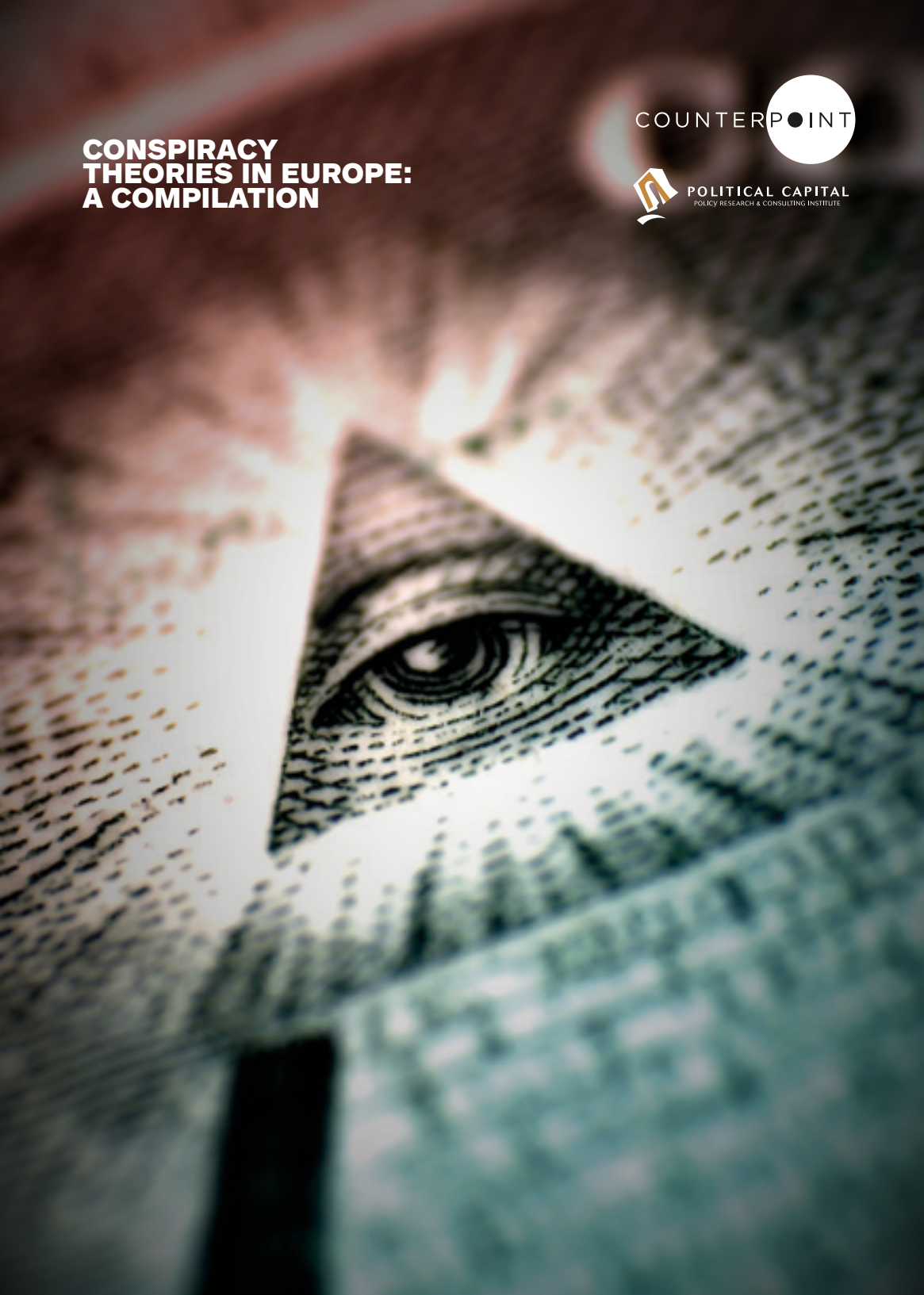
CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN EUROPE: A COMPILATION



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Introduction

Two and a half years ago, Political Capital, Counterpoint, the Center for Research on Prejudice, the Institute for Public Affairs, and the Zachor Foundation embarked on a project to develop an effective response to conspiracy theories in Europe. The aim of the project was both to build a stronger understanding of conspiracy theories and rival political narratives – particularly those with a xenophobic or anti-Semitic foundation – and to explore through workshops and interventions how those conspiracy theories that pose a danger to democratic values can be dealt with and, if necessary, short-circuited.

In particular, we wanted to achieve three things we believed were in urgent need of attention. First, we wanted to develop a robust evidence base on which to build a textured analysis of the roots of conspiracist beliefs. We were concerned that too much contemporary analysis of the phenomenon was divorced from thorough empirical work. We hoped to address this with detailed survey analysis of people's conspiracist beliefs, shining a light on both the extent of these beliefs and their roots. Second, we wanted our analysis to be comparative – drawing links and noting differences between the appeal of conspiracy theories in Western and Central and Eastern Europe. As a result, the project was designed to be a truly collaborative effort, learning from each other's expertise to find national strategies that were both appropriate to cultural context and adapted from successes (and mistakes) elsewhere. Our focus countries were France, Hungary, Slovakia, Poland and Norway. Third, it was essential that our research was sensitive to cultural differences, because an approach to conspiracy theories that took into account contextual nuances would always be superior to a "one size fits all" strategy.

This compilation brings together some of the written highlights from our project. It will hopefully illustrate the steps we have made towards these three aims: from the detailed evidence-based studies of conspiracy theories in France (Chapter 3), Slovakia (Chapter 4) and Poland (Chapter 5) to the subtle contextual approach in our pieces on Hungary (Chapter 2) and Norway (Chapter 6) and our comparative analysis of the "conspiratorial mindset" in all five countries in our study (Chapter 1). We have tried to select the pieces from our project that depict the sheer scope of the research conducted. Although not all of our work can be included in this paper, more information can be found on the project website (Deconspirator.com), where we have a range of articles, interactive maps and write-ups of the project's events and workshops.

With the recent furore surrounding the anti-Semitic comedian Dieudonné in France, last year's scandal in Hungary over the state award given to conspiracy theorist and journalist Ferenc Szaniszló, and the surge in support for some populist parties at the European Parliament elections, it appears that the context in Europe is still highly favourable for conspiracy theories. We hope that that these different pieces can provide a guide for understanding why they have such appeal.

We would like to thank all the contributors to this compilation. We would also like to thank the Open Society Foundations Think Tank Fund, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance and the European Jewish Fund, whose support made this project possible.

Political Capital and Counterpoint, July 2014

Chapter 1: The conspiratorial mindset in Europe

*The following article by **Marley Morris** from Counterpoint and **Péter Krekó** from Political Capital is based on "The Conspiratorial Mindset in an Age of Transition", a joint comparative study that brought together survey analysis on conspiracy theories in France, Hungary and Slovakia. First published on Open Democracy in January 2014, Morris and Krekó draw on recent examples of conspiracy theories in France, Hungary and Slovakia to make a wider point on the dangers of the conspiratorial mindset, and they discuss ways of "short-circuiting" the most dangerous theories.*

The French comic Dieudonné is courting controversy once again. Dieudonné, who has previously been convicted for anti-Semitic hate speech, recently caught the attention of the French authorities when he said of Jewish journalist Patrick Cohen "When I hear him talking, I say to myself: Patrick Cohen, hmm... the gas chambers... what a shame."[1] In response, the French government directed local authorities to ban his routine,[2] which some have done, obliging Dieudonné to now tour the country with a toned down stand-up show.[3] At the same time, West Brom footballer Nicolas Anelka was sacked from the team for "gross misconduct" after using the *quenelle*, a gesture created and popularised by Dieudonné and described by some as a reverse Nazi salute, at a football match.[4]

The political scientist Jean-Yves Camus has noted that Dieudonné is the focus of a "broad movement that is anti-system and prone to conspiracy theories, but which has anti-Semitism as its backbone".[5] This view is supported by a recent interview with author Alain Soral, who defended his friend Dieudonné on BBC Newsnight. When asked about the *quenelle*, Soral characterised it as "anti-system" and not anti-Semitic. But Soral then went on to say:

> *"Only recently the most powerful Jewish organisation in France, the CRIF [Conseil Représentatif des Institutions Juives de France], decreed that [the* quenelle*] was an anti-Semitic gesture. So basically their idea is that an anti-system gesture is an anti-Semitic one. So at the end of the day is that simply an improper accusation, or is there a deep link between the system of domination that Mr Dieudonné is fighting against and the organised Jewish community? Well, that's the question."* (BBC translation)[6]

While Soral was careful not to be explicit, it appears that he was alluding to a conspiracy connecting the Jewish community with "the system".

Conspiracy theories not directly based on anti-Semitism are also commonplace – not only in France, but Europe-wide. In Hungary, the economist László Bogár, a frequent guest in the public media and at government events, explains every political issue in the context of a "global financial empire", and thinks, for example, that Walt Disney cartoons wanted to deliberately "programme" people to be good consumers. And conspiracy theories have become even closer to the political mainstream: some conspiracy theorists (e.g. Béla Pokol, a political scientist whose favourite explanation scheme is the "Global order of domination") have become leading decision-makers. The organisers of the pro-government "Peace March" in Hungary claim that they want to save the country from Brussels' constant colonising attempts.

It might be tempting to dismiss these views as isolated anomalies. But our research at Counterpoint, Political Capital and the Institute for Public Affairs suggests that the phenomenon of conspiracy theories is in fact surprisingly widespread in several European countries. Clearly some conspiracy theories are more problematic than others – those that pin blame on the Jewish community are anti-Semitic hate speech, while others are merely the manifestations of healthy scepticism. But there is, we think, a common thread that runs through these theories – each conspiracy theory, in Cass Sunstein's and Adrian Vermeule's words, is "an effort to explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people, who have also managed to conceal their role". In our latest study, *The conspiratorial mindset in an age of transition*, we try to explore the underlying cultural factors behind conspiracy theories and suggest when and how they should be tackled.[7]

[1] 'French comic Dieudonne drops show after ban', BBC News, 13 January 2014
[2] John Lichfield, 'Dieudonné M'bala M'bala, the creator of Nicolas Anelka's controversial "quenelle", is arrested in France', Independent, 22 January 2014
[3] John Lichfield, 'An act of cruelty: An audience with Dieudonné M'bala M'bala, the man behind the "quenelle salute"', Independent, 28 January 2014
[4] 'West Brom sack Nicolas Anelka for "gross misconduct"', BBC Sport, 14 March 2014
[5] 'What's in a gesture? The quenelle's ugly undertones', France 24, 30 December 2014

[6] BBC Newsnight, 7 Jan 2014 – the footage of the interview can be accessed here: http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x19gru8_alain-soral-commente-l-actualite-dieudonne-sur-la-bbc_news
[7] Oľga Gyárfášová, Péter Krekó, Grigorij Mesežnikov, Csaba Molnár, Marley Morris, *The conspiratorial mindset in an age of transition*, Deconspirator, December 2013, http://deconspirator.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/The_Conspiratorial_Mindset_in_an_Age_of_Transition.pdf

A fertile ground for conspiracy theories

For our study, we surveyed the popularity of conspiratorial thinking in France, Hungary and Slovakia. We found widespread support for the belief that it is not the governments who govern – 50 per cent of respondents in our French survey either fully or slightly agreed with the statement that "actually, it is not the government that runs the country: we don't know who pulls the strings". Large numbers also agreed with the statement in Hungary and Slovakia.[8]

While of course it does not follow that everyone who agrees with this statement is a conspiracy theorist – the statement, after all, does not explicitly identify a conspiracy as such – these findings do suggest that many people are susceptible to a conspiratorial mindset. We define the conspiratorial mindset as a firm belief that conspiracies can be used to explain all sorts of events and decisions. According to those who have a conspiratorial mindset, conspiracies are the main driving force behind economic and political events, even history itself.

Our study argues that there is fertile ground for the conspiratorial mindset in Europe. This is in part the product of a period of transition. Post-Communist transitions in Central and Eastern Europe and economic and political transitions in the European Union have led to a perceived loss of control – a belief that governments do not have the power to truly make policy.

Furthermore, transitions often lead to uncertainty – the next stage of a transition is likely to be different and unfamiliar when placed next to what came before, even if it is a clear improvement. But in the case of Europe the transition is doubly uncertain because the next stage is not just unfamiliar – it is unknown. The post-Communist transitions may well have sparked uncertainty, but they at least knew that they were transitioning to capitalist democracies. Today in Europe, a feeling of transition is mixed with a sense of confusion: the European institutions will change, but it is not clear what they will change into. We argue in our study that these transitions have helped the conspiratorial mindset to prosper.

[8] The figures are not directly comparable since, although the same questions were asked, the survey methods differed. The French and the Slovakian samples are representative of the adult population, while the Hungarian is representative of regular internet users. See the report for further methodological details.

Populism and conspiracy theories

As these transitions have taken place, the phenomenon of populism has also emerged in Europe. Our study found that conspiracy theories and populism are powerfully linked. We found a strong correlation in Hungary and France between support for populist radical right parties and conspiratorial thinking. Voters for Marine Le Pen were more likely than others to agree that secret groups such as the Freemasons were pulling the strings of govenment from behind the scenes.

This is unsurprising in at least three ways. First, populist radical right politicians often make use of conspiracy theories to further their agenda. In Hungary, members of the populist radical right party Jobbik promote conspiracy theories indicating that Jews are somehow responsible for tensions between Roma and non-Roma communities, with one former chairman commenting "What is gypsy crime? Let's not deceive ourselves: it's a biological weapon in the hands of Zionists." László Bogár and others, such as the historian Kornél Bakay who denies both the theory of evolution and the finno-ugric origin of the Hungarian language, are admired "scientists" on the radical right. In France, Dieudonné himself has become friendly with the Front National after previously opposing the party in the 1990s.

In Slovakia, Marian Kotleba, leader of the extreme right ĽS-NS movement, was recently elected as the regional governor of Banska Bystrica and has become infamous for his anti-Roma stance.[9] He has also embraced several conspiracy theories about hidden plots by Jews, Zionists, Freemasons, who allegedly try to dominate, conquer, subjugate or destroy Slovakia and the rest of the world.[10] According to ĽS-NS:

"manipulators of human minds implanted the idea that experts would govern our country. However, these were not experts favouring the Slovak nation, but were Czechoslovaks and Bolsheviks, now they govern us and liquidate the Slovak nation. They dragged us into the EU, and into the terrorist organization of NATO."

Second, the core concept of populism that these parties exploit is a division between the (morally) "pure people" and the "corrupt elite". Conspiracy theories can help to sustain

[9] Radka Vicenová, 'Slovakia: right-wing extremism on the rise', Open Democracy, 19 December 2013
[10] Grigorij Mesežnikov, 'Slovak Parliamentary Elections 2012: Is Radical Nationalism Rising or on the Decline?', Deconspirator, 13 June 2012

this division by alleging secretive wrongdoings at the elite level while at the same time emphasising the innocence of an uninformed public.

Third, both conspiracy theories and populist politics are deeply linked to institutional distrust. Political Capital's Demand for Right-Wing Extremism Index indicates that anti-establishment attitudes expressing institutional distrust are on the rise Europe-wide.[11] Counterpoint's Reluctant Radicals project on the reluctant supporters of populist parties showed that distrust in government was a recurring predictor of support for populism across Europe. And the conclusion of our research on conspiracy theories was that political distrust was the key variable most strongly associated with support for conspiracism, over and above demographic factors like gender, religion and education level.

Catherine Fieschi has argued before on Open Democracy that populism "feeds off the dysfunctions of democracy, while rarely acting as the corrective which it claims to be".[12] Something similar can be argued with regard to the conspiratorial mindset. While healthy scepticism is important for a well-functioning democracy – blind adoration for political leaders is a recipe for disaster – the conspiratorial mindset has its problems too. Like populism, the conspiratorial mindset springs from and draws light to important political problems – like the dangerously low levels of trust in institutions across Europe – but pointing to conspiracy at every turn is more likely to fuel this distrust than address it effectively.

And, even worse, such a mindset could promote pernicious conspiracy theories – ones that stigmatise and incite resentment of particular minority groups such as Jews or Roma. While we were not able to test anti-Semitic conspiracy theories directly in France, we did so in Hungary and Slovakia, where we found strikingly high levels of support. For instance, 46 per cent of the Hungarian and 34 per cent of the Slovakian sample agreed with the statement "Jews would like to control international financial institutions".

Debunk or engage?

Anti-Semitic or xenophobic conspiracy theories (for instance, the "Eurabia" conspiracy theory that contends that European governments are encouraging the spread of Islam to undermine European values and traditions) are notoriously hard to tackle. The results from our study suggest that the traditional strategy of "debunking" theories is unlikely to work on its own. If conspiratorial thinking is rooted in institutional distrust, then discrediting the conspiracy theory will not address the underlying problem. Indeed, research in social psychology has shown that individuals typically have intuitive beliefs first and justify them after – so endless debates about, for instance, whether 9/11 was a Jewish conspiracy are unlikely to be fruitful.[13]

Instead, we argue that to address these conspiracy theories campaigners need to engage with their roots: phenomena like political transitions, perceived loss of control, and institutional distrust. This of course will differ depending on the particular cultural context. But combining an appreciation of the roots of the conspiratorial mindset with an active debunking (even ridiculing) strategy is likely to be the best way of undermining the most dangerous and most catchy conspiracy theories.

Legal actions against advocates of conspiratorial hate speech are in themselves unlikely to solve the overall problem. If the demand for such theories prevails, they will re-emerge and feed populist and extremist forces again and again. This means that a far more multi-layered, pre-emptive and subtle approach to tackling anti-Semitic and xenophobic conspiracy theories is vital.

[11] See http://derexindex.eu/
[12] Catherine Fieschi, 'Who's afraid of the populist wolf?', Open Democracy, 25 June 2013

[13] E.g. Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, Allen Lane, 29 March 2012

Chapter 2:
The empire of conspiracy: the axiomatic role of anti-Semitism in the ideology of the Hungarian extreme right

In this article originally written for the British anti-fascist magazine Searchlight in April 2013, ***Péter Krekó*** *analyses the prevalence of conspiracy theories in Hungary. He warns of the growing influence of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories promoted by the extreme right party Jobbik and shows how the party's rhetoric is penetrating the mainstream debate.*

"ONGOING GENOCIDE", "Tracking the Rulers of the World", "White Europe is under ultimate threat", "Hungary: 100% Israel". These are some typical titles you can see on the front page of *Barikád* (Barricade) magazine, the official weekly of the ultranationalist Hungarian Jobbik party. Jobbik is a considerable political force that gained 17% of the list votes in the 2010 parliamentary elections and, heading towards the 2014 elections, still enjoys a similar level of support, with a core base of young, middle-class male voters.

This weekly, as well as a lot of other channels (especially websites) that are openly supporting the far-right party, explains everything going on in the world in terms of sinister plots against innocent people. The economic crisis, Roma vs non Roma conflict, sensational murders, rising (or sometimes falling) real estate prices: all are the consequence of the machinations of the "clandestine power" behind the scenes. And who are these sinister forces? The response fits the old schemes: the Jews, inside and outside of Hungary. From the most archaic medieval-style conspiracy theories, such as the murders of young girls for ritual reasons, to the most modern forms, such as the state of Israel intervening in Hungarian domestic affairs through Israeli-Hungarian dual citizens within the political elite, these theories are articulated on an everyday basis – even by Jobbik politicians in the Hungarian Parliament.

The ideology of Jobbik and the organisations and opinion-leaders around them combine anti-Roma prejudice, the main driving force of their success, with traditional anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. In their view, Jews and Israel deliberately stoke the fire of Roma-non-Roma confrontation to realise their "colonising", "conquering" schemes. According to Jobbik's ideology, Jews are ultimately responsible for the Gypsy problem. Gypsies, according to this logic, are no more than the unconscious tool of a Jewish conspiracy aimed at subjugating Hungary. As a Jobbik MP Lóránt Hegedüs summarised a few years ago: "The time has come to state it clearly: Israel is bent on conquering Hungary. This is a fact; as evidence, it is enough to look at the all but total monopoly of Israeli investments and real estate developments. And the Gypsies are a kind of biological weapon in this strategy. They are used as a means against the Hungarians just as, to use a simple analogy, a snow plough is hitched to a truck."

Of course, these explanations are not unknown in Western Europe either. Some Islamist communities share similar theories. And even if they are less and less influential, some populist far-right forces still use these as ideological tools, such as the British National Party, whose leader Nick Griffin asserts, for example, that the rival English Defence League is the product of a Zionist conspiracy. But in Hungary, these theories are no longer confined to the margins of political discourse.

The Hungarian public provides fertile ground. Research indicates the widespread popularity of conspiracy theories, which are at the same time the cause and the result of Jobbik's success. And it is not a temporary phenomenon: a lack of trust in political institutions, the press and the banks means theories about politicians and economic players conspiring against the "people" (while the press, which is in the hands of those in power, hushes up such conspiracies) can easily take off.

According to a representative survey carried out by the Medián Institute based on questions by the Political Capital Institute, more than two-thirds of those asked agreed with the statement that "we never find out the truth from the media and the news, and everything important happens behind the scenes", and half agreed that "during the crisis powerful financial circles joined forces to destroy Hungary's economy in an effort to colonise the country". Eighty-eight per cent of respondents agreed with at least one of five conspiracy theories, while 23 per cent agreed with all five. According to further research in 2011 conducted by Tárki and analysed by the Political Capital Institute, 50% of Jobbik voters think that mass immigration of Jews and Israelis can be expected in the future, compared to less than 30% of the overall population.

Research by András Kovács in Hungary indicates that openly anti-Semitic statements are nowadays appearing in opinion polls much more frequently than a few years ago. He attributes this tendency to the "Jobbik-impact": because of the frequent presence of anti-Semitic public discourse at the highest political levels, citizens are no longer afraid to express their anti-Semitic views, breaking former taboos.

Conspiracy stereotypes connected to Jews are not a new phenomenon. They can be regarded partly as an archaic, collective legacy of Europe's historic past. Conspiracy theories about Jews such as blood libel and well poisoning sprang up in the Middle Ages. Although they are different from today's modern theories and embedded in a different,

mystical and transcendent world view, there is some continuity in these beliefs. Anti-Semitism was widespread in Europe overall before the Second World War. The problem is that while in most Western European countries after the Holocaust the elaboration of these issues in public discourse, education and at the political level led to the decreasing psychological and political relevance of anti-Semitism, in Central Eastern Europe – where this topic was suppressed during the era of state socialism – these spectres can be easily resurrected and activated politically.

And such conspiracy theories serve as useful tools for the far right for several reasons. First of all, they provide an ultimate, axiomatic explanation for the world's ills. Furthermore, they name the enemy, therefore helping to legitimise radical measures taken against them, as well as maintaining the collective self-esteem of the group and satisfying its narcissistic needs: if all the political forces are conspiring against Hungary and the Real Hungarians, it really must be the chosen people! And, of course, these theories are comforting because they help to distinguish between good and evil, and project responsibility onto a named enemy, as well as providing an outlet for hostile feelings.

A worrying tendency, however, is that over the past few years we can observe that similar theories, sometimes in more subtle but other times in their most manifest form, are gradually occupying the political mainstream. Conspiracy theorists such as László Bogár, who explains every problem of the world by pointing to the clandestine work of the "global financial/opinion empire", is a frequent guest in the public media for explaining economic and social trends or discussing the IMF. Béla Pokol, a political scientist whose favourite explanatory theory is the "Global order of domination", has become a constitutional judge, delegated by governmental caucuses in parliament.

And the most shocking case: Ferenc Szaniszló – an openly racist and anti-Semitic journalist who thinks, for example, that the red sludge catastrophe in Hungary was the result of NATO following an order by the IMF and firing a rocket into the reserve; that Jörg Haider, the former leader of the Austrian Freedom Party and Governor of Carinthia, was killed by drones; and that the Carpathian Basin is the scene of an eternal fight between Good and Evil – received a state award for his journalistic work. This award led to a huge scandal both domestically and internationally, the result being that the Minister asked Szaniszló to return the award. Nevertheless, this case – alongside awards for a singer in an extreme right rock band and an archaeologist historian who is popular among the radical right for his theory on the Hungarian origin of Jesus Christ, among other things – clearly reveals that the conspiracy world view that is dominant on the far-right can no longer be labelled as marginal.

What is the explanation? While it would be completely wrong to say that the governing conservative party Fidesz and Jobbik have the same ideological approach, the world view of the "radical wing" of governmental forces and the "moderate wing" of Jobbik are not really far from each other. The current political environment is only reducing the distance: the "freedom fight", as the Prime Minister calls it, for national sovereignty – that results in many conflicts between the Council of Europe, the EU and its member states, the US, and the Hungarian government – results in a situation where conspiracy theories about coordinated Western attacks against the nation play a central role in government rhetoric. And even if the government never use anti-Semitic theories to explain a situation, the structure of these theories is somewhat similar and can result in a similar world view – the only difference being the story's protagonist. Furthermore, there are some strong historical roots that can make society more receptive to such ideas: most of the Hungarian heroes are freedom fighters who were fighting for independence during Turkish/Habsburg/Russian domination.

The Hungarian example is a clear indication of how the current political environment, in the context of a national history of antagonisms, can fuel conspiracy theorising. This danger should not be underestimated. While conspiracy theories often seem innocently ridiculous at first sight, they pose a threat to democratic and social peace in different parts of Europe (and even elsewhere), and the 20th century clearly proved that conspiracy theories are capable of shaping history.

To understand and challenge this rising threat, a group of think-tanks and institutions in Europe, including the Political Capital Institute and Zachor Foundation in Hungary, Counterpoint in the UK, the Centre for Research on Prejudice in Poland, and IVO in Slovakia, are running an ongoing project, supported by the Open Society Foundations and the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, on how to research conspiracy theories and find the best tools to combat them. Conspiracy theories are always sensitive and flourish in different political contexts.

Chapter 3: Conspiracy theories in France

As part of the French strand of our project, Counterpoint worked with CEVIPOF, the Sciences Po Centre for Political Research in Paris, to add two questions on conspiracy theories to their 2012 post-electoral survey. ***Joël Gombin****, a political scientist and a Counterpoint associate, conducted a rigorous analysis of the data. The results are presented here in graphic form.*

The data

The fieldwork was conducted by OpinionWay, between the 10th and 29th May, 2012. The sample of 2504 people was interviewed by Computer Assisted Telephone Interview.[14]

The sampling was conducted according to the quota method.[15] The following quotas were used: sex, age and the socio-professional category of the head of household. The sample was stratified by region and size of the commune.

One limitation is that there was no quota for education level, as it is reasonable to suppose that beliefs in conspiracy theories are related to one's level of education. A second is that the socio-professional category quota was applied to the head of household rather than individuals.

Two specific questions were asked:

- First, interviewees were asked whether they believed that "Actually, it is not the government that runs the country: we don't know who pulls the strings".[16] The interviewee could say he totally agreed, rather agreed, neither agreed nor disagreed, rather disagreed or totally disagreed.

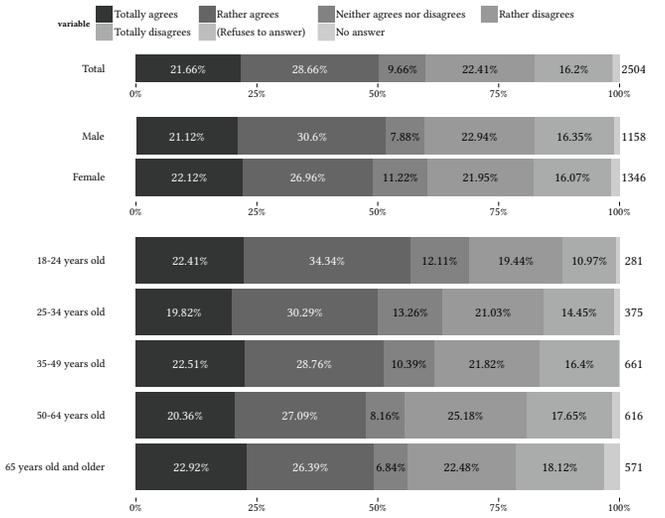
- The second question asks "Among the following groups, which ones are, according to you, those who control France from behind the scenes?"[17] The following possible answers were provided:

[14] The data for the post-electoral research on the 2012 presidential election was generated by CEVIPOF. The research was carried out by OpinionWay. The data will be held for consultation at the Sciences Po Centre for Socio-Political Data.
[15] All analysis performed hereafter is based on the weighted figures.
[16] « Ce n'est pas le gouvernement qui gouverne la France ; on ne sait pas en réalité qui tire les ficelles. »
[17] « Parmi les groupes suivants, quels sont pour vous les groupes qui manœuvrent la France dans les coulisses ? »

– International finance
– Some religious groups
– Other countries that try to dominate us
– Large TV networks and newspapers
– Secret groups such as the Freemasons
– Others
– None.[18]

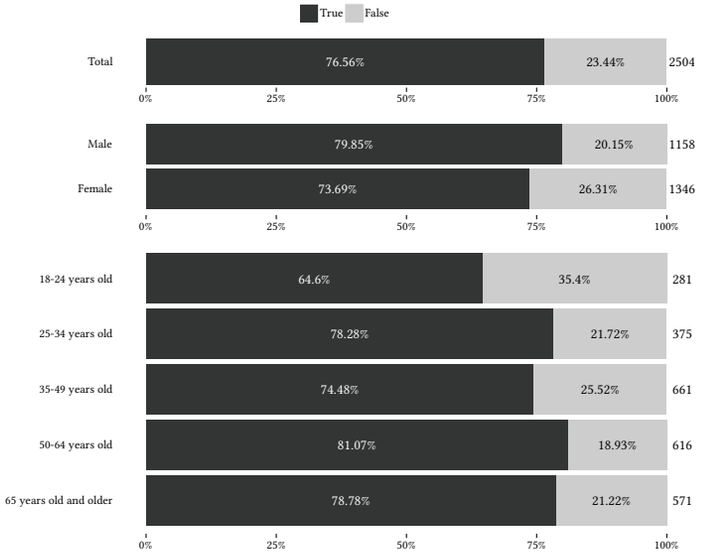
Descriptive statistics

We first assessed the topline figures. We found that support for conspiracist beliefs was surprisingly widespread in France. Some of the most notable results are depicted below. Approximately half of the sample agreed with the statement "Actually, it is not the government that runs the country: we don't know who pulls the strings". Over 75 per cent believed that international finance ran France from behind the scenes. On the other hand, smaller but still significant numbers (around one in five) believed the same for "some religious groups".



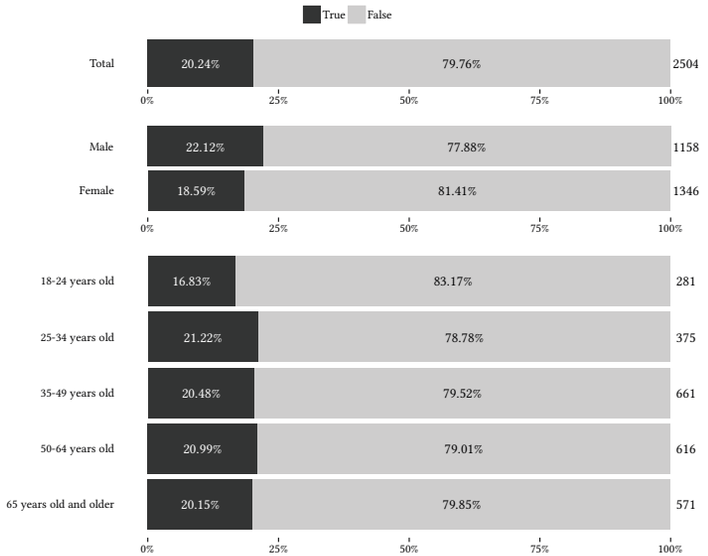
"Actually it is not the government who runs the country: we don't know who pulls the strings"

[18] « Réponses possibles : * La finance internationale * Certains groupes religieux * D'autres pays qui cherchent à nous dominer * Les grandes chaînes de télévision et la presse écrite * Des groupes secrets comme les Franc-Maçons * Autres * Aucun »



"Among the following groups, which ones are, according to you, those who control France from behind the scenes?"

- International France



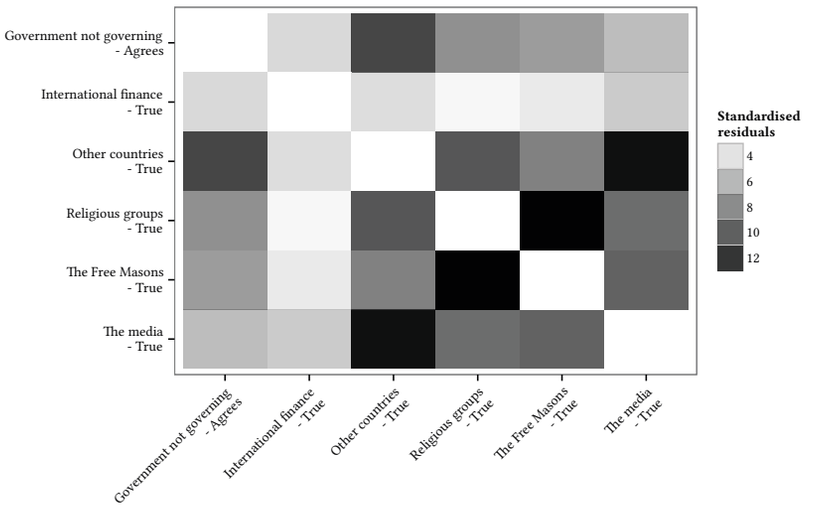
"Among the following groups, which ones are, according to you, those who control France from behind the scenes?"

- Some religious groups

Association between the questions related to beliefs in conspiracy theories

Next we tested the relationship between the different questions. One attractive hypothesis is that some people are more inclined to believe in conspiracy theories in general, whatever their content. If this is true, then the different variables we have presented should be strongly correlated.

In fact, as the chart below illustrates, the variables are weakly correlated and the intensity of the association varies between items.[19] In particular, the item about "international finance" stands out as especially weakly associated with the other items. This indicates that this question should not be viewed as a good indicator of conspiracist views.



This chart represents the standardised residuals of a chi-square test. The higher the number, the stronger the association between the items. There is a relatively weak association between a number of variables associated with conspiracy theories, particularly the variable relating to international finance.

[19] In this and the following charts and analysis, the answers to the question "actually, it is not the government that runs the country: we don't know who pulls the strings" have been recoded into three options: "agrees", "disagrees" and "no answer". In some cases, the individuals who gave no answer have been excluded from the analysis.

A geometric data analysis

Armed with this basic knowledge, the next step was to analyse in greater detail the roots of the support for conspiracy theories: who agreed with these statements and why? In order to explore the data further, we used multiple correspondence analysis (MCA). MCA is a statistical tool that allows researchers to represent a high-dimensional dataset in a low-dimensional space. In other words, it allows us to map a large number of questions onto a two-dimension graph, and thus to visualise how attitudes are organised.

On the map on the next page (Fig. 1), the answers to the questions on conspiracy theories define a space of conspiracist beliefs. The horizontal dimension opposes those who tend to believe in conspiracy theories (on the right-hand side) with those who tend not to believe in them (left-hand side). The vertical dimension aligns the different items along an intensity scale: from those who believe that "international finance" or "other countries" seeking to dominate us are "controlling France from behind the scenes" (more "mainstream" statements), to those who tend to believe that it is "some religious groups", or secret groups such as "the Free Masons" who are secretly pulling the strings (more "radical" statements). This intensity scale also roughly corresponds to an opposition between inner threats (secret societies, religious groups) and international enemies (international finance, other countries). On this map, three groups of respondents can be distinguished: the "non-conspiracists", who tend not to agree with any of the tested statements; the "mainstream", who tend to agree only with the statement that international finance is controlling France from behind the scenes; and finally, "conspiracists", who tend to agree with several, or all, of the statements provided.

Adding more variables

What role do socio-demographic variables have in determining attachment to conspiracy theories? To determine this, we added some more variables to the analysis. The defining dimensions of the map are unchanged; we have just added new variables to the map.

Sex and age are not strongly differentiated in the space of conspiracist beliefs (Fig. 2). Occupation does a better job of revealing differences between individuals, with the higher managerial and professional positions the least conpiracist and blue-collar workers and intermediate positions the most. But the differences are still relatively weak.

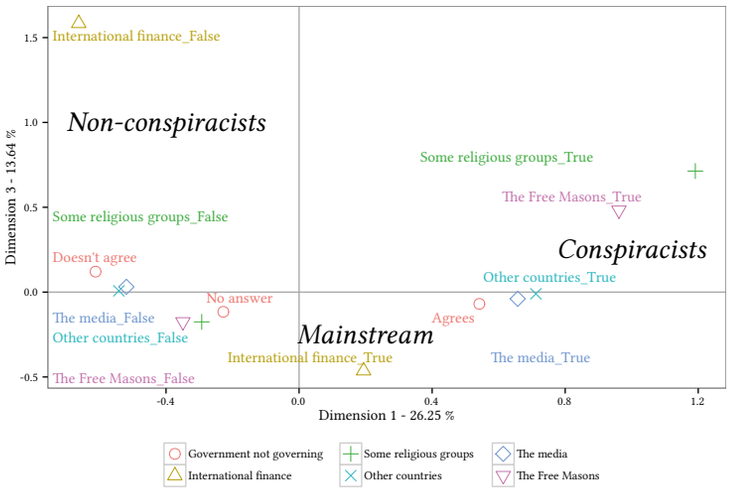


Fig. 1. Building the space of conspiracist beliefs

The different answers to the questions on conspiracy theories can be categorised into two dimensions: whether they correspond to a general belief in conspiracist statements and the intensity of the conspiracy theory in question.

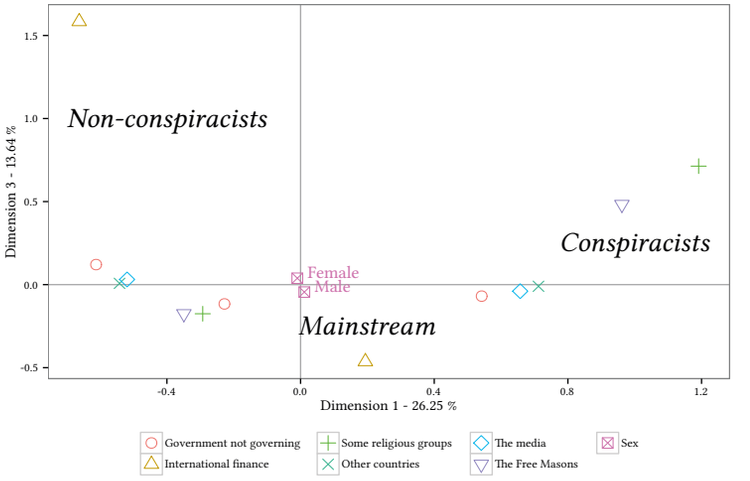


Fig. 2. Gender does not play a major role in influencing conspiracist beliefs

A surprising finding is that although the level of education is related to the propensity of agreeing with conspiracist statements, it is only mildly so. The level of income is also not strongly associated with believing in conspiracy theories.

However, conspiracist beliefs are strongly associated with other beliefs. These beliefs can be religious (Muslims agree with conspiracist statements more often than those who have no religion – but the frequency of attendance at religious services does not make a large difference), but they are mainly political. Individuals who position themselves as "0", "9" or "10" (that is, the most extreme positions) on a left-right scale are much more likely to agree with conspiracist statements than others.

Voting is also relevant: voters of Marine Le Pen stand out for often agreeing with conspiracist statements, whereas François Hollande's and Eva Joly's supporters are quite the opposite (Fig. 3). At the second round of the presidential election, those who did not vote or who cast a blank vote were also those who on average were the strongest believers in conspiracist statements.[20]

Trust and conspiracy theories

One very interesting finding is the strong correlation between measures of trust and conspiracist beliefs. This applies not only to political trust, but also to interpersonal trust: those individuals saying that "one can trust most people" are much less likely to agree with conspiracist statements. But the confidence citizens have in political institutions is even more important: those who think that democracy doesn't work well, that politicians don't care about people like them and who trust neither the left nor the right to run the country are far more likely to agree with conspiracist statements than others (Fig. 4).

[20] Marine Le Pen told her supporters that she would cast a blank ballot.

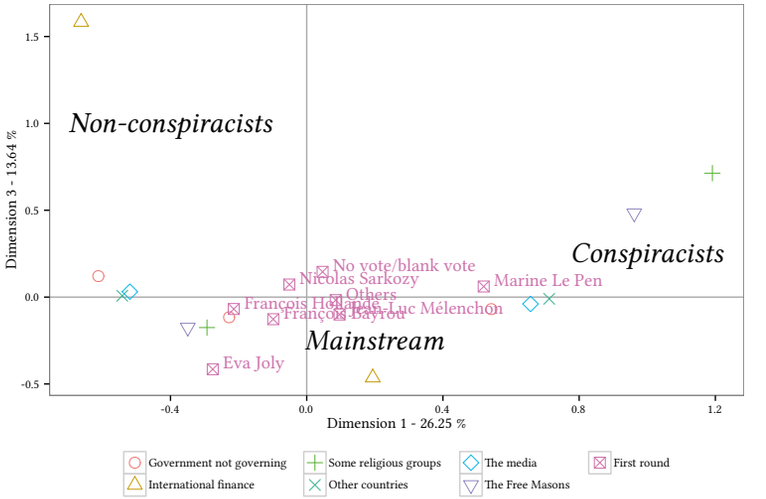


Fig. 3. Le Pen voters are much more likely than others to have conspiracist beliefs

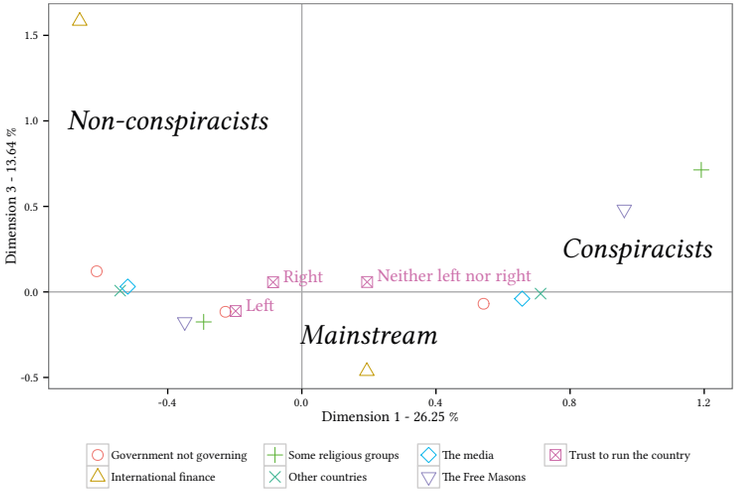


Fig. 4. Those who trust neither left nor right to run the country are far more likely to agree with conspiracist statements than others

Conclusion

Conspiracy theories are not an easy research topic. By their nature, they are fluctuating and hard to fully identify and assess. This survey is, to our knowledge, the first attempt to measure the level of support for conspiracy theories in France, as well as to establish the profile of those who believe in these theories.

While the interpretation of the questions asked may be debated, it is interesting to see how high the levels of belief in conspiracy theories are. Not only are the beliefs relatively widespread; they also span various segments of society. Despite there being some correlations, socio-demographics are not a determining causal variable for these beliefs.

Political values and behaviours are much more relevant to understanding the dynamics of conspiracist beliefs. Conspiracy theories are, at a deep level, intertwined with a high level of distrust towards others, in particular the political class. When trust in others and institutions is harmed, so is trust in official explanations and narratives.

This is a cumulative process, since conspiracy theories weaken further the trust individuals put into institutions and even their fellow citizens. This also explains why agreeing with conspiracist statements is correlated with being more likely to vote for, or support, extreme political parties and candidates: they are the ones who challenge established worldviews, values and policies.

Conspiracist narratives should not, however, be viewed as non-political or antipolitical stances. Quite the opposite: they are used as a means of mobilisation for those who do not have access to classic political power. Conspiracy theories offer to those who believe them the symbolic satisfaction of belonging to "those who know". This can be exploited by political actors who manipulate these narratives to promote their own political agenda.

This means that dealing with conspiracy theories is not so much a question of raising education levels or putting forward political arguments. Rather, it is about recreating the political, economic and social conditions of shared trust.

Chapter 4: Conspiracy theories in Slovakia: state of affairs, shifts and contexts

Drawing on original empirical research on attitudes to conspiracy theories, in this article for Deconspirator.com (written in October 2013) political analyst and project partner ***Grigorij Mesežnikov*** *from the Institute for Public Affairs describes the changing trends of conspiracy theorising in Slovakia. Mesežnikov explains why some Slovaks have turned to conspiracy theories and assesses the danger they pose for a liberal and tolerant society.*

As with every country that passes through major social change, a favourable environment exists for spreading various conspiracy ideas in Slovakia. Not all of them are well-elaborated "theories" whereby certain political forces interpret the surrounding reality and mobilise their supporters. Many remain just popular stereotypes, passing from generation to generation. Yet they have social relevance, since they affect the political and value preferences of their supporters.

Historical, socio-political and cognitive sources of conspiracy theories

Conspiracy ideas represent examples of inadequate assessment of reality, which reflect a lack of knowledge of history, economics and politics. They are based on national and social phobias, the psychology of the closed tribal community, and an inability to cope with difficult life situations, especially those caused by changes in society. Though conspiracy theories often react to real, existing problems, their false interpretative schemes divert society from viable solutions. However, this is fully in line with the main intentions of authors and disseminators of conspiracy ideas, whose primary purpose is not to solve problems, but to capitalise politically and socially.

Generally, conspiracy theories are used as a political tool most often by populist, radical-nationalist, racist and extremist forces. In Slovakia, the sources of persisting conspiracy ideas in the country's public and political discourse include:

1. The social consequences of radical reforms implemented after the fall of the Communist regime at the end of the 80s.

2. Nationalist stereotypes inherited from the past that are still rooted in the minds of large parts of the population.

3. Strong etatist, paternalist, authoritarian and egalitarian elements represented in the value orientations of the population.

4. Complicated relations with neighbouring countries and nations that lead to feeling of national deprivation.

5. Problems caused by a lack of transparency in governance, by corruption and by clientelism during the period of democratic development.

Nationalist context

No doubt it should be viewed positively that those politicians who promote explicit messages about mysterious, hidden, alien forces that secretly rule the world and that deliberately harm the country do not receive such a degree of support from Slovakia's population to enable them to participate in government. Radical nationalist and extremist forces who use conspiracy theories about Jews, Freemasons and Western plutocracy as part of their mobilisation strategies remain on the margins of the political scene. Their poor electoral results, although they have slightly increased, do not give much hope – at least so far – that they will transform themselves into a relevant political force. The spectacular actions of extremists, often accompanied by violence or by the threat of violence, encounter strong resistance from state authorities (especially the police), NGOs and active citizens. Their notorious speeches about Freemason–Zionist conspiracies, Jewish enemies of Slovakia and the US–Israeli alliance seeking to conquer the world are seen as exotic political folklore with the potential to reach only the least educated and most ignorant segment of society.

More dangerous today is the racist anti-Roma (anti-Gypsy) rhetoric used by radical nationalists and extremists. This rhetoric, however, lacks an explicit conspiratorial dimension. Extremists instead use widespread conventional stereotypes, depicting Roma as inflexible and lazy people, incapable of working and studying, directing their hands to the state with the purpose of abusing the welfare system at the expense of the non-Roma ("white") population.

One message more likely to reach the Slovakian population is the rhetoric of the so-called "Hungarian threat", a combination of conspiracy theories and schemes that play the ethnic card. The Hungarian minority population in Slovakia has strong political representation and is capable of articulating in a plausible manner its demands for minority rights both domestically and internationally. The traditional use of the ethnic card as a tool for political mobilisation by some Slovak parties (particularly nationalists), as well as the Hungarian government's support for ethnic Hungarians living in neighbouring countries, create a favourable environment for potential disseminators of conspiracy theories about the "Hungarian threat". Although now in decline, this myth remains a latent factor of domestic politics, which can be activated at the moment its holders find out it can bring them additional political gains.

The influence of the crisis and a lack of transparent governance on the content of conspiracy stereotypes

Public opinion polls conducted recently in Slovakia have revealed the relatively large presence of conspiracy ideas in people's minds. On the basis of the polls (though indirectly), we can conclude that there has been some weakening of the ethno-national, racial and confessional components of existing conspiracy theories and a strengthening of their socio-political components. Paradoxically, one of the reasons for such a peculiar phenomenon could be Slovakia's greater openness to the rest of the world and the country's more active participation in international affairs, such as joining the EU, NATO and the OECD. All this has created a state of closer interdependence between Slovakia and the rest of the world. Global challenges (such as the crisis of the global and European economy after 2008), which require careful analysis and precise explanation, are often interpreted in a simplified manner – for example, as a result of the decisions of small, closed groups of people belonging to banks and international financial institutions in order to obtain concrete benefits for themselves at the expense of everyone else. Consequently, such an interpretation leads to the conclusion that the real sources of wealth and influence in the world are neither particular states nor the policies of legitimate, politically representative bodies, nor nations that have achieved significant accomplishments through the implementation of challenging economic reforms, but instead a small group of actors able to assert their interests, even at times by instigating these major global problems.

Another reason for the recent changes in conspiracy ideas in Slovakia is a lack of transparent governance and the closeness of the current political elite, as well as certain shifts that have taken place in the context of the promotion of economic and other corporate interests at the political level: a change in relationship between political actors who aspire to gain democratic legitimacy for their position in the power system and various organised groups (industrial, financial) who want to influence the policy-making process. The numerous corruption and clientelist scandals that have taken place in Slovakia in the past decade could provoke in many people a feeling of helplessness and insignificance, a belief that democratic institutions are inefficient and useless, and a sense that all-important decisions affecting the life of the country's population are made behind closed doors by a small group of people (politicians and businessmen). The perception

is that the links between politicians and businessmen extend much further than just formal positions (for example, posts in the government), laws or government programs.

The results of the public opinion poll conducted by the Institute for Public Affairs (IVO) in July 2013 in the framework of this joint research project with Political Capital Institute show that 63% of respondents agreed with the statement "Actually, it is not the government that runs the country: we don't know who pulls the strings" (20% of them agreed strongly and another 43% tended to agree), while 25% of respondents disagreed (either strongly or tended to) and 12% didn't know or gave no response. The largest segment of respondents in the survey – 56% – thought that Slovakia was controlled by "international financial groups" that "pull the strings". A further option – "Other countries that wish to govern Slovakia" – ranked second with 32% of respondents. 10% of respondents answered that the country was controlled by "large TV networks and newspapers" and 10% said the same for "secret groups such as Freemasons", while 8% pointed the finger at "some religious groups".

The ranking of these agents of power and influence by the respondents who answered the research questions and the primacy of "international financial groups" could be a reaction to the course and consequences of the global financial crisis that hit the country's economy and strongly influenced its internal political development. (In October 2011, the centre-right government led by Iveta Radičová was defeated by the opposition in a parliamentary vote on the ratification of the EFSF and was forced to resign, which led to early parliamentary elections in March 2012).

Corruption as the breeding ground for "conspiracies"

One of the poll's most unexpected findings is that the majority of Slovak citizens think that it is not the Slovak government that runs the country. However, this also needs to be put into domestic context. The so-called Gorilla case, which fomented mass protest rallies in late 2011 and caused serious changes to the electoral standing of different political parties, strengthened the conviction of a large portion of the population that the country's real rulers were local oligarchic entrepreneurs who corrupted politicians and used them to maximise their own profit and influence. The circumstances of the Gorilla case could be interpreted by ordinary citizens to mean that many (if not all) important positions in the state administration could be bought and sold and that the real source of political weight of a political party was the strength of its ties with donors, not the party's formal position in parliament or in government.

Therefore, not surprisingly, after a series of political scandals that uncovered even more shocking links between the government and financial groups on questions of important socio-economic measures, 70% of citizens think (according to an opinion poll conducted by the research agency Polis Slovakia in early October 2013) that financial groups affect the decision of the current government led by Robert Fico (43% of respondents agree strongly with such a view and 27% tend to agree), while only 10% of respondents think that financial groups do not affect the current government.

How powerful are secret societies?

The persistence of ideas about hidden mechanisms of power and influence was confirmed by respondents' answers to questions dealing with classical conspiracy stereotypes depicting the existence of secret forces that control the world. In IVO surveys conducted in July 2013, 44% of respondents agreed with the statement "Secret societies threaten the stability of our society", while 20% of respondents disagreed (the rest of the respondents either said that they neither agreed nor disagreed, said that they did not know, or did not answer). 48% of respondents agreed with the statement "Most people don't realise how much our lives are controlled by plots hatched in secret places", while only 18% disagreed. 39% of respondents agreed with the statement "Powerful business groups joined forces to destroy Slovakia's economy, fostering the colonisation of the country", while 34% of respondents held the opposite view.

Weakening political anti-Semitism vs. commonplace stereotypes about Jews

Many conspiracy theories in Slovakia in the past have focused on Jews. Slovakia is a country with a rich experience of anti-Semitism both at the level of state policy (the genocidal anti-Jewish policy of the clerical-Fascist regime of the Slovak state during World War II or the policy of state anti-Semitism followed by the Communist regime and camouflaged in anti-Zionist and anti-Israeli rhetoric) as well as public opinion (social distance and distrust towards Jews). Quite peculiar shifts can be observed here. There are no relevant political forces today in Slovakia that would exploit anti-Semitism to mobilise the public. State policy is open and friendly to the Jewish community and the Slovak Republic behaves on the international arena as Israel's ally rather than its critic, in contrast to some other EU countries. The degree of social distance felt towards Jews is very low: according to a public opinion survey conducted by IVO and the Center for Research of Social Communication of the Slovak Academy of Sciences in 2008, only

11% of respondents would not like to have a Jewish family as neighbours. On the other hand, as an IVO survey conducted in July 2013 has shown, there is still a relatively high share of people who agree with the opinions that Jews have excessive influence and nefarious intentions (as Table 1. shows).

Table 1. Anti-Semitic stereotypes: Agreement / disagreement with the statements (%)

	Totally agree / tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Totally disagree / tend to disagree	Don't know / no answer
Jews tend to extend their influence on the global economy	32	18	25	25
Jews often operate in secret, behind the scenes	34	21	21	24
Jews sometimes meet secretly to discuss issues important to them	31	22	17	30
Jews aim to dominate the world	31	20	23	26
Jews want to have a decisive voice in international financial institutions	34	20	19	27
Jews achieve their group goals by plotting secret agreements	29	19	20	32

Source: Institute for Public Affairs/Political Capital Institute, July 2013.

Today in Slovakia, the political branch of anti-Semitism operates from the margins. But widespread negative stereotypes about Jews, indicated by the results of the IVO survey, can still be an attractive resource for extremists who, under certain circumstances, aim to resuscitate and reactivate political anti-Semitism in this country.

Chapter 5: Blood libel in Poland

"Blood libel", the belief that Jewish people kidnap Christian children in order to use their blood for a religious ritual, is one of Europe's most long-standing and pernicious anti-Semitic canards and is often tied to anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. This analysis by academics ***Michał Bilewicz*** *and* ***Agnieszka Haska*** *from the Center for Research on Prejudice discusses the historical backdrop to the phenomenon of blood libel in Poland and investigates its prevalence today.*

The blood libel has a long tradition on Polish soil. Heavily influenced by the preaching of Saint Giovanni da Capestrano in the 15th century, many Polish Roman Catholics at the time perceived Jews as responsible for crimes against Christians. The popular cult of da Capestrano was closely aligned with the blood libel and with his judgement of Jews as Christ-killers.[21] Today, figures of da Capestrano can still be seen in Polish churches, including one located in the former Warsaw Ghetto area.[22]

Several pre-War pogroms in Poland were provoked by rumours about Jews kidnapping children and using their blood for ritual purposes. Pogroms in Strzyżów (1919) and Białystok (1938) are two of the most well-documented. Even the post-War wave of pogroms was almost solely inspired by rumours about Jews kidnapping Polish children – this was the case, for example, in Kielce (1946), where the disappearance of an 8-year old Polish boy named Henryk Błaszczyk set off mob riots and ultimately led to the killing of 36 Jewish people. Similar atrocities occurred in Cracow (1945), where Polish inhabitants had gossiped about the kidnapping of Polish children leading up to a pogrom, and in Rzeszów (1945), where riots and the plundering of Jewish homes began after the dead body of a 9-year old girl was found in a local tenement house.[23]

All these historical cases – some of them as recent as the middle of last century – show how violent the consequences of blood libels could turn out to be in Poland. Contemporary anthropological research in the Sandomierz and Podlasie areas of Eastern Poland found several cases of rumours about blood libels. In 2000, Stanisław Musiał's article in Gazeta Wyborcza sparked one of the most heated and widespread debates on Christian anti-Semitism in Poland since 1989. The author argued that paintings by Charles de Prevot at the

[21] Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, 'Legendy o krwi. Antropologia przesądu (z cyklu: Obraz osobliwy)', WAB, Warsaw, 2008.
[22] Elżbieta Janicka, 'Festung Warschau', Krytyka Polityczna, Warsaw, 2012.
[23] Jan T. Gross, 'Fear. Anti-Semitism In Poland after Auschwitz', Random House, New York, 2006.

Roman Catholic Cathedral in Sandomierz, which depict a blood libel, should be removed from the church and displayed in a museum with suitable commentary. Notable voices in this debate included Catholic intellectuals (e.g. Zuzanna Radzik), scholars (e.g. Joanna Tokarska-Bakir) and artists (e.g. Artur Żmijewski).

While taking the above mentioned evidence into account, the Center for Research on Prejudice conducted two studies (in 2009 and 2011) on large nation-wide samples in an attempt to investigate the scale and popularity of blood libel myths in modern Poland. The 2009 study was performed on a representative random sample of 100 participants and the 2011 study was performed on a quota sample of 620 Polish internet users (from the GG Ariadna panel). In both studies we asked the following question: "In the past, Jews were accused of kidnapping Christian children. Do you think that such kidnappings took place in actual fact?"

In 2009, the study found that roughly 10% of Poles agreed (to a greater or lesser extent) that Jews kidnapped Christian children. Affirmative responses to the blood libel allegation were observed mostly in the Eastern parts of Poland, close to the borders with Belarus and the Ukraine. They were relatively scarce in other regions of Poland. In 2011, the study found that 9% of participants believed that Jews kidnapped Christian children.

In the second phase of data examination we explored some possible correlates of anti-Semitism. In the 2009 study, we found no correlation with age – both old and young Poles expressed blood libel beliefs to a similar extent. There were no significant differences in blood libel beliefs between men and women. Beliefs in blood libel allegation were less frequent among more educated people and among those living in larger cities. Moreover, they were positively correlated with right-wing, authoritarian political attitudes and other anti-Semitic beliefs (e.g. the belief in a Jewish conspiracy within politics, media and the economy). Somewhat surprisingly, belief in the blood libel, often portrayed by researchers as "religious anti-Semitism", was only weakly related to the religiousness measures used in the study.

We obtained similar results in a study conducted in 2011: the blood libel was unrelated to gender, age and socio-economic status (as measured by the participants' feelings of relative deprivation), but strongly related to education levels (i.e. less frequent among highly educated people) and settlement size (i.e. less frequent in urban areas). People of right-wing political orientation tended to believe more readily that Jews kidnap Christian children. Such beliefs were also strongly linked to other forms of anti-Jewish prejudice (i.e. greater social distance).

Taking into account all the results, we concluded that the blood libel is a relatively rare phenomenon in Poland, since no more than 10% of the population believe in this myth. At the same time, it became apparent through the research that blood libel beliefs are concentrated in specific areas of the country. The eastern regions of Poland, which are less urbanised and constitute traditional strongholds of right-wing party constituencies, still seem to pose a somewhat fertile ground for the form of anti-Jewish prejudice examined in this study. It seems plausible, then, that recent anti-Semitic incidents in Eastern Poland (the desecration of Jewish cemeteries, the destruction of wartime monuments, anti-Semitic graffiti, etc.) might be attributed to persistent anti-Jewish myths that still circulate in this part of the country.

Chapter 6:
The roots of populism's success in Norway

In "The roots of populism's success in Norway", an essay commissioned by Counterpoint for this joint project and published in May 2014, Financial Times journalist ***Martin Sandbu*** *challenges the traditional picture of Norway as a consensual social democracy. Sandbu examines the various elements of Norwegian culture that have over time fostered a deep-rooted conspiracy-minded populism. In this excerpt, he explores the underlying social and cultural drivers that have contributed to the toleration of conspiracy theories within the Norwegian establishment, reaching their most violent and toxic form in terrorist Anders Breivik's attacks in Oslo and Utøya in the summer of 2011.*

One of us?

> *"The sound of Behring Breivik's voice is starting to get on my nerves… On several occasions I've caught myself deleting text messages before sending them, because I've formulated myself like Behring Breivik… Overall there are a whole lot of things I have said and done from time to time that I've started to think about. The horrible thing is that we actually have a bit in common."*
> Kristopher Schau, "Court notes week 2", *Morgenbladet* 26 April 2012

One reporter stood out as the most unlikely journalistic presence at Anders Behring Breivik's trial. Kristopher Schau, a lanky man sporting sideburns, is a 40-something comedian, musician and performance artist whose oeuvre includes a TV programme involving him committing all seven deadly sins; a band fined for putting a fornicating couple on stage; and the performance *Decline*, in which he spent a week in a shop window feeding on fast food.

Schau was hired to report on the trial by *Morgenbladet*, the closest one gets to an intellectual weekly in a country where "intellectual" is a dirty word. It was a paradoxical touch of brilliance. Where most were at pains to show just how deviant a monster Breivik was, Schau homed in on a deeper monstrosity, which was how *typical* Breivik was of Norwegians from his milieu – including Schau himself. When the presiding judge asked the terrorist whether *World of Warcraft* was a violent computer game, Schau found that "Behring Breivik [and I] were in the same place: two men, not young, not old, overbearingly looking at a woman one generation above us and thinking: 'poor you, are you so scared of computer games?'". Then there was the way he spoke:

> *"When describing what he had thought about the possibility that the police would kill him, he used exactly the words I could have used in a different context. He was 'fucking unkeen on that', he said. But that's how I talk. These are my words he's using. Those are the strange, little moments when Behring Breivik seems not like a monster, but just like an ordinary guy."*

Yet Schau missed a trick. "In his ideology I find nothing in common, thank God", he reported with relief. But for many of Schau's compatriots the commonalities with Breivik did not in fact stop there. The revulsion with his violent acts was universal. But many of the views expressed in his ideological screed, a 1500-page manifesto distributed on the internet in the hours before his murders, were instantly recognisable to anyone who had had an eye on blogs, internet forums, and websites devoted to similar complaints – from the widely shared sense of cultural loss because of immigration, to a harsher desperation at a supposed imminent Muslim takeover, and even the notion that "cultural Marxists" in the Labour party were consciously seeking this "deconstruction" of Norwegian society: the local version of the Eurabia thesis.

A recent book by John Færseth[24] is a safari guide of sorts to the conspiratorial fantasies found in Norwegian society. There are those relating to supernatural phenomena – UFOs, mind control via radiation, and the like. Others, rooted in the world of alternative lifestyles, think vaccines are intentionally harmful to health, or that vapour trails from aeroplanes camouflage the spraying of the population with chemicals.[25] But the most worrying are the explicitly political conspiracy theories that see in everything the designs of a secretive group bent on domination, of which the Eurabia thesis is the most potent.

These conspiracy theories all have global currency. What is particularly Norwegian about them is the place they reserve for the Labour party. According to Færseth:

> *"[a] rhetoric, where the Labour party is referred to as something near a mafia or a totalitarian regime, unites just about every community I have described in this book, with the exception of people with a history on the left…there exists a virtually murderous hatred towards the Labour party among some Norwegians, which cannot be compared with common scorn for politicians or antipathy towards a party one would not consider voting for… a not so small subculture of Norwegians exists that regards today's Norway as being a virtually totalitarian society, where dissidents are gagged by corrupt or politically controlled courts, and where the media dare not disclose what is going on out of fear of losing their public subsidies."*

[24] *KonspiraNorge*, Oslo: Humanist, 2013.
[25] According to press reports, Norway has some of the world's most liberal regulation of alternative medicine, and Norwegians spend about 0.2% of the country's GDP on such treatments.

Much has been made of how Breivik was an internet terrorist. Indeed, all the evidence is that he was radicalised by Islamophobic conspiracy theories online that originated outside of Norway – by such authors as Michael Spencer or Bat Ye'Or. But Schau's intuition was more correct than he himself thought: ideologically too, there was something typically Norwegian about Breivik, even if his Raskolnikovian willingness to take the logic to its deadly extreme was not.

Norway's Eurabia

"We are digging our own cultural, ethnic and religious grave in Europe, so somebody actually has to wake up before it is too late."
Christian Tybring-Gjedde in Norway's parliament, 5.4.2011

Christian Tybring-Gjedde is afraid of Islam and unafraid to say so. The Progress member of parliament and outgoing leader of the party's Oslo chapter is important because he pulls off a feat that in another country might be more readily exposed. He combines the unthreatening broad populism that is Progress' stock-in-trade – of "merely saying what most people think", "calling a spade a spade", et cetera – with unabashedly stoking the most conspiratorial versions of these sentiments.

There are not all that many Muslims in Norway. The exact number is uncertain, for it is a redeeming feature of Norway's otherwise creepily comprehensive population statistics that they do not collect information about religious or "ethnic" affiliation (though the national statistics bureau tries to make up for that by keeping count of how many Norwegian residents have non-Western ancestry). On the best estimates, however, the proportion of Muslims in Norway is perhaps 3-4 per cent. Norway has received immigrants with less than open arms, especially those from "alien cultures" as local parlance puts it, but that has not prevented some from feeling invaded. Non-Muslim Norwegians on average think Muslims are vastly more fundamentalist and opposed to western values and cultural integration than Muslims in Norway report themselves to be.

Islam-scepticism has quite an impressive politico-intellectual infrastructure in Norway, one that skirts the border of Eurabia theorising without necessarily crossing it. It has its political apologists – apart from Tybring-Gjedde, there is the four-period Conservative parliamentarian and later Council of Europe member Halgrim Berg – and intellectual ones, such as the New York-born, Oslo-settled writer Bruce Bawer (the author of *While Europe Slept*). An erudite blog called document.no provides an often enlightening, trenchantly alternative take on news reporting and political debate (it spearheaded a successful campaign against hate speech legislation). An activist organisation called Human Rights Service, while regularly reviled as anti-Islam for its obsession with such customs as the veil, has also performed the creditable service of putting female genital mutilation and other difficult topics on the political agenda.

Many of these people and institutions may be blinkered or tendentious, but by and large represent honest worries about the compatibility of Muslim immigration with maintaining the prevailing culture. What is one to do, however, with this sort of rant?

"What was wrong with Norwegian culture, since you are dead set on replacing it with something you call multiculture? What is the goal of stabbing our own culture in the back? … It is Labour that sees to it that those with a Norwegian culture flee many districts in Oslo, and leave behind enclaves where Muslim uniformity, dogmatism and intolerance obtains ever stronger conditions for growth… But: are we going to help the Labour party substitute for Norwegian culture with "multiculture"? Never! Are we going to contribute to the cultural betrayal?… Are we ever going to feel "multicultural"? Never in the world. For we don't believe in multiculturalism. We think it's a dream from Disneyland. Systematised rootlessness. Long-term idiocy, and we think it may tear our country to shreds."

This heady language of backstabbing and betrayal appeared in an op-ed by Tybring-Gjedde and a fellow party member in *Aftenposten*, the national daily newspaper of record, in 2010. The same year he gave a lecture where he compared Islam with Nazism, adding that things are worse now than they were in the 1930s. ("Back then you were confronted with an ideology you could crush. It's hard to crush a religion.") The lecture, which remains available for all to watch online, must have resounded with Breivik: his manifesto contains faithful echoes of Tybring-Gjedde's arguments.

The point here is not to blame Eurabia proselytisers for what Breivik did, but to highlight the connection between the conspiratorial hatred for the Labour party that motivated him and the broader antipathy against Labour. For the connection goes well beyond coexistence. In other countries where conspiracy theories and respectable scepticism co-exist, they tend do so in separate circles – or more precisely, the establishment segregates off the conspiracy thinkers. In Norway, in contrast, conspiracy theories have a fast track into the establishment, popping up regularly in places such as the parliamentary pulpit and the national press, where the average informed European spectator would expect higher standards. I have argued that the ill will towards Labour has its roots in the breadth of the social democratic project itself. But how can it be that such a highly educated and prosperous society makes it so easy for that ill will to take a conspiratorial turn?

Levelling and the critical public

You shall not think you are anything special.
You shall not think you are any smarter than us.
Commandments one and three of the "Jante Law" — Aksel Sandemose

Even if a minority of Norwegians have reasons for scepticism about the country Labour has built, it is paradoxical that Norway should so easily let it transmogrify into the conspiratorialism Færseth documents.[26] Conspiracy theorists by definition blame their grievances on secretive powerful groups. They inherently reflect a suspicion of elites, real or imagined. But in egalitarian Norway it is hard to discern any elites at all. The very word "elite" is taboo (except in sports), or only used with sarcastic or derogatory intent. One might expect this to have inured Norway to conspiracy theories. The reality is quite the contrary: the country's intellectual defences against them may well have been blunted by its anti-elitist culture.

That culture is both cause and effect of Norway's material egalitarianism. It predates post-war social democracy. All foreigners settled in Scandinavia are sooner or later told of *Janteloven*, the conformist commandments Danish-Norwegian writer Aksel Sandemose set to rule social relations in Jante, an imaginary (but all too real) village from his books from the 1930s. A dislike for differences must be part of the reason why Scandinavian electorates have supported such extensive welfare states. But it has also discouraged independent thinking. "Norway is a free country inhabited by unfree men", Ibsen wrote. His complaint was, in the second half of the 19th Century, with the failure of intellectual liberation to follow political liberalism.

It remains the case that Norway does less than other countries – outside of sports and some other fields – to cultivate exceptional abilities. For much of the post-war period it was even actively prevented; social democratic school policy centred on an extremely homogenising system known as "the unity school". Much like the A4 lifestyle, it caters well for the large majority of average talent; less so for those at the very bottom or at the very top. The upshot of a heavily consensual culture combined with an educational system aiming for the middle is that Norway has little in the way of a critical public. Shared prosperity has come with a tolerance for intellectual and even practical mediocrity, even among the gatekeepers to the national debate – those in the media, but also in the professions and government.

[26] Note that this phenomenon is not limited to the Eurabia thesis or other right-wing views. In 2006, Jostein Gaarder (author of the global bestseller *Sophie's World*) criticised Israel's war in the Gaza strip with a comment article redolent of 1930s language about Jews.

The Breivik case provides two telling illustrations. The first is a scandal that was avoided by a whisker, in which the terrorist would have been cleared of criminal guilt despite his meticulous admission of what he had done. A non-conviction, which would have put him in forced psychiatric care, was nearly assured by two court-appointed expert psychiatrists who found Breivik psychotic, which under Norwegian law rules out criminal liability. Their leaked confidential report created enough consternation to prompt the court to appoint another pair of expert witnesses who found no psychosis, instead diagnosing Breivik with narcissistic personality disorder.

This was not simply a difference in professional judgment. The first report barely qualified as professional at all. Per Egil Hegge, one of Norway's most seasoned political journalists, bluntly dismissed its scientific status because "the conclusions bear no relationship to the premises". The text was poorly written; the descriptions of Breivik's behaviour in different examinations were verbatim repetitions of one another, as if they had all been written at the end of the observation process – which the psychiatrists later confirmed was largely the case. They qualified as "neologisms" terms used by Breivik (cultural Marxist, justiciar knight, and so on), which if outlandish, were hardly the sort of unintelligible utterances the International Classification of Diseases lists as a criterion for schizophrenia. To the psychiatrists, their own unfamiliarity with the terms seemed sufficient for treating them as symptoms of mental disease.

"Maybe it's just us who are a bit slow", one of them said in court. She meant it ironically. But with few exceptions (such as Hegge), nobody in Norway dared suggest that this was what their diagnosis rested on. Instead there was a striking unwillingness to suggest that two esteemed professionals could be incompetent. That their conclusions were mistaken, yes, or even that the whole discipline itself was ill suited to the task – these thoughts were widely argued, but always with great respect for its practitioners' authority. It was as if the public admitted that the emperor's new clothes were inappropriate, earnestly recognised the difficulty of finding the correct outfit for a monarch, and set up a commission to consider whether the office of the imperial morning dress ritual needed reform, but never could bring itself to mention or even notice the plain fact of his nudity. Even the prosecutors asked for an insanity verdict, on the grounds that the mere existence of the first report – which they seemingly found it inconceivable to jettison on the grounds of poor handiwork – created sufficient doubt about Breivik's sanity. (The court, of course, had to make a choice, and duly skewered the first report as well as the prosecution's servility to it.)

The other tale of accepted mediocrity came later the same year with the official enquiry into the authorities' response to Breivik's attacks. It found that a risk assessment had predicted the attack on the government headquarters in chilling detail, but no action

had been taken to secure it. It also blamed hopelessly inadequate training, communication systems and command lines for the fact that police arrived at the island of Utøya more than half an hour later than they could have done, enough for Breivik to kill dozens more youth politicians. It was a deep failure of governance, which in any other democracy would have toppled the government. Not so in Norway. A lone national newspaper called for his resignation, but the prime minister got away with expressing his regret and promising to "take responsibility by acting on the report". And across the country, there was an unwillingness to dwell on the basic, glaring incompetence with which both security and policing had clearly been managed.

What does this have to do with conspiracy theories? A lack of critical standards by which to judge arguments and performance mainly favours the status quo. But it also weakens the resistance to conspiratorial delusions – a sort of social Dunning-Kruger effect[27] – as it disables people from telling facts from suppositions and good arguments from bad. A public sphere in which celebrated intellectual or cultural "authorities" may flirt with, say, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion – which happens in Norway – without disqualifying themselves from being listened to is also one in which there is little to guide those seeking an alternative to the hegemonic social democratic consensus. An intellectually uncritical culture may even encourage conspiratorial thinking. Incompetence cannot always go unnoticed, and when it is noticed, it demands to be explained. For those not content to conform to the received view it is a short way to attributing covert malice to what is really unchallenged mediocrity.

[27] The Dunning-Kruger effect is the cognitive bias that leads incompetent people to overestimate their own competence while failing to recognise true competence where it exists.

Two and a half years ago, Political Capital (Hungary), Counterpoint (United Kingdom), the Center for Research on Prejudice (Poland), the Institute for Public Affairs (Slovakia), and the Zachor Foundation (Hungary) embarked on a project to develop an effective response to conspiracy theories in Europe. The aim of the project was both to build a stronger understanding of conspiracy theories and to explore how those conspiracy theories that pose a danger to democratic values can be dealt with and, if necessary, short-circuited. This compilation brings together some of the written highlights from our project.

With the recent furore surrounding the anti-Semitic comedian Dieudonné in France, last year's scandal in Hungary over the state award given to conspiracy theorist and journalist Ferenc Szaniszló, and the surge in support for some populist parties at the European Parliament elections, it appears that the context in Europe is still highly favourable for conspiracy theories. We hope that these different pieces can provide a guide for understanding why they have such appeal.

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