes to the sense of marginalisation that renders them attractive in the first place.

Figure 6: Visualisation of co-occurring words in Telegram posts about the alleged abolition of cash payments, which shows that it is conceived of as a Trojan horse ("trojanisches Pferd") to restrict civil rights more generally.



Poland/Slovakia Case Study

In Poland and Slovakia, we examined online conspiracy theories employed in gender critical and anti-LGBTQ+ narratives. For over a decade, both countries have witnessed an extensive conspiracist campaign that has claimed the existence of a powerful, hidden project allegedly driven by feminists, LGBTQ+ activists, international institutions and liberal elites. Their alleged goal is invariably claimed to be the destruction of the 'natural' family, erasure of sexual differences, corruption of children and undermining of religion and national sovereignty.

- In the context of a waning religious influence in once strongly Catholic societies, right-wing and conservative politicians, the Church and lay religious movements have been among the main online drivers of conspiracy narratives warning about progressive attitudes towards gender issues.
- The conspiracy narratives about the pernicious influence of the 'gay lobby' or 'gender lobby', 'gender ideology' and 'LGBTQ ideology' feed into pre-existing tropes of nationalist victimisation and suspicions towards the West, in the case of Slovakia, and of foreign imposition and subversion of values in the case of Poland.
- Online conspiracist discourse is often implicit, with the dangers of a 'gay agenda', and 'gender' and 'LGBTQ' ideologies invoked, but the interpretative work is often left to users' prejudices.
- The relatively weak opposition against these theories comes mostly from below, with few social leaders taking an explicit stand in support of feminist and queer rights.
- Because they are not often called 'conspiracy theories', they are often categorised as scientific and philosophical disputes. We suggest that seeing them alongside other conspiracy theories allows us to recognise rhetorical tactics of demonisation at work, taking us well beyond the realms of science.

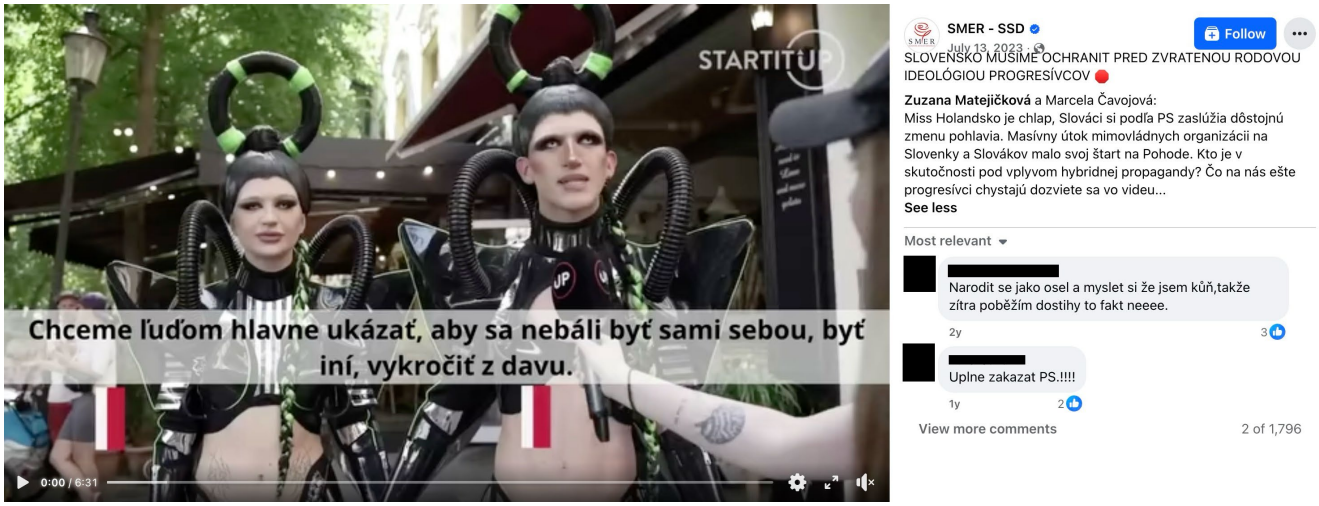


Figure 7: Facebook video posted by the official account of Smer-SD, 'We must protect Slovakia from the perverse gender ideology of Progressives'. It alleges 'a massive attack by non-governmental organisations on Slovak women and men', asking '[w]ho is actually under the influence of hybrid propaganda?', 2023.

United Kingdom Case Study

The UK team examined conspiracy theories that accompanied proposals for progressive traffic and urban planning measures introduced in 2023. Re-signifying a legitimate urban planning initiative, known as the 15-minute city, this conspiracy version is representative of a trend that finds a sinister plot behind a common-sense or benign proposal.

- Embedded in the wider British socio-political context and media ecology, conspiracy theories about traffic controls are best understood as post-Brexit because of the way they articulate concerns over sovereignty and agency that are stoked by culture wars.
- They also need to be understood as post-pandemic. This is because they repurpose the freedom-oriented rhetoric of anti-lockdown conspiracism as well as its protest networks.
- 15-minute conspiracy theories are characteristic of an increasing tendency towards superconspiracy theories. In this case, they become one element of the Great Reset conspiracy theory. The latter warns about supposed plans by the global elite (led by the World Economic Forum) to restrict individual freedoms.

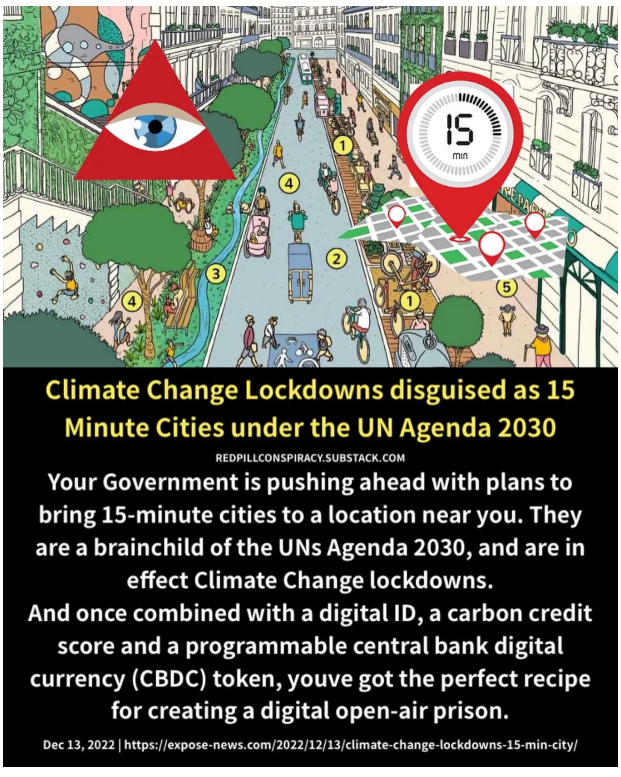


Figure 8: Image shared on social media and Substack arguing that the UN's agenda for sustainable development is a far reaching super-conspiracy to subjugate the people.

Figure 9: Widely circulated meme on Instagram, 2023.

- At work is a feedback loop between four nodes: online conspiracism where ideas are shared and events organised; pandemic era protest networks; politicians who are looking for wedge issues to gain voter leverage; and mainstream media reportage which can unintentionally amplify the rhetoric.
- Ultimately, 15-minute city conspiracy theories are evidence of how conspiracism is being used as a mobilising rhetorical device in British culture wars.

5. The Counter-Disinformation Sector in Europe

Since the 2016 Brexit and Trump elections, the Covid pandemic and the Ukraine war, a varied and dynamic counter-disinformation ecosystem has developed in many countries across Europe. It has become more professional and institutionalised but also been subject to increasingly politicised attacks. Although the counter-disinformation sector deals with a variety of threats ranging from clickbait fake news to FIMI (foreign information manipulation and interference), conspiracy theories are now often the most conspicuous examples in media and political discussions of this work.

In addition to a desk-based analysis of the counter-disinformation sector in each country, the REDACT team conducted 100 interviews with individuals working in government institutions, civil society organisations and the media in different European regions to understand how they frame the issue of conspiracy theories in the wider context of online monitoring and counter-disinformation. Our interviewees included experts who work as project managers, educators, counsellors, fact-checkers, researchers, journalists and policy advocates.

The goals and therefore the type of activity conducted by each organisation fall into four broad categories: pedagogy-related fields such as media and civic education or peace and conflict education; social-work related fields, particularly counselling; security-related approaches, including anti-radicalisation and online monitoring; and journalism, focused mainly on fact-checking and information integrity. They include companies which provide their services for a fee; non-profit organisations which depend on donations or project-based external funding; and public institutions which receive public funding and depend on a political mandate.

Key Findings

- Disinformation and conspiracy theories are a complex problem with no easy solutions. It 'takes a network to fight a network', as one of our interview organisations put it.

- The counter-disinformation sector varies widely across Europe and is increasingly diverging from the US during the second Trump administration with the rolling back of content moderation activities in response to claims from right-wing politicians that it constitutes censorship. Although this diversity can lead to fragmentation, it can also be seen as a strength. While some populist critics in the US complain about the supposed political influence of content moderators, in smaller countries like Slovakia there is a dearth of locally trained experts employed by the major social media platforms.

- In the Balkans, the media ecosystem extends beyond state borders but regional cooperation among stakeholders, as well as efforts to regulate, are underdeveloped. In the Baltic countries, conspiracy theories are often addressed by the state as part of Russia's hybrid warfare and framed as a national security-related issue. The same holds for Poland and Slovakia, although the counter-disinformation sector in these countries is subject to politically motivated attacks. In Germany, institutional awareness of Russian interference increased after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, but conspiracy theories (especially related to antisemitism) have long been a focus for civic education activities. In the UK, conspiracy theories are more often framed in terms of terrorist and violent extremist content or hate speech, racism and toxic online behaviour.

- The focus and methods of the counter-disinformation organisations vary widely across Europe. In the UK, for example, many organisations engage in big data analysis of social media, whereas in Germany there is more focus on individual counselling and legacy media. In Poland the emphasis is on fact-checking and lobbying for regulatory solutions.

- Across the sector, there is considerable variation in the use of key terms like conspiracy theory, misinformation and disinformation, often with no clear agreement on their meaning. Some counter-disinformation experts are hesitant to use the term 'conspiracy theory' because it seems to grant too much scientific respectability to conspiracism (as if it were on a par with other scientific theories). However, most practitioners agree that it is best to use terms like 'conspiracy theory' as that is what the general public and the media understand and there is interest in the topic.

- There are also significant differences across Europe in the legal frameworks that regulate online communication (especially since the Covid pandemic and the Ukraine invasion). Latvian law, for example, includes fines and penalties for both media outlets and individuals spreading disinformation. The UK's Online Safety Act primarily focuses on protecting users in the UK from illegal and harmful content and imposes duties of care on online platforms. At the same time, in Poland or Slovakia this sphere remains unregulated even though the EU's Digital Services Act applies to a broader range of online intermediaries operating in the EU and emphasises transparency, accountability and risk management, including addressing illegal content and systemic risks.

- Current funding models for counter-disinformation work undercut possibilities for (1) long-term thinking; (2) collaboration; and (3) the ability to quickly swerve to emerging issues and technologies. In addition, in some countries, the precarity of contracts leads to high turnover, insecure work and limits effectiveness.

- The sector in Europe has not yet faced full-scale ideological attacks like in the US. Nevertheless, it is beginning to encounter bad-faith actors, corporate co-opting of counter-disinformation language and the increasing politicisation of disinformation.

- Current critiques of the counter-disinformation sector as either an instrument of censorship or a self-sustaining industry that overhypes the threat do not adequately reflect what the organisations actually do.

- While in some countries, funding comes from the state and/or the EU, it has also been the case that funding (for fact-checking services, for example) has been provided by tech companies themselves. Some countries in Europe have also received funding for counter-disinformation programmes from the US. Countries reliant on big tech or US funding are therefore vulnerable to shifts in foreign policy.

Voices from the counter-disinformation sector in the Balkans:

People have a need for clear answers and to understand why their lives are difficult. Conspiracy theories offer this very effectively – if everything is an elite conspiracy, then I am powerless and that is why I am suffering. (…) It is much easier to blame an evil enemy than capitalism, and to avoid engaging in labour organising and solidarity."

"I'd say the lack of systematic funding is our number one issue. Constantly having to write numerous project proposals outside our core activity requires staff to manage these projects instead of creating content, which is our main function."

"Politicians today use social networks as a testing ground for their theses – what generates the most interaction is later transferred into parliaments and institutions. (…) The result of this imbalance is very often a complete or significant loss of trust in institutions and society."

Voices from the counter-disinformation sector in the Baltics:

Conspiracy theories are dangerous because they can impact elections and ultimately decide what kind of government we'll have. Who will come into power? Will we stay in the European Union? Will we remain in NATO?"

"Kremlin disinformation isn't scary – it's just frustrating and dumb. You can laugh at the absurdity for a while, but eventually it gets depressing."

"We simply don't have the tools to reach as many people as disinformation does."

"From the perspective of approaches and how we work, it is strictly non-political. However, in terms of results and how people perceive it, it is, of course, political. So objectively, it is political."

Voices from the German counter-disinfo sector:

You can't solve the problem on the platforms; it has more to do with trust in general."

"I think it's dangerous to blame it all on the filters, i.e. the echo chamber and the bubbles. Because I think that gives algorithms and technology more power than they still have."

"Instead of doing any substantial work, I'm going to spend the next three weeks writing an application so that I still have a job in six months."

Voices from counter-disinfo in the United Kingdom:

Last week, somebody called us 'The Industrial Censorship Complex'."

"The end goal is not to get people to believe a certain thing, it's to get them to doubt everything and then leave them in a position where they can be manipulated."

"We're all trying to work towards the same thing, but there is limited funding (…) so finding ways to work together without threatening our own IP or undermining our own operating models is really difficult."

Voices from the counter-disinformation sector in Poland and Slovakia:

We can use the metaphor of chronic illness that just has worse and better periods (…) I think that the presence of conspiracies and disinformation in society works in a similar way, that you just never completely stamp it out, but you can have it at a level where it's just a tolerable societal harm."

"The only way to influence the owners of social media is through regulatory solutions. There is no other way. There is no 'encouragement path'. If they are not forced they will either do nothing or just pretend they do something."

"I think that the only solution is to appeal to values, to secure people's safety, in the family, at schools. I know this sounds unachievable, but I think that happy, content people have no psychological reason to look for enemies, to scaremonger, to be aggressive."

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