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

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Researching Europe, Digitalisation and Conspiracy Theories (REDACT)

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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 Author

Elzbieta Drazkiewicz (Associate Professor, Lund University) has been researching conspiracy theories and conflicts over truth for almost a decade. She also has extensive experience in studying state and non-state organisations, NGOs and civic movements. Currently, she is leading several international projects on countering disinformation and crisis preparedness.

Key Findings

- **Conspiracism has deep historical roots:** Conspiracy theories are evolving but they remain tied to longstanding concerns about external and internal enemies and national identity and sovereignty.
- **Conspiracy thinking often reflects complex socio-economic changes at the global and local level as well as the highly diverse experiences of those changes.**
- **Conspiratorial narratives often recycle old tropes while adapting to new issues.**
- **Conspiracism amplifies nationalism and polarisation:** This makes public debate more emotionally charged and intractable.
- **Conspiratorial narratives become part of the political mainstream:** Once these narratives are mainstream, interventions are almost impossible.
- **Grey zones complicate intervention:** Conspiracy theories are not always expressed explicitly, making them hard to identify, regulate or counter.
- **Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) and homegrown conspiracy theories are closely linked:** Often exploiting pre-existing fears and using local actors for scaremongering, they must be considered jointly.

- **The counter-disinformation sector relies predominantly on civil society organisations, which are underfunded and under pressure.**
- **Everyday users play an important role in countering conspiracism:** The Polish education system (both formal and informal) is an untapped resource for supporting the fight against disinformation and conspiracy theories.

Key Recommendations

1. **Understand conspiracy theories as a unique form of disinformation:** Consider what makes conspiracy theories 'stickier' than other forms of disinformation.
2. **Don't use conspiracism to fuel political wars:** Stand up against the normalisation of conspiracy theories in public discourse.
3. **Don't allow populist conspiracism to set the terms of national debates:** Media neutrality does not mean that we have to tolerate forms of denialism, veiled racism, homophobia and radicalisation. Resist clickbait.
4. **Create society-centred solutions:** Don't overestimate solutions focusing on technology.
5. **Disincentivise online disinformation:** This requires regulators and platforms to work together for the public good.
6. **Look beyond social media:** Conspiracy theories do not exist only in the online world and should be considered as part of the larger ecosystem.
7. **Acknowledge that just as the problem of conspiracy theories is political, so is the countering of disinformation, which deserves support:** Run nationwide programmes for all ages that link critical literacy skills to real local and global issues (corruption, health, history) and mobilise trusted local actors (teachers, doctors, community leaders).
8. **Regulate platforms with transparency and sensitivity to local needs:** Push platforms for fine-grained moderation data, stronger Polish-language moderation teams, cooperation with regulators and measures that disincentivise disinformation.
9. **Avoid heavy-handed censorship; insist on due process:** Any legal measures must have clear criteria, judicial oversight and swift, proportionate implementation — transparency over secret takedowns.
10. **Design tailored, evidence-based responses:** Different conspiracy types (anti-gender ideology, anti-migrant, anti-Ukraine, etc.) need different approaches.
11. **Protect and strengthen independent institutions and journalism:** Fund and legally safeguard public service media, investigative outlets, regulators and public broadcasters to rebuild trust and prevent capture.
12. **Invest in civic capacity and rapid response:** Provide stable, multi-year funding for NGOs and create cross-sector, non-partisan rapid-response units for coordinated communications, fact-checking and evidence-based explanations.

1. History and Context of Conspiracy Theories in Poland

Central and Eastern European spaces are often described as the archetypes of strong conspiratorial cultures. This is understandable given the number of real conspiracies experienced by countries in the region.[1] In the case of Poland, this includes external conspiracies, such as the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, or the postwar efforts of Stalin and his allies to install a communist, pro-Moscow regime in Poland. But while the fear of the external enemy is strong, the fear of the internal traitor is perhaps the most significant difference between Eastern and Western European conspiracism.[2] This trope is particularly strong in Poland. The Targowica Confederation of 1792 played a pivotal role in generating fears of internal treachery, making it an indispensable part of Polish political life. This perception was consolidated and complicated during the 20th century, particularly during World War II. This historical context is important because many conspiracy theories in Poland today utilise this fear of betrayal, for instance, in narratives in which prominent politicians are accused of betraying the nation and of being puppets in the hands of foreign elites.

The Polish context is also different from the West in the lack of overt stigmatisation of conspiracy theories. In Western Europe, the 1950s were pivotal for the delegitimisation of conspiracy theories.[3] In Central Europe, on the other hand, that was a time when conspiracy theories were integrated into official Communist Party discourse. Communist propaganda not only included lies about the state of the economy and society, but also was heavily dependent on anti-capitalist, anti-West conspiracy theories. Scaremongering was an important part of communist ideology; citizens were encouraged to stay vigilant and to watch out for traitors of the state. Communist authorities frequently used conspiracy theories to influence the atmosphere in their countries or justify their own actions. The events of March 1968 are an example of this, when, to justify the brutal crackdown on student protests and to push for a shift in politics, the Communist Party utilised well-rehearsed antisemitic conspiracy theories.

When the Solidarity movement finally succeeded in 1989, suspicion towards the state, elites, foreign powers and one another was so engrained it was hard to overcome. The politics of the 1990s were influenced by the weaponisation of the lustration process and an urge to reveal the truth about the end of communism. The question of who among politicians and high-level civil servants had collaborated with communist interior police and served as internal or external agents – and lied about it – was a driving force in the politics of the era, generating suspicion and conspiracy theories. This atmosphere led to the collapse of several governments, most notably Jan Olszewski's government in 1992. Conspiratorial investigations concerning communism and its dissolution continue to shape contemporary politics. In particular, the conservative camp, continues to fuel conspiracy theories concerning the Magdalenka talks and Round Table Negotiations, as well as speculation surrounding Lech Wałęsa and his alleged conspiring against the Solidarity movement. According to Franciszek Czech and some of the experts we interviewed for this project, the most prominent conspiracy theories in Poland concern the end of communism.[4]

While the Central and Eastern European conspiratorial milieu is unique to an extent, the differences between Western and Eastern Europe should not be overestimated. As in other parts of Europe, since the 19th century there has been a tendency to attribute societal problems to a clandestine plot by Jews. The predominantly Christian, Catholic environment of Poland fostered anti-Judaic beliefs that portrayed Jews as satanic conspirators, poisoning wells and kidnapping Christian children for ritual purposes.[5] In the interwar period, antisemitic conspiracy theories were widely spread by national-radical movements such as Falanga and its leader Bolesław Piasecki[6] as well as the National Democracy movement and its leader Roman Dmowski.[7]

At this time, the notion of Judeo-Bolshevism ('Żydokomuna') gained momentum, spreading the idea that communism was invented by Jewish conspirators to take over Poland and the world. In the postwar and later post-communist periods, other variants of antisemitic conspiracy theories were propagated, associating Jews with capitalism and imperialism. In both variants Jews were dehumanised, representing an almost metaphysical evil, a foreign power plotting against the Polish community in order to exploit it. These antisemitic conspiratorial tropes connect strongly in Central Europe, where victimhood plays a large part in social identity. Research shows that antisemitic conspiracy theories correlate with competition for the status of victim and destroy intergroup relations, as victimised groups deny or minimise the status of historical victims of others.[8] An example is the case of Polish conservative groups distorting the memory of World War II crimes in general and the Holocaust in particular.

Antisemitic tropes and the fears of external and internal enemies accumulate in several popular conspiracy theories, particularly concerning the EU and 'the West'. Here, the EU is presented as the external enemy, with 'Brussels Elites' plotting to endanger Poland through economic exploitation, the loss of national sovereignty and the imposition of values that are not compatible with the traditional Polish Catholic–Conservative variant. Another version of this conspiracy theory identifies the 'gender and gay lobby' as the main threat, plotting to destroy the family and eradicate the Polish nation by corrupting its values. Theories utilising the fear of the loss of sovereignty are frequently weaponised in politics, with politicians accusing each other of acts of treachery and of serving as puppets of Brussels, Germany or Russia. Their echoes can also be found in climate change denialism, which is frequently interpreted as a plot to end the Polish coal industry, reverse the last thirty years of modernising efforts (which included a strong emphasis on supporting the automobile and aviation industries through large investments in motorways and airports) or counter Catholic doctrine, which sees the environment as subservient to humans.

In Poland, conspiracy theories are not just on the fringes of politics. Antoni Macierewicz and some other politicians are responsible for sharing conspiratorial speculation concerning the Smoleńsk plane crash. Grzegorz Braun has been accused of antisemitism, in 2019 Sławomir Mentzen 'jokingly' summarised the programme of his party as: 'We do not want Jews, homosexuals, abortions, taxation and the European Union'. Some members of the Konfederacja party also support ending Poland's ban on promoting fascism and hate speech. Current President Nawrocki propagates views that Germany is using the EU to subordinate Poland and actively fuels theories that Lech Wałęsa was a traitor of Solidarity and secretly plotted with the Secret Service. Some Catholic bishops and priests spread conspiratorial narratives, particularly with regard to gender ideology and feminism.

Conspiracy theories are not just a characteristic of new media or a problem limited to digital media. They have been spread by right-wing news outlets such as *Gazeta Polska* (founded in 1993), *Sieci* (founded 2012), *Do Rzeczy* (founded 2013) or Radio Maryja (established in 1991). During the PiS government, the national TV broadcaster, Telewizja Polska, produced pseudo-documentaries such as *Reset*, which was strongly conspiratorial in tone. Since 2022, TV Republika – a right-wing television station linked to *Gazeta Polska* – has frequently served as a platform for conspiratorial views.

The spread of conspiracy theories is made easier not only due to their normalisation in the political sphere, but also because of increasing distrust in science. Even before Covid-19, low vaccination rates have been a serious issue, with organisations such as STOP-NOP gaining popularity.[9] Covid-19 only exacerbated this situation, but it also (again) linked science with politics. While pandemic denialism was popular, there were also many conspiratorial voices circulating among liberal audiences accusing the conservative PiS-led government of deliberately hiding the real infection and mortality rates to push its own political agenda.[10]

As Covid-19 restrictions eased, a new crisis began – the full-scale invasion by Russia of Ukraine. This triggered new conspiracy theories, but also escalated hybrid war attacks from Russia, which frequently included the spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories.

In sum, the world of conspiracy theories in Poland is highly diverse and strong. It taps into centuries-old concerns about independence and power, as well as historical interethnic conflicts, such as those between Catholic and Jewish populations, or Polish and Ukrainian ones. While conspiratorial rhetoric has never been fully delegitimised in the Polish political sphere, currently it seems to be escalating, with Foreign Information Manipulation Interference (FIMI) only making the issue worse.

Figure 1. Post on X, 2025: "#PiSRussianAgents: The truth comes out in the end."

2. Polish Online Environment and Online Conspiracist Environment

Internet usage in Poland is high (89.8%). In 2025 there were approximately 29 million active social-media user identities, which is equivalent to 75.6% of the population. Google, YouTube and Facebook are the three most visited websites in Poland. The most popular platforms (by share of population) are Facebook (86.5%), Messenger (80%), Instagram (63.2%), Whatsapp (58.7%) and TikTok (51.8%). Compared to Western Europe, the number of X users in Poland is low (28.7%). When measured by time spent on platforms, the most popular sites by far are TikTok, YouTube and then Facebook. However, Facebook still leads in web traffic referrals (58.78%) followed by Instagram (18.75%), Pinterest (8.9%) and X (6.11%).[11]

Poland has a diverse media landscape, including its public service TV and radio broadcasters. During the eight years of rule by PiS, these were used as propaganda tools, and private media was under strong pressure, often subjected to SLAPP cases. Trust in private media companies is also frequently undermined by smear campaigns (often led by politicians and conservative pundits) accusing them of 'representing foreign interests'.

According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report of 2024, since 2015 trust in information media has dropped by 17 percentage points (from 56% in 2015 to 39% in 2024).[12] Across all media, the rankings of the most trustworthy is led by private radio stations (RMF FM and Radio Zet). The right-wing newspaper *Gazeta Polska*, known for scaremongering and spreading conspiracy theories, scores almost the same as the left-leaning online magazine *OKO Press*, known for its investigative journalism and fact-checking services (31% and 32%). At the bottom of the ranking are the tabloid magazine *Super Express* and national TV broadcaster TVP.

According to the study undertaken by the Digital Poland Foundation in 2024, as many as 16% of respondents claimed they do not have any reliable sources of information.[13] The three most reliable sources are television (chosen by 64%, considered reliable by 27%), internet portals (chosen by 58%, considered reliable by 25%) and radio. Social media is consolidating its position as a source of information, moving ahead of print media.

The last decade has witnessed the rise of the highly conservative Telewizja Republika. Since 2023 it has become one of the fastest growing broadcasters in the country, often topping popularity rankings (of both digital and traditional legacy media), despite being accused of spreading disinformation and tapping into conspiratorial narratives. Increasingly, Polish conservative commentators (such as Łukasz Warzecha, Rafał Ziemkiewicz and many others) have successfully expanded their journalistic activities to social media, in particular YouTube. One of the most successful channels is Kanal Zero, run by controversial journalist/politician Krzysztof Stanowski. The second fastest growing channel is the Sejm's official YouTube channel, which currently has 702k subscribers, five times more than Germany's Bundestag channel.

This already complex landscape is further complicated by the economy. Polish media consumers are very reluctant to pay for content and subscriptions. At the same time, there are no subsidies for national or local print media. As a result, print media faces increased financial pressure, competing with digital media in the clickbait race by opting for sensationalised content or cutting back on in-house fact-checking. As a result, such services are pushed on to other organisations or become the responsibility of media consumers.

The study undertaken by the Digital Poland Foundation indicates that only one in five Poles knows about fact-checking organisations, but 62% of respondents recognise the need for such services. In the same study, 79% indicated that at some point in their lives they encountered disinformation, and according to 81% of respondents, the scale of online disinformation has grown in the last decade. Similar responses were given to questions about fake news. Significantly, respondents encountered fake news equally frequently in social media (55%) and on television (53%), but 70% of respondents admitted that they received fake news from another person, either through word of mouth (57%) or through social media (49%). This shows that we have to pay equal attention to offline and online spaces when it comes to the spread of disinformation. Importantly, half of respondents (52%) pointed to politicians as responsible for spreading falsehoods.

Research shows that the Polish population is strongly concerned with disinformation. In the survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2025, 85% of Polish respondents identified the spread of false information online as the primary threat, with the spread of infectious diseases, terrorism, climate change and the state of the economy ranked significantly lower.[14] This is the highest result among 25 countries surveyed. Significantly, the percentage of adults who consider false information to be a serious threat has increased by more than 20 percentage points since 2022, when the spread of infectious diseases was considered the largest threat. This reflects the intensified weaponisation of conspiracy theories and disinformation during the most recent election campaigns in 2023 and 2025, as well as intensified FIMI attacks originating from Russia.

Poland is at particularly high risk of FIMI. According to the Microsoft Digital Defense Report of 2024, Poland ranks third in Europe and nineth in the world in terms of exposure to attacks from cybercriminal organisations sponsored by foreign countries, mainly Russia.[15] Disinformation spread by Russia strongly influences the political landscape as well as public moods, especially attitudes on such sensitive issues as migration.[16] According to Polish government representatives, there is evidence that the GRU (Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation) and FSB (Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation) have been recruiting people through the dark web to influence the results of the 2025 presidential elections by spreading disinformation online.[17]

Figure 2: "Any history of mental conditions in the family?" - "My Brother-in-Law reads 'Wyborcza' and watches TVN." Meme from Facebook, 2024.

3. Case Study: Great Replacement Conspiracy Theories in Poland

Figure 3: "Year 2044. A group of Varsovians makes their way to the City Center through the sewers." Meme referencing the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 when Polish freedom fighters were escaping Nazi occupiers through sewage canals. Facebook, 2024.

While Poland is a country with very few immigrants in comparison to other EU countries, it nevertheless is characterised by an extraordinary fear that immigrants will dilute its cultural identity.[18] While anti-immigration sentiments are strong, this should not be conflated with a high belief in conspiracy theories in general or the endorsement of Great Replacement conspiracy theories in particular. From both our social media datasets and the Polish counter-disinformation organisations that we interviewed, it is clear that the Great Replacement is not among the most popular conspiracy theories spread in the digital sphere in this region. This is confirmed by the study undertaken by Digital Poland in 2025, which identified conspiracy theories concerning the energy sector, health, new technologies, politics and climate change as the most popular among Polish respondents. Nevertheless, the sentiments expressed in the Great Replacement theory resonate with Polish audiences.

In the Polish social media posts that we considered, replacement narratives were mostly discussed in relation to migrants from Ukraine and often linked with antisemitic conspiracy theories. The fear of Ukrainians taking over Poland was explicitly expressed in slogans such as 'Stop ukrainizacji Polski' ('Stop the Ukrainisation of Poland'). Among the most popular tropes are those promoting the vision of 'Niebianska Jerozolima' ('Heavenly Jerusalem') – a conspiracy theory that claims Russian elites are supporting Jewish efforts to 'relocate' Israelis to Ukraine. According to this narrative, the war in Ukraine is a plot to claim Ukrainian space for the Jewish people by pushing Ukrainians into Polish territory. In this conspiracy theory, Ukrainians are not victims of war but scheming and victorious, seeking to gain access to all the benefits that Poland offers. Furthermore, the ultimate goal of the war is not only to benefit Jewish people by creating a new safe state for them, but also to destroy the Polish nation by replacing it with Ukrainians. Another trope suggests that the war in Ukraine is a plot to replace Poland with a Jewish state – referred to as 'Polin'. According to a survey from 2024, 11% of Polish respondents believe this theory, and 17% neither denied nor confirmed it.[19] While spread online and appearing as new, these theories exploit many pre-existing offline sentiments, particularly antisemitic attitudes deeply rooted in Polish history. Another pre-existing sentiment finding expression in new digital conspiracist content concerns the racialised perception of Ukraine as an uncivilised and corrupt nation that is incapable of taking care of its own people, institutions and state without exploiting others.

Frequent labelling of Ukrainians as 'Banderowcy' (Banderites) in online posts across different platforms also reveals a perception of Ukrainians as dangerous, treacherous, violent and, therefore, capable of secretly plotting against Poland. The term refers to supporters of the Banderite faction of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN-B), who led particularly brutal massacres of Poles in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia between 1943–1945. The inclusion of the memory of past atrocities shows how even new, imported conspiracy theories – such as the Great Replacement – need to resonate with local sentiments and anxieties to gain traction and how conspiracy theories can transform from one context to another. In the conspiracist framing

of the 'Kalergi Plan', the Great Replacement is a form of revenge by Muslim populations for colonisation; in 'the Heavenly Jerusalem' or 'Ukropolin' variants, the replacement of Polish people by Ukrainians is a discursive resolution of unfinished conflicts that arose when Polish landowners governed large areas of Western Ukraine.

The evidence from Polish social media shows that digital platforms offer an infrastructure for the spread of conspiracy theories, but that the theories themselves are not always first aired on these infrastructures. They are not 'born digital'. The omnipresence of anti-immigrant, Islamophobic and anti-Ukrainian sentiments and theories in the public domain (especially on state-owned media during the tenure of the PiS government) suggests that even without social media these theories would still be present in Polish public discourse.

Despite these findings, digital platforms are an influential component in the disinformation environment in Poland. Investigations undertaken by cybersecurity and disinformation experts in Poland demonstrate that many of the anti-Ukraine theories mentioned above are spread in Poland by Russia, as part of its FIMI operations. Amid these circumstances, social media became an important infrastructure facilitating the spread of propaganda and conspiracy theories. At the beginning of 2022 Facebook and Twitter/X began to block such content, so Telegram became the preferred channel for spreading anti-Ukraine conspiracy theories. The weaponisation of pre-existing fears and conflicts aligns with the Kremlin's interest not only in weakening support for Ukraine at the international level, but also in generating division and conflict within Poland.

4. Case Study: Anti-Gender Ideology Conspiracy Theories

Online conspiracy theories focusing on anti-gender ideology and anti-LGBTQ+ narratives are a common fixture across Central and Eastern Europe, including Poland. The contemporary anti-gender movement deploys a recognisably conspiratorial logic when it frames 'gender ideology' (and related signifiers such as 'LGBTQ ideology', 'homolobby' or 'gender lobby') as a hidden, intentional project of liberal elites, feminists, LGBTQ+ activists and international institutions deliberately aimed at the erasure of sexual differences, corruption of children and the destruction of the 'natural' family, religion and national sovereignty. The phrase 'gender ideology' can function as an empty signifier that aggregates diverse grievances and enables actors to consider unconnected social changes as the work of a coordinated enemy. These discourses move frequently between civic campaigning and mainstream institutional politics.

Conspiracy narratives about the pernicious influence of a 'gay/gender lobby', 'gender ideology' and 'LGBTQ ideology' feed into pre-existing tropes of nationalist and religious victimisation and suspicions towards the West. As with other countries of the region, in Poland religious authorities are among the central conveyors of this conspiratorial logic. In 2013, Dariusz Oko argued in the Catholic magazine *Niedziela* that 'gender ideology' is 'a tool of ruthless struggle for the benefit of the atheist gender and homosexual lobbies. [And is propagated by] fighting homosexuals who want to promote their perverted way of life as the best by attaching a theory that justifies their behaviour. There are also feminists – often lesbians – who, under the guise of slogans about women's liberation, want to "liberate" them from marriage, motherhood, the family and men'.[20] Such conspiratorial discourses on 'gender ideology' imply that the 'gay/gender lobby' does not simply wish to carve out a space for itself in society along with other groups, but has more malicious aims of destroying the Catholic religion and erasing the values and lifestyle that come with it.

Due to the nationalistic association of Catholicism with Polish identity – a trope galvanised only in the late 19th century – the supposed plot of 'the gender lobby' becomes

not just a conspiracy theory about a religion, but also a theory about the threat to the Polish nation and its sovereignty. To amplify this dimension, equality activists are frequently described as fascists and communists. For instance, in July 2019, to express his opposition to equality marches, Bialystok Bishop Andrzej Wojda used a phrase 'Non Possumus' ('We Cannot').[21] This Latin expression is attributed to apostles Peter and John and represents their ultimate determination to obey the Catholic faith. In Poland, it is associated with the Catholic Church's resistance against Stalinist oppression. The application of the phrase 'Non Possumus' suggests that LGBTQ+ rights are as equally damaging to Poland as communism was. Also in 2019, during annual celebrations commemorating the Warsaw Uprising, nationalist demonstrators turned the old anti-communist slogan 'With hammer and sickle [we fight] the red mob' into: 'With hammer and sickle [we fight] the rainbow mob'. Both the slogan and the timing of the demonstration signalled that LGBTQ+ issues are not matters of gender identity but national identity, and supporters of gender equality – here equated with Nazi occupiers of Warsaw and the Communist regime – are the enemies of the nation: 'the rainbow fascists'. Frequently, the supposed LGBTQ+ threat is further inflated and escalated into existential dangers (plague, totalitarianism and so on). The source of the plot is often located abroad, coming from the West and its institutions (especially the EU), which converts domestic grievances into episodes of resistance to external interference – a typical pattern in Polish conspiracy theories, which often build on the fear of the external enemy and on tropes of victimhood.

Radically conservative political actors have only continued to echo and amplify such claims, explicitly framing LGBTQ+ people and 'gender' as an external danger to be defended against. In practice, anti-gender conspiratorial framings are mobilised to oppose the introduction of reproductive rights, the implementation of the Istanbul Convention or sex and health education at schools etc. The most direct and widely analysed situation was the 2019–2020 mobilisation of 'LGBT-free zones', when local authorities declared their districts unwelcoming of LGBTQ+ rights in order to ban equality marches and other events.

At the forefront of these initiatives are conservative organisations such as the Right to Life Foundation, the Life and Family Foundation and the Ordo Iuris Institute for Legal Culture Foundation. Traditional media plays an important role in amplifying such theories, including radio, TV and print outlets, such as the right-wing *W Sieci, Do Rzeczy, Gazeta Polska*, Radio Maryja and TV Republika. Conspiratorial talk regarding gender is also present on social media among Polish-language users. Telegram and Twitter were the preferred platforms for spreading conspiratorial views on LGBTQ+ groups, while Facebook (at least among the public groups and profiles) had less conspiratorial content, often becoming a platform for those who support LGBTQ+ rights and feminist values. At the same time, content creators who expressed fear of the 'gender lobby' would support their views with 'evidence' from outside Poland. For instance: most examples of queer communities supposedly targeting children were coming not from Poland, but from the US, even if the posts were written in Polish and with Polish audiences in mind. This suggests that while the fear of a 'gender conspiracy' is not born online, digital platforms play an important role in amplifying and validating homegrown fears, by providing an opportunity to link with other international cases and search for 'evidence' for conspiratorial claims abroad, even if (or especially when) it does not exist at home.

Importantly, our research captured not only posts that spread conspiratorial views, but also those that counter them. Equally importantly, the label 'conspiracy theory' has hardly ever been mobilised to discuss the issue. Even though 'gender ideology' implies the existence of a network or lobby of hidden actors (elites manipulating culture, politics and media in secret) rather than a contested set of ideas; even though anti-gender views are often more than mere 'culture war' expressions of opinion-based opposition to certain rights, anti-gender and anti-LGBTQ+ discourses are rarely discussed as a 'conspiratorial narrative'. On the one hand, this may be a symptom of the high saturation and normalisation of conspiracy narratives and theories within the Polish political sphere. On the other, 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. Nevertheless, despite

fitting the label of a conspiracy theory, anti-gender and anti-LGBTQ+ narratives are rarely recognised as conspiracist, even by people who disagree with them. This might suggest that gender issues are not perceived as a matter of 'settled' science, but as a 'cultural issue', still to be negotiated and debated.

Figure 4. "September 1939/September 2019". Originally taken by Hans Soennke, this black-and-white photo of German police officers breaking through a barrier on the border with Poland in 1939 is considered a symbol of the German invasion of Poland. It is known to be staged, a 'fraudulent' image created to support Nazi propaganda. Now altered with rainbow colours to suggest the 'homolobby' invasion of Poland. Facebook, 2019.

5. The Counter-Disinformation Sector in Poland

The growth of the counter-disinformation sector has been multilinear, and it is hard to point to one event that triggered its development or the establishment of a specific organisation. The first grass-roots efforts that align with the spirit of preventing and countering the spread of disinformation were not conceptualised explicitly in these general terms, but instead were framed as addressing specific problems, such as climate change denialism, hate speech, antisemitism or anti-migrant or anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments. However, there have been several important issues that triggered the need to counter disinformation and conspiracy theories in more systematic ways. These include:

Politicisation of public media:
Since PiS won the parliamentary elections in 2015, state-owned TV and radio broadcasters started to exhibit pro-PiS biases, eventually becoming propaganda tools of the ruling party.[22] Around the same time, the problem of partiality also became an issue in private media, which, in the effort to counter PiS's narratives, started to show pro-opposition bias. The establishment of *Oko Press* in 2016 (an independent online magazine specialising in investigative journalism and fact-checking) and other fact-checking organisations can be understood as an expression of disagreement with such a polarised and biased media landscape.

Changing economy of the media landscape:
Print media in Poland does not enjoy the benefits of state subsidies and thus is strongly profit oriented. Traditional print journalism is increasingly facing redundancies that impact editorial standards. Print media also competes with online content in a clickbait race. This promotes sensationalism and can lead to information manipulation. In response to these market-driven changes, fact-checking emerges as a separate niche in journalism, now outsourced to separate entities.

Threat of Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI): In international literature, most scholars point to Brexit and the election of Trump in 2016 as significantly influenced by FIMI, and thus pivotal for the development of the sector.[23] However, in Eastern Europe the ground-changing moment was the 2014 Annexation of Crimea and the launch of the Russian hybrid war against the Baltic and Visegrad states, and its 2022 escalation.[24] This was the time when the first fact-checking organisations were established in Poland (for instance, Demagog) and when cybersecurity organisations such as Visegrad Insight/Group, CyberDefence24.pl and INFO OPS Poland Foundation gained traction and visibility.

Development of new information infrastructures: With the rise of Big Tech there is growing concern over its influence on information flows and control, as well as the right to privacy, access to information and freedom of expression. These issues are addressed by organisations such as Panoptykon, an NGO set up in 2009, which strives to improve democratic standards in the online world, mostly through legal means.

Global health crisis: As early as 2019, WHO announced vaccine hesitancy as one of the biggest global health challenges and attributed the cause to disinformation. The Covid-19 pandemic hit the world and generated a new wave of disinformation and conspiracy theories. Consequently, the pandemic generated a pressure to address the problem in more systematic ways. Amid this context, new grassroots initiatives were born, such as Fakenews.pl and Pravda Association, taking on the difficult task of defending science and countering disinformation.

Need to improve societal resilience against disinformation and crisis preparedness: This also prompted some educational initiatives. Most of the organisations listed above offer special workshops for schools and teachers on disinformation, media literacy and source criticism. Educational initiatives are also led by NGOs who do not specialise in disinformation, yet due to their expertise in the field of democratisation, digitalisation, education and science promotion recognise the problem of disinformation as a mounting issue and thus occasionally design initiatives in that field. Among them are Centrum Mieroszewskiego, Centrum Edukacji Obywatelskiej, Ośrodek Rozwoju Kompetencji Edukacyjnych, Instytut Cyfrowego Obywatelstwa, Stowarzyszenie Nigdy Więcej, Digital Poland Foundation, The Centre for Monitoring of Racial and Xenophobic Behaviour and many others. Notably, most of these initiatives prioritise the young, neglecting the education of older generations. They also focus on the online sphere without addressing the problem of disinformation in the non-digital world and in face-to-face communication, or the impact that conspiratorial beliefs might have on interpersonal and social relations or in the political domain.

This list is not exhaustive. The Polish digital space is reached with grassroots and semi-organised civic initiatives that also contribute to creating symbolic space for countering conspiracy theories and disinformation. Examples include scientific and political blogs, podcasts or social media groups and channels where content creators together with their audiences discuss pending topics and current issues. Sometimes with humour, sometimes with scientific rigour, they engage in conversations about 'the truth', offering their own analysis and interpretations of specific events, or debunking particular stories or popular misconceptions.

All these initiatives, while not focused exclusively or sometimes even explicitly on disinformation, still can be seen as a way of expressing disagreement with the quality of public discourse, of engaging with the issue of disinformation, of taking a stand in defence of truth. Collectively, these initiatives, both formal and informal, suggest that there is a growing concern about the problem of disinformation, and the conflict over truth and epistemic order in general. This is confirmed by research in 2024 in which more than 80% of respondents agreed that they have encountered fake news, and 82% perceived it to be a growing problem.[25]

The societal perception of the danger of disinformation stands in contrast to the state approach to the issue. The Polish government lacks a clear strategy for dealing with disinformation and conspiracy theories; the responsibility is spread across different institutions, with unclear leadership. Within the digital sphere, NASK (Naukowa i Akademicka Sieć Komputerowa) plays the most visible role – however, as a research organisation, positioned at the margins of state administration, this institution has limited capacities for action, with no regulatory or executive authority.

State cooperation with civil society is very weak. Civic actors suffer from a lack of funding, which means that many organisations relay on international donors. This is problematic because the challenge of disinformation is politically sensitive and touches upon issues of national security. Such funding is also vulnerable to geopolitical shifts: until 2025 the US government was an important sponsor

for Polish organisations. However, the US has recently withdrawn its support, sometimes ending projects that were already underway. Private sector funding poses an additional challenge, especially funding from Big Tech companies, which prioritise initiatives focusing on users' behaviour and their ability to 'resist' disinformation, rather than on content creators or digital infrastructures that generate and enable the spread of harmful content. Funding pressures not only influence the type of projects that can be carried out, but also can prevent innovation. Project-based funding cycles also result in precarious working conditions in the sector.

> *Disinformation is effective because it triggers emotions in people (…) People still hope that everything can be solved just by fact-checking, that if we build those fact-checking portals, then the problem will be solved. But we already know this is not enough, it doesn't work."*

> *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."*

> *"We need better cooperation between Ministries, institutions to create better systems for preventing disinformation (…) But not all institutions consider the fight against disinformation as something important, as a priority."*

6. Expanded Key Findings

Conspiracy Theories

- **Conspiracism has deep historical roots:** From fears of treachery triggered by the Targowica conspiracy in the 18th century to digital-age populism, Polish conspiracy theories have evolved but remain tied to longstanding concerns about external and internal enemies, traitors, national identity, state sovereignty and prosperity.
- **Political mainstreaming of conspiratorial narratives makes interventions almost impossible:** Conspiracy theories are frequently mobilised by high level politicians. Speculation and accusations of treachery are a normalised form of 'doing politics' in Poland, making it hard to define the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable forms of expression.
- **Conspiracy thinking often reflects complex socio-economic changes at the global and local level as well as the highly diverse experiences of them:** Real concerns (about growing inequality, insecurity, unresolved historical traumas) are channelled into conspiracist explanations instead of being addressed by policy. Rather than considered as isolated misinformation, conspiracy theories should be understood as expressions of diverse and often contradictory experiences of a highly turbulent history as well as the gap between the political interpretation of the past and current events and the way they are experienced or memorialised.

- **Grey zones complicate intervention:** Conspiracy theories are not always expressed overtly. They are often communicated through innuendo, implication, speculation and memes rather than explicit claims, making them difficult to identify, regulate or counter.
- **FIMI aligns closely with homegrown conspiracy theories, often exploiting pre-existing fears and using local actors for scaremongering:** They must be considered jointly.
- **Conspiratorial narratives often recycle old tropes while adapting to new issues:** Topics shift with crises (gender → COVID → Ukraine), but actors reuse core repertoires (fear of the external enemy, treachery, victimhood) to fit new contexts.

Counter-Disinformation Sector

- **While the Polish state is making some progress in addressing the problem of disinformation, its response is still insufficient:** There is a lack of clarity on which institutions are responsible for addressing the problem of disinformation, what the state strategy is and what the priorities in that field are.
- **The labour of countering disinformation and conspiracy theories relies predominantly on civil society organisations, which are underfunded and under pressure:** In the last decade there has been a significant growth of civic initiatives aimed at countering disinformation. However, funding is still precarious and vulnerable to geopolitical shifts, resources are minimal relative to the scope of disinformation and there are no consequences for spreading lies.
- **Technology-oriented solutions limit possibilities of deep and meaningful change:** Debates concerning counter-disinformation frequently focus on seeking technology-based solutions, but the problem of conspiracy theories is neither exclusively nor predominantly digital. While digital platforms offer the infrastructure for conspiracy theories to travel, the popularity of conspiracy theories cannot be blamed on digitalisation alone, as they are deeply rooted in the regional political culture and national identity politics, as well as low trust in science and experts. Searching for a digital solution is a start, but a true change requires a shift in the political culture.
- **Everyday users play an important role in countering conspiracism:** Grassroot, ad-hoc initiatives should not be underestimated. In Poland, their importance is reflected in the popularity of scientific and political blogs, podcasts and social media groups and channels where content creators and their audiences discuss current issues and engage in conversations about 'the truth', offering their own analysis and interpretations of specific events or debunking (dis)information or popular misconceptions.
- **The Polish education system (formal and informal) is an untapped resource that can be better utilised to foster resilience against conspiracy theories:** Unlike in other countries – such as the Nordics, where source criticism has been part of the national curriculum for decades – in Poland, subjects that could support the fight against disinformation are not prioritised in national education. At present, such educational programmes are mostly promoted by civil society actors, rather than the state.
- **While fact-checking and media literacy are useful, they have their limitations:** Such approaches push responsibility for addressing the problem of conspiracy theories and disinformation on consumers of digital content rather than those who produce content or provide platforms enabling conspiracy theories. Wider approaches to improve societal resilience and crisis preparedness as well as stronger regulatory solutions are needed.

7. Expanded Recommendations

1. **Don't use conspiracism to fuel political wars:** Conspiratorial narratives are frequently spread and popularised by political elites, so focusing only on addressing the problem at the societal level is not enough. Stand up against the normalisation of conspiracy theories in public discourse.

2. **Create society-centred solutions; don't overestimate solutions focusing on technology:** Conspiracy theories do not exist only in the online world. Many spread in 'traditional' ways: at political rallies, through face-to-face communication, print media, TV and radio, etc. Thus, they should be considered as part of the larger ecosystem.

3. **Don't allow populist conspiracism to set the terms of national debates:** Media neutrality does not mean that we have to tolerate forms of denialism, veiled racism, homophobia and radicalisation. Resist clickbait.

4. **Tackle root grievances with policy and institutional strengthening:** Instead of lamenting falling levels of trust, institutions should become worthy of trust. The focus cannot only be on the 'paranoia' of citizens, but should examine the trustworthiness of institutions and political actors. Because conspiracy theories are better thought of as symptoms rather than causes of democratic disfunction, energy should be directed towards making democratic institutions and systems fair, robust and transparent.

5. **Protect and strengthen independent institutions and journalism:** Fund and legally safeguard public service media, investigative outlets, regulators and public broadcasters to rebuild trust and prevent capture.

6. **Disincentivise online disinformation:** To understand contemporary conspiracism, we need to examine how platform affordances and financial incentives shape online communication and, crucially, how they intersect with traditional media and the offline world. This requires platforms giving access to researchers and considering digital infrastructures as a public good.

7. **Regulate platforms with transparency and sensitivity to local needs:** Push platforms for algorithmic transparency, fine-grained moderation data and stronger moderation teams with necessary language and socio-cultural skills. Platforms must cooperate with regulators and measures must be taken to disincentivise disinformation, both for platform owners and users.

8. **Address current funding models for counter-disinformation work:** Funding models for counter-disinformation work should be reformulated in consultation with the sector to ensure swift and adequate responses to emerging issues. There is an urgent need for more sustainable planning, better state support and investment in the sector.

9. **Avoid heavy-handed censorship; insist on due process:** Any legal measures must have clear criteria, judicial oversight and swift, proportionate implementation.

10. **Create alliances:** Foster and support cooperation between civic and state actors, and national and international institutions countering disinformation. The exchange of ideas, learning best practices and joint initiatives can enhance capacity to tackle the problem of disinformation. Strong transnational alliances can also prove central for addressing problems related to FIMI.

11. **Design tailored, evidence-based responses:** Different conspiracy types need different approaches.

12. **Acknowledge that, just as the problem of conspiracy theories is political, so is countering disinformation:** Instead of dividing society into those who defend 'truth and democracy' and those who have been 'brainwashed by algorithms' we should acknowledge that decisions about what counts as disinformation or conspiracy are never completely neutral — they always involve politics and values. Recognising this does not mean abandoning facts; rather, it allows us to argue more honestly that politics grounded in verified information and open debate offers citizens the fairest and most democratic way to make collective choices.

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