Report on Conspiracy Theories in the Online Environment and the Counter-Disinformation Ecosystem in Austria, Germany and Switzerland

Michael Butter and Mara Precoma

Researching Europe, Digitalisation and Conspiracy Theories (REDACT)

Licensing Information

Open Access. Some rights reserved. As the publisher of this work, REDACT wants to encourage the circulation of our work as widely as possible while retaining the copyright. We therefore have an open access policy which enables anyone to access our content online without charge. Anyone can download, save, perform or distribute this work in any format, including translation, without written permission. This is subject to the terms of the Creative Commons By Share Alike licence. The main conditions are:

- REDACT and the author(s) are credited including our web address www.redactproject.sites.er.kcl.ac.uk
- If you use our work, you share the results under a similar licence

A full copy of the licence can be found at
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/

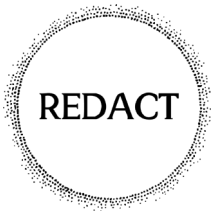
All data methods and data visualisations by Ben Pelling.

Designed by Julius Haferkorn.

Imprint

Published by REDACT November 2025
© REDACT. Some rights reserved.
www.redactproject.sites.er.kcl.ac.uk

REDACT is supported by the CHANSE ERA-NET Co-fund programme, which has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme, under Grant Agreement no. 101004509. The research on the German-speaking countries is funded by the Federal Ministry of Research, Technology and Space.



With funding from the:

Federal Ministry
of Research, Technology
and Space

Funded by
the European Union

Contents

Executive Summary 4

1. History and Context of Conspiracy Theories in Austria, Germany and Switzerland 6

2. The DACH Online Environment and the Conspiracist Ecosystem 7

3. Case Study: The Great Replacement Conspiracy Theory 9

4. Combatting Conspiracy Theories in the DACH Region 11

5. Expanded Key Findings 13

6. Expanded Recommendations 14

References 15

Executive Summary

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 in a selection 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, 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. Each regional team also conducted ethnographic interviews with key members of counter-disinformation organisations across Europe. Political, social and economic contexts were brought to bear on all of these methods and findings.

About the Authors

Professor Michael Butter (University of Tübingen) has been researching conspiracy theories for twenty years. He has published widely on the topic and led several international research projects. Mara Precoma, M.A. (University of Tübingen) is a PhD candidate in Media Studies. Her dissertation investigates the discursive constitution of conspiracy theories in German-language alternative news media.

Key Findings

- **The regional context requires a specific approach:** US-centric models are of little use for analysing conspiracy theories in the German-speaking context.
- **Mostly home-grown and complex ecosystem:** Conspiracist content is now largely produced locally, with foreign disinformation amplifying but not creating narratives.
- **Not all conspiracy theories are problematic:** Not all conspiracy theories are similarly dangerous. Moreover, many also reflect real and perceived grievances.
- **No infodemic:** Believers typically seek out conspiracist online content deliberately or via personal networks rather than encountering it online by chance.
- **Grey zones complicate interventions:** Posts often exist in a grey zone between legitimate political debate and conspiracism.
- **Large and active sector:** Many projects in Germany and Austria address conspiracism on local, regional and national levels. They often operate under difficult conditions.
- **Conspiracism over disinformation:** Conspiracy theories are rarely understood as merely a form of mis- or disinformation. Instead, most initiatives focus more on the causes and forms of conspiracism.

- **Questionable assumptions:** Some initiatives rely on outdated assumptions about conspiracy theories, which potentially makes their work less focused and effective.
- **Structural pressures:** Funding models create inefficiencies and can encourage exaggerating the threat of conspiracism.
- **Different foci, limited diversity:** Projects pursue different tasks but often mirror each other in methods and target groups.

Key Recommendations

1. **Create bespoke solutions:** Don't import models of and solutions to conspiracism wholesale from other countries.
2. **Identify underlying causes:** Address causes rather than symptoms.
3. **Understand how conspiracy theories stick:** Understanding why conspiracy theories resonate helps to address their root causes.
4. **Make institutions worthy of trust:** Instead of lamenting falling levels of trust, institutions need to become worthy of trust.
5. **Look beyond online conspiracism:** Conspiracy theories spread not only online but also through traditional media like books.
6. **Adopt a nuanced perspective:** Efforts should focus on the most harmful forms of conspiracism.
7. **Diversify projects:** Funders should support diverse approaches and measure their effectiveness to identify what really works.
8. **Systematise educational efforts:** Efforts to address conspiracism in schools should target all school types and be integrated into a broader curriculum on digital literacy.
9. **Expand educational efforts:** Adults, not only children, must also be reached with targeted educational initiatives.
10. **Extend funding periods and reduce bureaucracy:** Longer, less bureaucratic funding allows projects to focus on their core work.

1. History and Context of Conspiracy Theories in Austria, Germany and Switzerland

Conspiracy theories have a long history in the German-speaking countries, beginning, as in Europe more generally, in the Early Modern period. These early variants usually incorporated metaphysical actors, imagining conspirators ultimately controlled by the Antichrist or the Devil. It was only during the eighteenth century that conspiracy theories were fully secularised. The French Revolution, for instance, was interpreted by many conservatives across Europe as a plot by Freemasons and the secret order of the Illuminati against the established order and organised religion.

The response to the French Revolution shaped the dominant form of conspiracism in the region for roughly 150 years. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the German conspiracist imagination was preoccupied with alleged threats to the social order. Besides Freemasons, liberals and socialists were accused of plotting against the emperor, the state and its institutions. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, fuelled by growing antisemitism, attention increasingly focused on Jews. Most conspiracist texts of the time imagined a secret collaboration between Jews and Freemasons. On the one hand, this shows how influential the pattern established in the conspiracist response to the French Revolution still was a century later. On the other, it suggests that Jews were long imagined as not powerful enough to act alone. After World War I, this pattern was reversed when communists at home and abroad were cast as dangerous plotters by being associated with Jews.

Freemasons and Jews were also associated in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, first published in Russia in 1903. The text gained wide influence across Europe only after 1918, when conspiracy theorists of different stripes began to interpret World War I as a Jewish plot. Many of the ideas articulated in the *Protocols* became a constant refrain of Nazi propaganda and helped to create a climate whose ultimate consequence was the genocide of European Jews.

If the Holocaust demonstrates the terrible consequences that conspiracy theories can have, especially when they target stigmatised groups, the longer history of conspiracism in the region shows that, as elsewhere in the Western world, conspiracy theories constituted officially accepted knowledge for several centuries. They were not the exclusive domain of the oppressed, nor naturally linked to a populist critique of elites, but were believed by the disadvantaged as well as by those in power, and often weaponised by the latter to quell and discredit opposition and rebellion. By the same token, conspiracism was not the exclusive property of right-wing extremists. It was also popular among communists, liberals and conservatives in Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

After 1945, however, conspiracy theories underwent a process of stigmatisation. In the wake of the Holocaust, they were increasingly perceived as inherently dangerous and considered at odds with scientific insights and common sense. Within a few decades, conspiracy theories moved from the mainstream to the margins of society and became stigmatised knowledge, derided by epistemic authorities and no longer acceptable in serious discourse. As a result, conspiracy theories largely disappeared from the public mind for nearly half a century. They only made a comeback after the attacks of September 11, 2001. Although 9/11 conspiracy theories were initially more popular in Germany and France than in the United States, they were largely regarded as an American phenomenon.

While it seems safe to assume that the number of people believing in conspiracy theories in the region decreased significantly because of their stigmatisation, such ideas continued to thrive in subcultures and, from the late 1990s onward, in niche online spaces. The larger public and the media only realised how widespread these beliefs were when the Vigils for Peace took to the streets in Germany in 2014 to protest what their members perceived as NATO aggression

against Russia. The protest movement was rife with conspiracy theories, which functioned as the glue holding ideologically diverse groups together. In this sense, the Vigils provided the blueprint for the Covid protests that occurred a few years later, in which conspiracy theories performed the same function.

The Vigils also paved the way for the anti-immigration Pegida movement (Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes), which staged regular demonstrations in Dresden between 2014 and 2024. The newly founded right-wing populist party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) quickly appropriated many of Pegida's stances and demands. The AfD has close ties to the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), which had already adopted populist positions by the 1980s. As a number of studies have shown, supporters of both the AfD and the FPÖ are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories than supporters of other Austrian or German parties.

However, since conspiracy theories remain highly stigmatised in the region, only a small but significant minority of the voters of these populist parties actually believe in them. Concerning the overall population in the three countries, the numbers are even lower. But as in most other countries of the Global North, people who are socioeconomically disadvantaged or suffer from status anxiety are particularly drawn to conspiracy theories. And while there is no reliable data to prove this, conspiracy theories also appear to be particularly widespread among immigrants. These groups often consume media from countries where conspiracy theories are not stigmatised and are therefore more openly articulated.[1]

2. The DACH Online Environment and the Conspiracist Ecosystem

The number of people who use the internet at least occasionally has steadily increased over the past decade. Today, more than 90% of people in the three countries go online at least once a week, and most of them are also active on social media.[2]

In Germany, Instagram (63%) has now overtaken Facebook (60%) as the most popular platform, with TikTok (39.5%) in third place as the fastest-growing. Telegram (24%) and X (18.5%) lag considerably behind.[3] In Austria, Facebook (54%) remains more popular than Instagram (45.5%), but TikTok (21.5%) is rapidly gaining ground and has already become the favourite platform among younger users. Telegram (16%) and X (11%) are less widely used than in Germany. In Switzerland, Instagram (70%) has also surpassed Facebook (66%), while TikTok (38%) is expanding quickly. Telegram (30%) is more popular there than in the other German-speaking countries, whereas X usage (11%) mirrors Austria and is well below Germany's level. As in most other European countries, WhatsApp is by far the most widely used messenger service across all three.

The media ecosystems of Germany, Austria and Switzerland combine public and private radio and television channels. In Germany, the two main public broadcasters, ARD and ZDF, are considered the most trustworthy news sources by a majority of the population (55%). Increasingly, however, even their news shows are consumed online, either through their websites or on YouTube, as the internet has overtaken linear television as the most important news source in recent years. Among those under 34, social media has become the primary way to access news. Yet paradoxically, like the rest of the population, younger users regard information from TikTok and Instagram as far less reliable than traditional news outlets.[4] The situation in Austria is very similar. While traditional sources are still the most trusted, only people over 55 now rely primarily on television; all younger groups prefer the internet, even if they continue to consume content from public-service broadcasters.

Conspiracy theories remain heavily stigmatised in the DACH region. Over the past decade, public discourse has increasingly framed them

not only as catalysts for violence but also as serious threats to democracy. Virtually all public and private broadcasters in Germany, Austria and Switzerland condemn articulations of conspiracism. As a result, conspiracist discourse has migrated elsewhere. On the one hand, a thriving book market exists, with some printed conspiracy narratives selling tens of thousands of copies. On the other hand, conspiracism has found a home online. The two spheres are closely connected, as much online content produced by 'conspiracy entrepreneurs' is designed to promote their books or the sale of, for example, survival kits, gold or tickets to lectures.

Social media plays a central role in the spread of online conspiracism. Public debate about how to contain and counter it has focused largely on the (self-)regulation of major platforms. Before the pandemic, Facebook was the most important hub for the exchange of conspiracist ideas. During the pandemic, however, public pressure led to the deletion of many conspiracist accounts and groups. Conspiracy theorists quickly relocated to Telegram, where they have since expressed their views largely undisturbed. Many Telegram groups and channels share links to YouTube videos. Although conspiracist accounts were also deleted from YouTube during the pandemic, the platform still hosts a significant amount of relevant material, even if it is harder to find today.

Telegram posts also frequently link to one or more of the alternative online media outlets, many of which have emerged in response to the condemnation of conspiracy theories and heterodox ideas more generally in the established media. These outlets, which label themselves – and are described by scholars – as 'alternative media', cater to audiences receptive to conspiracy narratives. Their style and formats often imitate mainstream media. Successful alternative news sites feature serious-looking anchors delivering short news segments or moderating panel discussions in professionally lit studios designed to resemble public television. On some platforms, conspiracy theories are presented by figures such as Eva Herman, a former host of news programme Tagesschau. As high-profile 'renegades' who have turned their backs on mainstream journalism, Herman and others lend particular credibility to the conspiracy theories they promote online.

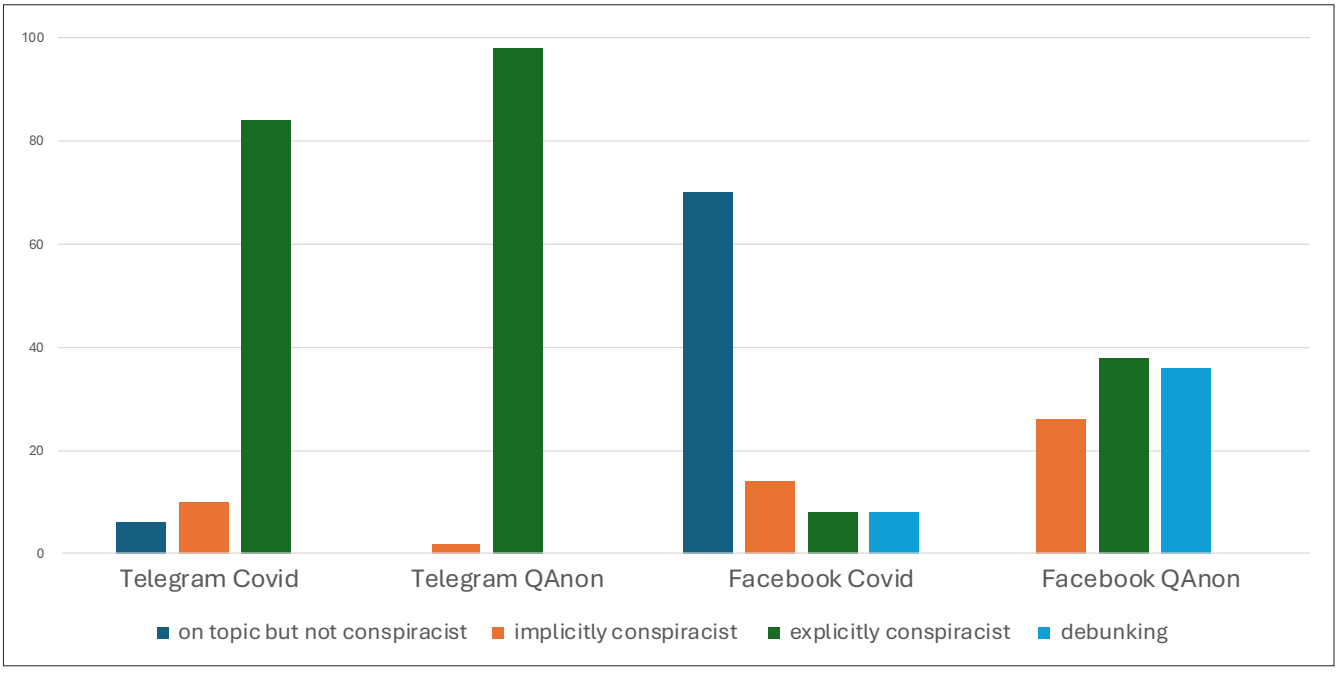


Figure 1. Analysis of style of post on Facebook and Telegram for Covid and QAnon conspiracy theory discussion. In the period of our data gathering (2019–2024) these topics were more successfully content moderated on (public) Facebook pages, with conspiracy discussion either resorting to coded forms or openly rejected. In contrast, Telegram has few restraints and explicit conspiracy talk is far more prevalent.

3. Case Study: The Great Replacement Conspiracy Theory

The Great Replacement conspiracy theory is currently the most influential in the German-speaking countries. It resonates strongly with a small but significant segment of the German population and with an even larger one in Austria. (With regard to Switzerland, our data analysis does not allow for any meaningful conclusions.)

Great Replacement narratives represent the latest chapter in the long history of hostility towards immigrants in Germany and Austria. This history includes the lingering remnants of Nazi ideology, neo-Nazi violence against asylum seekers – especially in the years after German reunification in the East – and Austria's longstanding reluctance to confront racist and antisemitic attitudes, rooted in its self-image as the 'first victim' of Nazism.

The present popularity of the Great Replacement theory stems largely from the so-called 'migration crisis' of 2015, when Angela Merkel's government opened Germany's borders to more than one million, mostly Syrian, refugees. While many Germans initially welcomed the refugees at train stations and even opened their homes, the public mood soon shifted. Across the political spectrum, parties represented in parliament did little to acknowledge or address the real challenges immigration poses for the socioeconomically disadvantaged, nor did they effectively communicate the necessity of migration in aging Western societies. Right-wing actors such as Austria's Freedom Party (FPÖ), Germany's Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and the Identitarian Movement capitalised on this gap, tying nearly every social problem – rising inflation, high taxes, decaying infrastructure, lack of housing, a strained healthcare system, crime and terrorism – to immigration.

The AfD in particular has skilfully exploited the dual character of the Great Replacement theory. On the one hand, it exists as a full-fledged conspiracy theory, claiming that population replacement is the result of a deliberate plan. On the other, it can be framed as a narrative of neglect and ignorance, in which elites are blind to the consequences of uncontrolled immigration. Both versions rest on deep-seated racism, sometimes explicitly expressed but often veiled. This ambiguity makes the narrative especially effective in Germany and Austria, where conspiracy theories remain stigmatised. Through 'calculated ambivalence', right-wing populist actors are able to appeal to multiple audiences and normalise anti-immigrant sentiment.[5]

Figure 2. Meme condensing a longer post from an official AfD account on Facebook (2019).

Although TikTok has recently drawn much public attention, Facebook remains central to the AfD's online communication and is the most important platform for spreading Great Replacement narratives in the region. Among the 125 most-engaged posts we identified, only 23 are explicitly conspiracist in that they openly claim a sinister plan is underway – and most of these come directly from official AfD accounts. This could suggest that content moderation is relatively strict when it comes to conspiracy theories, but that official party accounts may be granted more leeway. Another possible explanation is that these accounts are followed by many supporters and opponents of the party. Explicit conspiracist content might provoke a lot of positive and negative reactions, pushing these posts to the top spots in our dataset. Explicit conspiracist posts often invoke the so-called 'Kalergi Plan', misrepresenting the pro-European integration efforts of 1920s intellectual Richard von Coudenhove-Kalergi as evidence of a Jewish plot to change Europe's ethnic makeup.

Implicit conspiracist rhetoric is far more common: 44 of the most-engaged posts employ language that allows audiences to interpret them conspiratorially, even if no explicit plot is stated. In many cases, the conspiracy theory emerges most clearly in the comments rather than in the initial post itself. By using implicit rhetoric, authors circumvent potential platform moderation and appeal to both conspiracist-minded 'insiders' and people who are dissatisfied with current politics but distance themselves from explicit conspiracy theories. This broadens the circle of potential voters and/or increases the account holder's engagement rate, which can have financial benefits.

A different picture emerges on Twitter/X. During the period of our data collection, the platform functioned very differently in the German-speaking countries than in the Anglo-American world. This has changed due to the influence of Elon Musk, but during the period of our data collection, it was primarily a meeting place for politicians, scholars, journalists and civil society organisations. As a result, AfD content received substantial pushback, and efforts to debunk the Great Replacement and other conspiracy theories are more visible here than on Facebook, where such counter-discourse accounts for less than a quarter of highly engaged posts. Given the platform's character limit, individual tweets often tie into the larger Great Replacement narrative only through hashtags such as #Kalergiplan.

Telegram, by contrast, has become the go-to platform for conspiracist content in the region because it is not subject to moderation. The most influential channel in our dataset is that of the privately owned Austrian TV station Auf1, which produced the 15 most-engaged posts on the Great Replacement. These posts are typically short, beginning with a teaser and followed by links – usually to the station's own website. While the AfD rarely ties the Great Replacement to a larger 'globalist' plot on Facebook, Auf1 makes this connection explicit in nearly every post.

In sum, the Great Replacement conspiracy theory in its explicit form remains relegated to the fringes of society and, online, to the fringes of the internet, as Telegram is relatively unpopular outside committed conspiracist circles. In its implicit form, however – framed as neglect or denial – it reaches broader audiences.

Notably, left-wing, liberal and mainstream conservative politicians do not themselves promote the Great Replacement theory, either explicitly or implicitly. Yet their discourse on immigration has become increasingly shaped by populist and racist rhetoric in recent years. While they continue to forcefully reject conspiracy theories, which remain heavily stigmatised, they simultaneously legitimise the anti-immigrant sentiments that fuel both the conspiracist and non-conspiracist variants of the Great Replacement narrative.

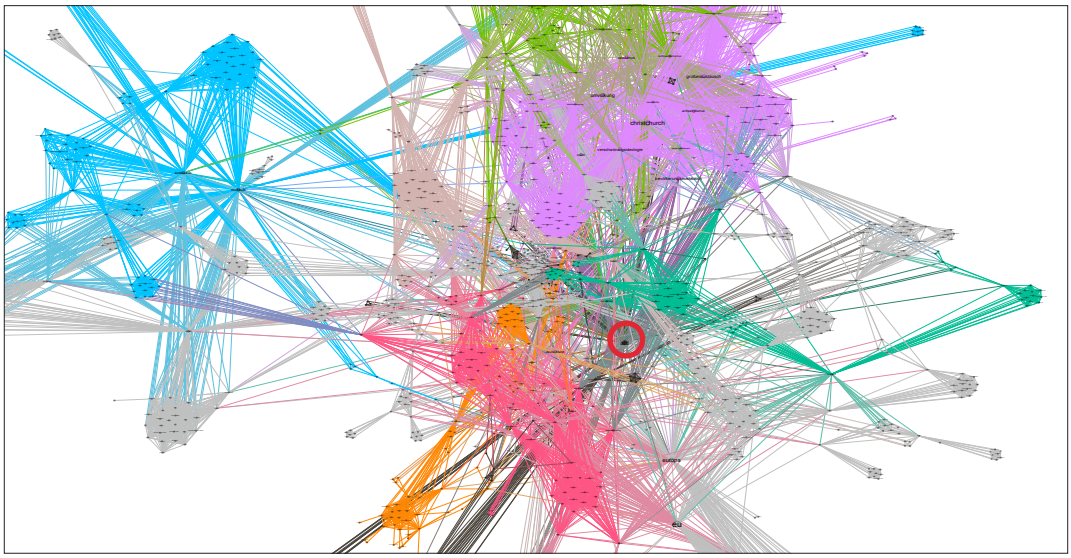


Figure 3. Visualisation of co-occurring hashtags in social media posts about the Great Replacement in the region, which shows the centrality of the AfD – the black dot in the middle circled in red – to both posts that claim, either in conspiracist or non-conspiracist language, that a population exchange is happening and posts that criticise such claims as conspiracist and/or racist.

4. Combatting Conspiracy Theories in the DACH Region

> *And 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."*
>
> *"Competition is often fierce – not only between organisations, but also between projects within larger organisations."*

In addition to mapping the counter-conspiracist landscape in Austria and Germany, REDACT conducted more than 25 interviews with NGOs, foundations and other organisations working against conspiracism to understand how conspiracy theories, along with dis- and misinformation, are perceived and addressed. While organisations in other European regions tend to focus on disinformation and treat conspiracy theories as a specific form of it, most organisations in the DACH region – especially in Germany – place conspiracy theories at the centre and view disinformation as a key, if not the dominant, channel through which conspiracist ideas are expressed and spread.

This focus has historical roots: because of the experience of Nazism and the Holocaust, conspiracy theories have long been regarded as particularly dangerous in the region. When Vigils for Peace took to the streets in 2014, using explicitly conspiracist language to oppose sanctions against Russia after the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of parts of Donbass, conspiracy theories re-emerged as a matter of public debate. After a 'Reichsbürger' shot a police officer in 2016, concerns deepened further, leading to the first projects specifically designed to counter conspiracy theories – preceding broader worries about disinformation, which gained traction during Trump's first presidency and reached a tipping point during the pandemic.

Although the conspiracist scenes in Austria and Germany are closely intertwined – Austrian accounts and websites draw a large German audience and vice versa – their approaches to combatting conspiracism differ sharply. Austria pursues a 'single-institution' strategy, in which one organisation is assigned a specific task and provided with permanent funding. While no institution deals exclusively with conspiracy theories, they are addressed indirectly – for example, by the Federal Office for Cult Affairs, which focuses on religious cults and sects, or the Counselling Centre for Extremism.

Germany, by contrast, has developed a disproportionately large counter-conspiracist sector due to its federal structure. The Federal Agency for Civic Education engages with the issue, as do corresponding state-level agencies. These bodies not only run their own projects but also publish online resources and host workshops. In addition, several federal and state ministries fund projects carried out by NGOs, foundations and other civil-society actors. Larger foundations such as the Amadeu Antonio Stiftung – long active in the fight against extremism and antisemitism – either apply for such funds or rely on donations to finance specific initiatives.

The coronavirus pandemic caused the sector to expand rapidly. The Centre for Monitoring, Analysis and Strategy (CeMAS), founded in 2021 with support from the Alfred Landecker Foundation, quickly became one of the most prominent organisations in the field. To address tensions sparked by debates around safety measures and vaccination, several counselling services were established to support relatives and friends of people drawn into conspiracist beliefs. The spread of disinformation also prompted the creation or expansion of fact-checking organisations, operating independently or in cooperation with public media, which frequently work to debunk conspiracy theories.

Despite this growth, many projects within the same category resemble each other in methods and approaches. Educational initiatives, for example, often target teenagers preparing for higher education, while relatively few programs reach students in other types of schools or older adults – even though research and counselling organisations' experiences show that belief in conspiracy theories correlates negatively with education level, and that older people are more susceptible than younger ones. Moreover, because many projects are not rigorously evaluated, it remains unclear which measures are truly effective.

Funding structures pose additional challenges. Most projects are financed for only a few years, with some forced to reapply annually. Funders such as the Ministry of the Interior typically require regular, often extensive progress reports, and even minor deviations from the original work plan or budget must be justified. These conditions create multiple problems: project staff often work under precarious short-term contracts, already searching for their next position while still engaged in ongoing projects. If unsuccessful, they leave the sector – taking valuable expertise with them. The near-constant need to apply for funding, combined with excessive reporting obligations, drains time and energy from core project work. Rigid adherence to initial proposals further limits flexibility, even when more effective approaches emerge during implementation.

At times, the imperative to secure funding fosters an alarmist framing of conspiracism, reinforcing a problematic feedback loop. Calls for project applications often already cast conspiracy theories as a democratic or security threat. To receive funding, projects must adopt this framing, even when staff members hold a more nuanced understanding of the issue. Once tied to these frameworks, they reproduce simplistic narratives that then shape public perceptions and influence future funding calls. As a result, parts of the counter-conspiracist sector continue to reinforce an outdated view that treats all conspiracy theories as equally dangerous and inherently linked to radicalisation, racism and, especially, antisemitism.

It is important to distinguish between legitimate, differentiated and impersonal criticism of funding structures and the work of projects on the one hand, and unfounded attacks on organizations and institutions – often framed in conspiracist terms – on the other. In recent months, voices have increasingly emerged that portray NGOs as part of a larger globalist plot, questioning both their independence and their good intentions. This greatly hinders the work of these organisations, as it can damage their reputation, lead to the suspension of funding streams, or – in the worst case – result in staff members being targeted with hate messages and threats.

"There should be a few prototypical projects that actually pursue different approaches. After a certain period of time, one could evaluate what works and what doesn't. And on that basis, one could then pour money into the projects that actually work."

"We often notice that very ambitious goals lie behind funding programs and political education, and that money is spent on them. But the responsibility for ensuring sustainability then falls to the organizations implementing these projects, which often cannot do so without funding — so it feels like we're always starting over again."

5. Expanded Key Findings

Conspiracy Theories

- **The regional context requires a specific approach:** Universalist or US-centric frameworks for understanding conspiracy theories – their platforms, status and impact – are of limited use for analysing the German-speaking scene. One size does not fit all.
- **Mostly home-grown and complex ecosystem:** While twenty years ago most conspiracist content was imported from US sources, today it is predominantly created by conspiracy entrepreneurs and ordinary users within the region. Although important influencers and superspreaders can be identified, the diffusion of conspiracist ideas is not merely a top-down process. Foreign disinformation accelerates and reinforces existing dynamics but does not create them; it typically picks up on and amplifies narratives already circulating locally.
- **Not all conspiracy theories are equal:** Conspiracy theories are often – but by no means always – tied to racist, antisemitic or sexist beliefs. Not all are equally problematic, and they therefore require differentiated responses. Frequently, conspiracy theories are symptoms of legitimate – or at least genuinely perceived – grievances and anxieties.
- **No infodemic:** The metaphor of an 'infodemic', popularised during the pandemic, suggests that online users encounter conspiracy theories and other forms of misinformation accidentally and are then 'infected' by their claims. However, especially since the major deplatforming efforts made during the pandemic, people who believe in conspiracy theories access relevant sites intentionally or are directed there by friends or acquaintances.
- **Discourse often occurs in a grey zone:** Populists, such as AfD or FPÖ politicians, are far more likely than others to voice conspiracy theories. Yet, because conspiracism is still stigmatised, their statements often fall into a grey zone between conspiracist rhetoric and a rhetoric that is, in the case of the Great Replacement theory, still racist and xenophobic but not strictly conspiracist. Importantly, the conspiracy theories articulated or alluded to by populists are usually not in outright opposition to mainstream views. Rather, they represent intensifications of existing controversies, for example around migration or climate change.

Combatting Conspiracy Theories

- **Large and active sector:** Compared to other European countries, the counter-conspiracist sector in the region is disproportionately large. While efforts in Austria are mostly centralised, the German landscape consists of numerous actors operating at national, regional and local levels.
- **Conspiracism over disinformation:** Historically rooted concerns about conspiracism sparked public debate in the region before disinformation became a major issue. As a result, many projects focus more on conspiracism than disinformation, although the latter is often treated as a primary vehicle for spreading conspiracy theories.
- **Structural pressures:** Funding models can create short-term thinking, limit flexibility and, at times, encourage exaggeration of the conspiracism threat. The need to continually reapply for funding also consumes significant time and energy that could otherwise be dedicated to core project work.

- **Different foci, limited diversity:** Projects in the region pursue different goals – some provide counselling, others educate about the forms and consequences of conspiracist beliefs and some monitor online conspiracism. However, within each category, initiatives tend to resemble one another. They often target the same groups (e.g., young people), use similar methods or approach the issue with identical assumptions.
- **Limited perspective:** The alarmist tone of some projects appears to stem not only from funding pressures but also from debateable assumptions about conspiracism and its consequences. Some initiatives still adhere to the outdated view that conspiracy theories are inherently linked to antisemitism and extremism, thereby construing them automatically as threats to public safety and democracy.

6. Expanded Recommendations

1. **Create bespoke solutions:** While it is useful to draw on models of best practice wherever they arise, Austria, Germany and Switzerland should not import solutions wholesale from very different socio-political contexts. Instead, approaches should be developed in relation to the national situation.
2. **Identify underlying causes**: Conspiracy theories cannot simply be dismissed as paranoid delusions. They often resonate with genuine grievances (whether we consider these justifiable or not). If we understand why certain conspiracy theories gain traction, we can address the root causes. Too much discussion in politics, the media and counter-disinformation focuses on the most sensational examples of extreme conspiracy beliefs, and not enough on the grey zone where conspiracism overlaps with potentially legitimate political grievances.
3. **Make institutions worthy of trust:** Instead of lamenting falling levels of trust, institutions must work to become trustworthy. The focus cannot remain solely on citizens' 'paranoia' but should also examine the trustworthiness – or lack thereof – of institutions and political actors. Since conspiracy theories are better understood as symptoms rather than causes of democratic dysfunction, energy should be directed towards making democratic institutions and systems fair, robust and transparent.
4. **Understand how conspiracy theories stick:** Conspiracy theories are not merely pieces of erroneous information, but narratives embedded in social and political contexts and tied to identity and belonging. This makes them 'sticky' – resistant to refutation. To counter them, it is therefore important to develop narratives – for example, around the radical project of democracy – that are as engaging and emotionally compelling as conspiracy stories. It is also vital for democratic institutions to build stronger relationships with communities.
5. **Look beyond online conspiracism:** While platforms and 'alternative news' websites have clearly increased the speed and visibility of conspiracy theories, online media should be seen as only one component of the wider media-political ecosystem. Conspiracy theories are also propagated through printed books that sell thousands of copies.
6. **Adopt a nuanced perspective:** Not all conspiracy theories are equally problematic, and not all conspiracy theorists are dangerous. Public discourse and projects combatting conspiracism need to identify and focus on the most harmful manifestations, which are usually tied to racist and sexist beliefs and to the construction of rigid enemy images.

7. **Diversify and evaluate projects:** Many initiatives that aim to counter conspiracism or educate the public about it use very similar approaches, and their effectiveness is far from clear. Funders should therefore support projects with diverse strategies and ensure they are properly and efficiently evaluated over time to identify which methods work best.

8. **Systematise educational efforts:** Many teachers already address conspiracy theories in the classroom, but these are still mostly individual initiatives and largely focus on students preparing for higher education. Teaching about conspiracy theories should instead occur in all types of schools and be integrated into a broader curriculum on digital literacy. Further research is needed to determine the appropriate age to introduce the topic, and strategies should be developed to engage students in schools that do not prepare for university entry.

9. **Expand educational efforts:** Educational projects currently focus almost exclusively on children and teenagers, but research shows that older adults are particularly susceptible to conspiracy theories. New initiatives should therefore be developed in collaboration with unions, workers' councils and employers to reach adults.

10. **Extend funding periods and reduce bureaucracy:** Short-term funding cycles and excessive bureaucratic requirements seriously undermine many projects. Longer funding periods, greater flexibility in spending and more moderate reporting obligations would allow project staff to concentrate on their actual work. This would also help prevent 'brain drain' both within and between projects.

References

[1] For a more detailed version of the historical overview with references, see chapter 3 of Michael Butter, *'Nichts ist, wie es schent': Über Verschwörungstheorien* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2018) and chapters 2 and 4 of Michael Butter, *Die Alarmierten: Was Verschwörungstheorien anrichten* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2025).

[2] Unless indicated otherwise, these and the following numbers are based on articles from https://de.statista.com/ accessed in September 2025.

[3] Nathalie Roehl, 'Social Media Statistiken für Deutschland [Update 2025]', Meltwater, 2025, https://www.meltwater.com/de/blog/social-media-marketing-statistiken.

[4] 'Welchen Medien vertrauen die Deutschen?', *Tagesschau*, 2025, https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/gesellschaft/medien-glaubwuerdigkeit-100.html.

[5] Ruth Wodak, 'Populist Discourses. The Rhetoric of Exclusion in Written Genres', *Document Design* 4/2 (2003): 142.

If you would like to hear about future events or projects, or to give your feedback on this report, please scan this QR code.

For more information on the REDACT project:
www.redactproject.sites.er.kcl.ac.uk