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Introduction

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Birchall, Clare; Blanuša, Nebojša ; Butter, Michael; Drazkiewicz, Elzbieta; Knight, Peter; Madisson, Mari-Liis

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

INTRODUCTION

Researching Europe, Digitalisation and Conspiracy Theories

*Clare Birchall, Nebojša Blanuša,
Michael Butter, Elżbieta Drążkiewicz,
Peter Knight and Mari-Liis Madisson*

Over the past decade, conspiracy theories have become an ever-growing concern for European politicians, educators, journalists and civil society. By now, they are frequently perceived as a threat to democracy (Curato and Tomacruz 2025). Conspiracist counter-narratives about the ‘migration crisis’ of 2015, the pandemic and the war in Ukraine have challenged the authority of political and epistemic authorities. Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as well as the success of populist parties such as the AfD in Germany, PiS in Poland or the Five Star Movement in Italy show how closely populism, often perceived as a danger to at least the liberal variant of democracy, and conspiracism are connected. The dismantling of democratic processes and institutions alongside attacks on the separation of power and independent media by Fidesz in Hungary or the second Trump administration speak to the proximity of conspiracism to authoritarianism and extremism. The attacks of, among others, Utøya, Christchurch and Halle confirm conspiracy theory’s ties to racist and antisemitic worldviews. Importantly, they have raised concerns about the role the internet played in the radicalisation of these lone gunmen and their turn to violence.

In fact, according to public perception, the internet and especially the rise of social media are to blame for the spread and harmful consequences of conspiracism. After all, the story goes, conspiracy theories were still a fringe phenomenon across Europe 25 years ago. The attacks of 9/11 triggered some conspiracist counter-narratives in the continent, making many people aware of the phenomenon for the very first time, but these conspiracy theories remained marginal, had no impact on politics and society and were mostly imported from the US via the internet. A quarter of a century later, the assessment could hardly be more different. The events mentioned above have made the public acutely aware that European societies are not immune to conspiracism and that many of the conspiracy

theories circulating on the continent are home-grown and not imported from the US. Importantly, the rise of European conspiracism has occurred synchronously to the rise of social media, proving in the eyes of many that platforms such as Twitter/X, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube are to be blamed for the apparently ever-growing influence of conspiracy theories and their increasingly harmful effects on societies and individuals.

The public concern about conspiracy theories, which, for obvious reasons, is also observable in the US, has led to an exponential increase in research on the topic. The pandemic in particular has been a catalyst in this regard. According to a recent article, more than 70 percent of academic studies on conspiracism were published after 2020 (Peker and Dufour 2025). Twenty-five years ago, hardly anybody outside of literary and cultural studies and history engaged with conspiracy theories and the focus was almost exclusively on the US (Butter and Knight 2018). By now, other countries and continents have received considerable attention (although the history of conspiracism in these regions still remains understudied), and many disciplines – from anthropology to psychology – have begun to contribute to the topic, making contemporary conspiracy theory studies a highly interdisciplinary endeavour (Butter and Knight 2020). Most of the work done in recent years uses quantitative methods and focuses on social media (Mahl et al. 2023). It also often takes as its point of departure the general impression outlined above. In other words, it usually assumes that conspiracy theories are now more widespread and influential than ever because of the advent of the digital communication age.

This book contends that the story is far more complicated. It is the outcome of the three-year research project ‘REDACT: Researching Europe, Digitalisation and Conspiracy Theories’, which was designed in response to a call by the CHANSE organisation for projects to investigate the effects of digitalisation on European societies. However, we do not provide an analysis of the impact of the internet on conspiracy theories as such. (This analysis is currently being written by two authors of the present study, Clare Birchall and Peter Knight, and will be published in 2027.) More modestly, we focus on the impact of digitalisation on conspiracy theories in the European information environment. Our study explores, on the one hand, the impact of social media platforms and their affordances on the forms, functions, popularity and effects of online conspiracism across the continent and, on the other, attempts at EU and national levels to combat conspiracism. Although we argue, as we explain in more detail below, that public and scholarly discourse tends to overestimate the impact of social media on the popularity and impact of conspiracy theories, it is obviously true that platforms like X or Facebook are important sites for the articulation of conspiracist fears and allegations. Given the rise of populism and authoritarianism across Europe and the threat of Russian neo-imperialism – phenomena all closely connected to conspiracy theories – it is crucial to assess their exact role.

In the political and civil society discourse that informs efforts to combat conspiracism, but also in scholarly discussions, conspiracy theories are often seen

as inextricably tied to disinformation, that is, the intentional spread of wrong information for strategic purposes (Ginsborg and Gori 2026). Sometimes the two phenomena are conflated entirely, sometimes conspiracy theories are understood as a particularly powerful form of disinformation. For example, Quassim Cassam (2019) treats conspiracy theories as political propaganda and thus as disinformation, although he does not use the term, while in a more recent piece in *Nature* on the dangers of disinformation for democracy, leading researchers in the field mainly draw on conspiracy theories such as Holocaust denial or the claim that the 2020 US presidential election was stolen to illustrate their argument (Ecker et al. 2024). By the same token, as our analysis of the effort of civil society organisations shows, several projects that are charged with combatting disinformation focus mostly on conspiracy theories.

The first central assumption of this book is that it is important to keep conspiracy theory and disinformation conceptually separate. They are distinct phenomena that need to be treated accordingly. Only this enables us to understand when and to what effects they may overlap in concrete manifestations. Drawing on the seminal work of Geoffrey Cubitt (1989) and Michael Barkun (2003), we understand conspiracy theories as claims that powerful actors are pursuing a sinister plan behind the scenes. Four basic assumptions define the conspiracist worldview: First, nothing happens by accident: Everything happens as planned. Second, nothing is as it seems: Only when the curtain is pulled back can one see what is really going on, because the conspirators operate in secret. Third, everything is connected: There are relationships between events, people and institutions that can only be understood by assuming a grand conspiracy. Fourth, most conspiracy theories feature a clear division of roles: The ‘good’ and innocent victims of the conspiracy are contrasted with the ‘evil’ conspirators.

Accordingly, conspiracy theories need to be considered misinformation rather than disinformation. Defined as above, they represent wrong information because their assumptions about secret collective planning and the subsequent successful realisation of these plans contradict explanations for social, political and historical phenomena by the modern social sciences, which do not deny intentions but stress unintended consequences and structural effects. But conspiracy theories should not generally be understood as intentionally spread falsehoods. As much research (discussed in Butter 2020, 81–2) has demonstrated, most people who spread conspiracy theories in private conversations, in print publications and also through various digital outlets, genuinely believe their own claims. Of course, conspiracy theories can be and sometimes are used for disinformation purposes, but assuming that this is always the case gravely weakens both concepts’ critical edge: a perspective that assumes that media influencers and populist politicians spread conspiracy theories always cynically and that they are only believed by their audiences runs the danger of replicating the conspiracist binary of scheming manipulators and innocent victims. Rather, it makes more sense to assume that genuine belief and strategic deployment often go hand in hand, as in Vladimir Putin’s conspiracy theories about

Ukraine (Bolechów and Szulc 2024) and, most probably, also in Donald Trump's claims about the 'stolen election' of 2020 (Butter 2022, 800–1).

The second major assumption that has guided the research presented in this book is that history and place matter. The history of European conspiracy theories can be traced back to the Early Modern Period when the first allegations that fit the definition presented above occurred (Zwierlein 2020). While we still lack overarching analyses that trace the development of conspiracy theories in specific countries or on the continent, a lot of work has been done on specific periods, groups of alleged conspirators and events that triggered conspiracy theories. These studies all find that conspiracy theories were very popular and influential all over Europe until the middle of the 20th century (see, e.g. Rogalla von Bieberstein 1976; Campbell, Kaiser and Linton 2007; Coward and Swann 2017; Girard 2020). They were believed and articulated by elites as well as by ordinary people and constituted what sociologists call orthodox knowledge (Anton 2011). After World War II, European conspiracism then underwent a process of stigmatisation similar to the one in the US (Thalmann 2019). Conspiracy theories were delegitimised and pushed to the margins (McKenzie-McHarg and Fredheim 2017) and became heterodox knowledge (Butter 2020, 100–1). However, this stigmatisation did not occur all over Europe or at least not to the same degree. There are strong indicators that conspiracy theories retained most, if not all of their status as legitimate knowledge in Eastern European countries like Hungary or Poland (Turza 2023; Butter 2027). Accordingly, any assessment of the impact of the internet in general and social media more specifically on the popularity and influence of conspiracy theories in different European regions must take their historically determined degree of acceptance in that part of the continent into account.

One reason why conspiracy theories have remained more accepted in former communist countries is most likely the experience of real government conspiracies in Soviet times as well as the rapid social transformations after 1989. This points to another way in which history and place matters for contemporary articulations of conspiracism. Conspiracy theories are always concerned with the present and the future, as they see a sinister plot at work whose devastating effects will only get worse. But they are also historical narratives, and as such they are shaped by regional, national and local conditions and pasts. Contemporary conspiracy theories about the pandemic, migration or climate change circulate globally, but they exist in many different versions, often reflecting regional specificities. In fact, any conspiracy theory only gains traction in a region if it can be adapted to speak to its conditions, issues and problems. The experience of empire and postcolonialism shapes British conspiracy theories, as the memory of Nazism, division and reunification affects those circulating in Germany. By the same token, the disintegration of Yugoslavia affects conspiracy theories in the Balkans as much as decades of Soviet hegemony and current Russian aggression affect conspiracism in the Baltics and Central Europe.

Accordingly, the research project on which our study is based was organised around regional differences and the same ordering principle informs this book as a whole as well as some of the individual chapters. The project comprised work packages that focused on Western Europe (the UK and the German-speaking countries), Central Europe (Poland and Slovakia), the Baltics (Estonia and Latvia) and the Balkans (Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia), and the book begins with a chapter on ‘Contextualising European Conspiracism’, which provides an overview of the history of conspiracy theories and their contemporary forms and popularity as well as the digital media environment in each region and thus lays the foundation for the analyses that follow.

The book’s comparative approach comes most strongly to the fore in [part III](#) and the remaining two chapters in [part I](#), ‘Comparative Analyses of Digital Conspiracism in Europe’, which explicitly put the different regions we focused on into dialogue. [Chapter 2](#), ‘Mapping Conspiracy Theories in the European Online Information Environment’ provides a bird’s-eye view of the continent’s conspiracist landscape based on a variety of data methods and visualisations, which we discuss in detail below. By contrast, [chapter 3](#) ‘Great Replacement Conspiracy Theories across Europe’ zooms in on one the most influential and dangerous conspiracy theories currently circulating within Europe and beyond. It identifies commonalities and differences between and within regions in the articulation of this multi-versional narrative. Though its importance varies greatly across the regions, Great Replacement talk resonates everywhere with deeply rooted anxieties about national identity, values and territory. What is more, the chapter also shows that across regions its most influential disseminators are not social media pundits or the algorithms that amplify them but politicians using every platform available – both online and offline. This shows that in order to accurately assess the forms and functions of platformed conspiracism, we need to look beyond social media and frequently also beyond the internet to the analogue world.

The chapters that make up [part II](#) of the book, ‘Regional Case Studies’, do exactly this, albeit in a different fashion and to different degrees. In [chapter 4](#), ‘Conspiracy Theories on the Ukraine War in the “Balkan Triangle”: Comparative Analysis of Social Networks in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia’, Nebojša Blanuša, Vedran Jerbić, Jasna Milošević Đorđević and Vladimir Turjacanin analyse Facebook posts from the three countries. They show that the platform’s affordances have a significant impact on the form and rhetoric of conspiracist ideas, which do not significantly differ across the three countries, as they form a shared supranational discursive ecosystem. A very different approach and focus inform [chapter 5](#), ‘From Shorthand Cues to Elaborated Dystopian Reasoning: The Affordances of Orwell’s *1984* in Strategic Online Conspiracy Narratives’. Building on an earlier analysis of references to *1984* on Facebook in Estonian, Latvian and Russian ([Madisson and Menise 2026](#)), Mari-Liis Madisson and Tatjana Menise discuss the function of references to George Orwell’s famous novel in articles published on two Estonian right-wing populist and anti-establishment online news portals. By contrast,

Michael Butter and Mara Precoma first trace the conspiracist discourse about cash abolition and expropriation in German on Twitter/X and Telegram and then focus on two video interviews with a conspiracy entrepreneur on an alternative media website to understand how the conspiracy narrative is fleshed out in a different medium in [chapter 6](#), “‘The Goal Is the Unconditional Abolition of Cash’: German-language Conspiracy Theories about the Ban on Cash and Expropriation”. Elżbieta Drażkiewicz and Pavol Hardoš also first focus on social media in their analysis of conspiracy theories about feminist and LGBTQ+ communities in Poland and Slovakia in [chapter 7](#), ‘None Dare Call It Conspiracy Theory: The Anti-Gender Narratives of the Illiberal Right in Central Europe’, but then focus on why such clearly conspiracist articulations are rarely labelled as such in public discourse. Finally, in [chapter 8](#), ‘Conspiracy Culture Wars: 15-Minute City Conspiracy Theories in the UK’, Clare Birchall and Peter Knight investigate conspiracy theories that accompanied proposals for progressive traffic and urban planning measures introduced in the UK in 2023. They move between online and offline analysis to identify a feedback loop between online conspiracism, protest groups, party politics and mainstream media reportage.

Part III of the book, then, shifts the focus from conspiracy theories and those articulating them to how they can be countered and contained. [Chapter 9](#), ‘Combatting Conspiracy Theories and Debunking Disinformation in the European Information Environment’, is based on 95 semi-structured interviews with individuals working in institutions, the media and NGOs in the regions we studied. It documents the similarities and differences in how they understand conspiracy theories and its relationship to disinformation, and examines how institutional settings, funding and national contexts shape the implementation and continuation of their work. The conclusion, ‘Conspiracism’s Contexts’, translates our findings throughout the book into concrete recommendations for policymakers and other stakeholders. Among others, we argue that conspiracy theories are best understood as symptoms of legitimate concerns, structural grievances and institutional trust deficits. Thus, measures must address the underlying drivers of conspiracism to be effective.

The third and final assumption that has guided our work is that a mixed-methods approach is needed to analyse the conspiracist online environment. The research methodology informing our project is best described as ‘data hermeneutics’ ([Gerbaudo 2016](#)). As discussed in more detail in [chapter 2](#) (where we also explain the ethics protocols we have followed), we assembled a dataset of nearly 6 million social media posts in the languages spoken in the European regions we had selected. We focused on posts and groups or channels from Telegram, Facebook and Twitter/X as at least one of these represents a significant platform in our chosen countries. Our datasets span the period from January 2018 to April 2024. Using keywords we collected data on six conspiracy theory topics (QAnon, the Ukraine war, the Great Replacement, climate change, Covid and gender ideology), together

with more general articulations of conspiracism. We settled on these topics because we knew from our previous work on the respective regions that these conspiracy theories enjoyed at least some popularity in each. But since there are also conspiracy theories that exclusively or predominantly circulate within a specific region, we also collected data for region- and country-specific conspiracy theories, for example, about the abolition of cash in the German-speaking countries. The datasets allowed us to create various visualisations of conspiracist conversation networks within each region. They have informed our ‘big data’ analysis in [chapter 2](#), but also the regional case studies in [part II](#). The most important of these visualisations are represented in this book, and they are also available in higher resolution together with additional ones on our project website (<https://redactproject.sites.er.kcl.ac.uk>). Acutely aware, however, of the limitations of purely quantitative analyses, we supplemented this approach with close readings and careful contextualisation of the most-engaged posts from each dataset. In the majority of cases, we focused on the top 20 posts, but extended our analysis whenever the regional teams concluded that a larger sample had to be studied to allow meaningful conclusions.

Moreover, as already mentioned above, our work was based on the assumption that social media conspiracism had to be placed in larger contexts – on the one hand, the history of conspiracism in the region as well as the political situation and media environment in each country; and on the other hand, within the larger picture of online conspiracist discourse. Accordingly, we also studied articles and videos on alternative media websites and statements by (populist) politicians through close readings and discourse analysis. In addition, we conducted digital ethnographies of especially important groups and channels, and used traditional ethnographic methods, that is, semi-structured interviews, in our analysis of the counter-conspiracist sector in each region and on EU level.

Our strictly comparative and highly interdisciplinary approach also explains the form of this book, which, although nominally an edited volume, is best described as a joint monograph. At the centre of our analysis are the explicitly comparative [chapters 2](#) (our ‘big data’ analysis), [3](#) (the cross-regional case study on Great Replacement conspiracy theories) and [9](#) (in which we engage with organisations combatting conspiracism), which all have more than half a dozen authors, but also one lead author who coordinated the research and wrote the bulk of the text (Peter Knight for [chapter 2](#), Clare Birchall for [chapter 3](#) and Felix Schilk for [chapter 9](#)). The regional case study chapters in [part II](#) have only two – and in one case, four – authors, but they, too, are the result of extensive discussions among the whole team and thus have been shaped by input from uncredited researchers. This introduction is a case in point. Like the conclusion, it was authored by the PIs of the project, but significantly shaped by the discussion of all project members over the years.

Our general findings are discussed in detail in the conclusion, but we would like to mention three here already. Most importantly, one size does not fit all. One cannot meaningfully study conspiracism in Central Europe, or the Balkans or

anywhere in Europe by simply applying research paradigms developed on American conspiracy theories. And one cannot draw general conclusions about conspiracism in general and even within Europe based on a single region or country. As our research shows, there are sometimes significant differences between and even within regions. Accordingly, customised approaches are necessary to understand conspiracy theories in and within different regions as well as to combat them. EU approaches that treat the phenomenon and the continent uniformly, for example, in assuming that conspiracy theories produce stigmatised knowledge everywhere in Europe, appear to be less effective than initiatives on the national level, which, due to their awareness of local specificities, tackle the topic at times with significantly different assumptions and strategies. Nevertheless, the EU clearly has an important role to play in setting expectations and creating collective legal frameworks such as the Digital Services Act.

Secondly, in those regions in which conspiracy theories constitute heterodox knowledge, they are very often not articulated explicitly – especially not on moderated platforms like Facebook and not by influential posters whose accounts reach thousands more than merely a few dozen devotees. The posts of populist politicians but also some conspiracy entrepreneurs often operate in a grey area between legitimate critique and conspiracist exaggeration (cf. also [Bergmann 2025, 33](#)) in order to appeal to conspiracy theorists and to avoid at the same time the stigma attached to conspiracy theory. One consequence of this strategy is that the hope that AI will ever be able to unfailingly identify and remove conspiracist content from social media platforms appears far too optimistic. It seems highly unlikely AI can do what we – after decades of research on conspiracy theory – could not do: reliably classify every post on a topic as either conspiracist or not.

If this finding might be disappointing, the third and final one that we would like to mention here is more uplifting but also complicates things further. Our research, corroborated by ethnographic studies on conspiracy believers, shows that people do not start believing in conspiracy theories because they encounter them online by accident. This means that deplatforming and content moderation, which are done very differently across regions and platforms anyway, are probably less significant in countering misinformation than often assumed. It also means – and our data shows this clearly as well – that foreign actors spreading conspiracy theories as disinformation are not chiefly responsible for the circulation of this content all over Europe. Foreign actors, we found, tend to pick up on and amplify conspiracy theories already gaining traction in different regions, but they do not create them. Most European conspiracism these days is home-grown. Thus, the recent focus on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) runs the danger of simplifying the problem and obscuring its causes. In short, people do not encounter conspiracy theories online and therefore become distrustful of the mainstream media, epistemic authorities and moderate politicians. Instead, they seek conspiracist content online intentionally because they are already distrustful. Meaningfully combatting conspiracy theories in the European information

environment, then, requires addressing the real-world grievances that fuel distrust and thus conspiracism.

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