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GERMANY

“WE TAKE OUR HOUSE BACK!”

Containing the fringe conspiracy movements in the United States.
Lessons for Germany.

Abstract

The purpose of this policy-oriented report is to explore possible damage control strategies after anti-government, identity-based fringe conspiracy theories have successfully penetrated public debate and mainstream politics as consolidated conspiracy movements. The focus lies on conspiracies rejecting the political status quo in Germany and the United States, such as questioning election results (QAnon) and the legality of government (Reichsbürger, Querdenken). Based on the American experiences, embracing its unique institutional, systemic, and cultural settings, it will conclude by identifying best practices and producing practice-oriented, evidence-based policy recommendations for possible application in Germany and beyond.

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Introduction

Germany and the United States are key actors in the international arena. They are close allies in global security and economic architecture (NATO, G7). Conspiracy movements targeting established governance structures often question the value of the transatlantic alliance and "Western values," instead favoring a multipolar world and expressing support towards alternative centers of power. Their political exploitation and potential impact might increase as both the United States and Germany are facing federal elections, which exacerbates political competition. The threat posed by exploiting fringe conspiracy theories and movements for instant political gains becomes real on both sides of the Atlantic.

The leading questions underlying this research were: What are the main anti-government, identity-based fringe conspiracy theories questioning the democratic order in the United States and Germany? Which were used to impact the public debate and mainstream politics in these respective countries? What measures have been taken by state and non-state actors to contain the spread of conspiracy theories and movements in the United States, especially in the aftermath of the attack on the U.S. Capitol riot? Which measures tested in the United States could be transferred and adapted in Germany?

Research methods included a literature review, primary sources analysis (manifests, statements, other original materials), and secondary sources analysis (media reports), as well as interviews with experts, academics, and practitioners in the field based in the United States.

What is a conspiracy theory?

The common and accepted understanding of conspiracy theory is an explanation of disruptive or traumatizing events, like crises or catastrophes, as an alternative to information provided by authorities or other legitimate sources of knowledge, like science and academia. The suspicion of existing conspiracy lies at its core: a forbidden act performed in secret by a specific group, or a collective action aimed against the common good.¹ Three distinctive attributes of conspiracy thinking are 1. the existence of mighty conspirators (agency), 2. malevolence and secrecy (measures), and 3. the assault on the public interest of common people (objective). The epistemic baseline of conspiracy thinking is the recurring Manicheist motive of a battle between the good and the evil: us vs. them, the rich vs. the poor, and the elite vs. the masses. This dichotomy directly indicates the normative core of a conspiracy theory, with believers and their allies positioning themselves on the bright side of history, as morally superior and virtuous, or even ready for a fight and sacrifices for the greater good.

¹ Sarah J. Halford (2023) Conspiracy Movements: A Definitional Introduction and Theoretical Exploration of Organized Challenges to Epistemic Authority, *The Sociological Quarterly*, 64:2, 187-204, DOI: 10.1080/00380253.2022.2060147; Joseph E. Uscinski, Joseph M. Parent (2014). *American Conspiracy Theories*, Oxford University Press.

Conspiracy theories often recycle motives, narratives, and even factual incidents from the past. For example, event conspiracies try to explain single incidents, like the assassination of JFK or the emergence of a new coronavirus. Systemic conspiracies assume the existence of a bigger plot aiming to seize power, for example accusing Jews or Freemasons of such malevolent inclinations to control and suppress the population by steering migration flows, mass application of military technology, or orchestrating natural disasters. Single beliefs can also become part of broader super-conspiracies, accumulating diverse plots together in a generalized conspiracy worldview.² Finally, there also are meta-conspiracies ('false flags'³): conspiracy theories about the arranged and organized emergence of theories conspiracy theories.⁴ Although not necessarily improbable or irrational, conspiracy theories are prone to falsity as they often merge various beliefs, sometimes mutually contradicting. By analogy, conspiracy movements unite on the basis of conspiracy theories, with the overall goal of exposing and undermining the conspirators.⁵

Conspiracy theories differ from propaganda as they emerge from the bottom-up in a creative act of folklore, as opposed to top-down government communication. They differ from disinformation as their spread is spontaneous, as opposed to a planned and systemic dissemination of falsity. However, conspiracy theories can be purposefully utilized for both propaganda and disinformation or for mobilizing movements that do not originate from conspiracy theories but embrace conspiracy beliefs. In other words, conspiracy theories are not a security threat until they become weaponized as such.

Social and political impact of conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories are often compared to a virus in the air, spreading uncontrollably in the population under favorable conditions. But, not all members of the public are equally susceptible to conspiracy theories, let alone forming conspiracy-inspired movements. There is evidence that conspiracy beliefs satisfy a desire for entertainment - some people follow and share them for fun, which might disrupt the quantification of their factual salience.⁶ There is no universal profile of a conspiracy theorist, but some individuals are more prone to conspiracism than others. The underlying psychological factors are the most accurate in predicting a general susceptibility to conspiracy thinking. A set of cognitive traits contributes to a conspiracy mentality or

² Jørgen Eikvar Axelsen, Terje Emberland, What is a conspiracy theory?, C-REX - Center for Research on Extremism, University of Oslo, <https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/groups/compendium/what-is-a-conspiracy-theory.html>.

³ Sam Jacksn (2017) Conspiracy theories in the patriot/militia movement, Program on Extremism, George Washington University, May 2017, p. 11, <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/downloads/Jackson%2C%20Conspiracy%20Theories%20Final.pdf>

⁴ Nera, K., Leveaux, S., & Klein, P. (2020). A "Conspiracy Theory" Conspiracy? A Mixed Methods Investigation of Laypeople's Rejection (and Acceptance) of a Controversial Label, <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/A-%E2%80%9CConspiracy-Theory%E2%80%9D-Conspiracy-A-Mixed-Methods-of-Nera-Leveaux/54dd281f495340b18b9fecf3485cb209514ffdf0?p2df>

⁵ Sarah J. Halford (2023) Conspiracy Movements: A Definitional Introduction and Theoretical Exploration of Organized Challenges to Epistemic Authority, *The Sociological Quarterly*, 64:2, 187-204, DOI: 10.1080/00380253.2022.2060147

⁶ Hornsey, M.J., Bierwiaczonek, K., Sassenberg, K. *et al.* Individual, intergroup and nation-level influences on belief in conspiracy theories. *Nat Rev Psychol* 2, 85–97 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44159-022-00133-0>.

conspiracy ideation⁷, which in some cases might be augmented by the existence of a mix of anti-social personality traits (dogmatism, a tendency to be argumentative)⁸ or the co-existing dark triad of personality (Machavellism, narcissism, psychopathy).⁹

The disposition to conspiracy thinking results from the effect conspiracy theories have on an average individual: reducing uncertainty when information is unavailable, offering the feeling of safety, security and a sense of control, maintaining a positive image of the self and the in-group.¹⁰ Motivated reasoning leads to worldview-confirming conclusions through a selective interpretation of information supporting the original position.¹¹ This explains why conspiracy theories are so easily utilized in the political context. They follow partisan identification, reinforcing the 'us against them' attitude: favoring in-group and self-validation.¹² They also are far more effective in individuals exhibiting populist attitudes, supporting political violence¹³ and extreme right-wing positions.¹⁴ Conspiracy beliefs are also convincing when they result from the experienced collective trauma of abuse, discrimination, or real conspiracies in the past.

Conspiracy movements existed long before the rise of mass and social media, feeding on conspiracy beliefs transmitted by other channels of communication, like written pamphlets, oral history, or simple gossip. The blood libel or accusations of witchcraft are examples of past conspiracy thinking that resulted in pogroms targeting minorities. Today, modern challenges facilitate the emergence of new conspiracy theories, such as 'the Great Replacement' addressing migration pressures, 'New World Order' reflecting economic crises, 'the Climate Hoax' as an answer to climate change," or 'the Plandemic' developing parallelly with the spread of COVID-19.

As such, conspiracy beliefs might lead to distrust in institutions and science as legitimate sources of knowledge. There is a recursive link here: low trust may make individuals more susceptible to conspiracy theories and conspiracy theories further erode trust.¹⁵ Conspiracy theories might also divert people from standard ways of political participation, especially if combined with the pre-existing feeling of political

⁷ Enders, A.M., Diekman, A., Klofstad, C. et al. On modeling the correlates of conspiracy thinking. *Sci Rep* 13, 8325 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-34391-6>.

⁸ Enders, A.M., Diekman, A., Klofstad, C. et al. On modeling the correlates of conspiracy thinking. *Sci Rep* 13, 8325 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-34391-6>.

⁹ Uscinski, J., Enders, A., Diekman, A. et al. The psychological and political correlates of conspiracy theory beliefs. *Sci Rep* 12, 21672 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-022-25617-0>.

¹⁰ Douglas, K. M., Sutton, R. M., & Cichocka, A. (2017). The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 26(6), 538-542. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721417718261>.

¹¹ Miller, J.M., Saunders, K.L. and Farhart, C.E. (2016), Conspiracy Endorsement as Motivated Reasoning: The Moderating Roles of Political Knowledge and Trust. *American Journal of Political Science*, 60: 824-844. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12234>.

¹² Smallpage, S. M., Enders, A. M., & Uscinski, J. E. (2017). The partisan contours of conspiracy theory beliefs. *Research & Politics*, 4(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168017746554>.

¹³ Uscinski, J., Enders, A., Diekman, A. et al. The psychological and political correlates of conspiracy theory beliefs. *Sci Rep* 12, 21672 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-022-25617-0>.

¹⁴ Imhoff, R., Zimmer, F., Klein, O. et al. Conspiracy mentality and political orientation across 26 countries. *Nat Hum Behav* 6, 392–403 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01258-7>.

¹⁵ Mari, S., Gil de Zúñiga, H., Suerdem, A., Hanke, K., Brown, G., Vilar, R., Boer, D. and Bilewicz, M. (2022), Conspiracy Theories and Institutional Trust: Examining the Role of Uncertainty Avoidance and Active Social Media Use. *Political Psychology*, 43: 277-296. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12754>.

powerlessness¹⁶ and provoke minor antisocial behaviors. For example, conspiracy beliefs around COVID-19 circulating freely in social media resulted in anti-social behaviors, such as vaccine hesitancy or the rejection of measures for reducing the spread of the virus, like wearing masks.¹⁷ Such incidents may result in the increased perception of conspiracy theories. Initial empirical research also suggests that the belief in conspiracy theories correlates with the rejection of democracy and may increase the support for autocracy.¹⁸

What creates the social and political impact of conspiracy theories is their commodification and instrumentalization. It is the direct economic interest of diverse content platforms, such as digital media or social media, to host conspiracy theories. Obligatory and customary content moderation is a very laborious process, often involving manual interventions next to automated processes. Meanwhile, the creation and consumption of engaging content by their users result in its direct monetization. Politics is a vital element of the media environment, and these two often form a symbiotic relationship. Media exposure elevates political figures and gives them visibility. Conspiracy theories are profitable content for political entrepreneurship as they generate attention. Although sharing them makes a bad impression on the general population, research suggests that politicians communicating conspiracy beliefs are viewed as outsiders who can possibly bring about change.¹⁹ Therefore, evoking strong conspiracy beliefs can mobilize voters, not only with their final commitment at the ballot box but also with voluntary activism and financial contributions.

A real threat emerges when conspiracy theories acquire an anti-government, identity-based character and become exploited for a particular political agenda or used to instigate violence. Due to their mobilization potential and emotional appeal, they can easily be instrumentalized to distort mainstream politics. If legitimized in public space, they can spark the formation of autonomous organizations with political ambitions, moving them dangerously close to domestic terrorism. This was the case in Germany in 2020 and the United States in 2021.

Conspiracism in the United States and Germany

The turbulent times and continuous polycrisis associated with the unending COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing armed conflicts engaging Western countries (in Ukraine and in Gaza), economic crisis, and rising costs of living, finally such permanent meta-challenges like climate change or migration pressures will with high

¹⁶ Jolley, D. and Douglas, K.M. (2014), The social consequences of conspiracism: Exposure to conspiracy theories decreases intentions to engage in politics and to reduce one's carbon footprint. *Br J Psychol*, 105: 35-56. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12018>; Ardèvol-Abreu, A., Gil de Zúñiga, H. and Gámez, E. (2020), The influence of conspiracy beliefs on conventional and unconventional forms of political participation: The mediating role of political efficacy. *Br. J. Soc. Psychol.*, 59: 549-569. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12366>.

¹⁷ Giancola M, Palmiero M, D'Amico S. Dark Triad and COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy: the role of conspiracy beliefs and risk perception. *Curr Psychol*. 2023 Mar 31:1-13. doi: 10.1007/s12144-023-04609-x. Epub ahead of print. PMID: 37359671; PMCID: PMC10064627; Jennings W, Stoker G, Bunting H, Valgarðsson VO, Gaskell J, Devine D, McKay L, Mills MC. Lack of Trust, Conspiracy Beliefs, and Social Media Use Predict COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy. *Vaccines (Basel)*. 2021 Jun 3;9(6):593. doi: 10.3390/vaccines9060593. PMID: 34204971; PMCID: PMC8226842.

¹⁸ Papaioannou K., Pantazi M., van Prooijen J. (2023). Is democracy under threat? Why belief in conspiracy theories predicts autocratic attitudes, *European Journal of Social Psychology*, Volume 53, Issue 5, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/ejsp.2939>.

¹⁹ Ricky Green, Daniel Toribio-Flórez, Karen M. Douglas, James W. Brunkow, Robbie M. Sutton, Making an impression: The effects of sharing conspiracy theories, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Volume 104, 2023, 104398, ISSN 0022-1031, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2022.104398>.

probability intensify political competition and possibly increase the presence of conspiracy theories in the public sphere. In recent years, both the United States and Germany have witnessed the rise of fringe conspiracy movements²⁰ that question democratic legal order and proclaim selective criteria of belonging to a national community, assuming the existence of secret traitors and external enemies.²¹ Such disruptive actors also express the readiness to overturn the current system by dismantling the rule of law or gaining power by violence.

Due to the long-lasting legacy of the 1964 book *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* by Richard Hofstadter, it was long believed that conspiracy theories are specific to the political culture of the United States. Five decades later, it proves not to be the case. Empirical research renders evidence that the level of conspiracy thinking is similar in Europe and the United States.²² Yet, the “Trump era” saw a rapid rise of conspiracy theories in the United States.²³ Political and racial violence aimed against individuals, not property damage, has peaked since the 1970s.²⁴ In 2022 in Germany, too, politically motivated crimes have reached the highest level since the beginning of reporting in 2001²⁵. Many of these incidents were associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, which nudged far-right conspiracy groups to become increasingly violent.²⁶ Conspiracy theories have risen to a collective dimension by making political claims and forming coalitions.²⁷

Echoes of conspiracies are already present in the rhetoric of the MAGA wing (‘Make America Great Again’ movement derived from Donald Trump’s 2016 campaign slogan) of the Republican Party in the United States or the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) party in Germany. Nevertheless, conspiracies can develop not only along right or left-wing extremism but also as a non-normative engagement. It is crucial to underline that it is not a matter of favoring specific policies or leaders against others but pursuing a distinctive style of politics with no accountability for words (escalation, antagonization, disinformation) and no respect for the rule of law (denouncing democratic processes and institutions, endorsing violence).

²⁰ Halford S. (2022). Conspiracy Movements: A Definitional Introduction and Theoretical Exploration of Organized Challenges to Epistemic Authority, April 2022, *Sociological Quarterly* 64(12), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00380253.2022.2060147>.

²¹ Axelsen J.E., Emberland T. What is a conspiracy theory?, C-REX Compendium, Center for Research on Extremism, University of Oslo, <https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/groups/compendium/what-is-a-conspiracy-theory.html>.

²² Walter, A. S., & Drochon, H. (2022). Conspiracy Thinking in Europe and America: A Comparative Study. *Political Studies*, 70(2), 483-501. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321720972616>.

²³ Chenoweth E., Leung T., Perkins N., Pressman J., Ulfelder J., The Trump Years Launched the Biggest Sustained Protest Movement in the United States History. It's Not Over, *Washington Post*, 8 February 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/02/08/trump-years-launched-biggest-sustained-protest-movement-us-history-its-not-over/>; Galea S Social Movements in the Trump Era, Boston University School of Public Health, <https://www.bu.edu/sph/news/articles/2018/social-movements-in-the-trump-era/>.

²⁴ Parker N, Eisler P., Political violence in polarized the United States at its worst since 1970s, *Reuters*, 9 August 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-politics-violence/>.

²⁵ Politisch motivierte Kriminalität erreicht neuen Höchststand, Bundesministerium des Innen und für Heimat, 9 May 2023, <https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/kurzmeldungen/DE/2023/05/fallzahlen-pmk-2022.html>.

²⁶ Politisch motivierte Kriminalität erreicht neuen Höchststand, Die Bundesregierung, 11 May 2022, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/kriminalitaetsstatistik-pmk-2016140>.

²⁷ Bertuzzi N. (2021). Conspiracy theories and social movements studies: A research agenda, *Sociology Compass*, Volume15, Issue12, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12945>.

The *QAnon* conspiracy theory ('Q' as the highest security clearance in the Department of Energy and 'Anon' as anonymous) first emerged as a baseless Internet movement and gained traction during the COVID-19 pandemic, fueled by the conspiracy theories around the global pandemic.²⁸ The three core beliefs shared by its followers were that "the government, media, and financial worlds in the United States are controlled by a group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who run a global child sex trafficking operation", "there is a storm coming soon that will sweep away the elites in power and restore the rightful leaders", and "true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country".²⁹ Donald Trump, former U.S. president, was also the only genuine leader working behind the scenes to overcome these threats.³⁰ Before escalating in 2021 on the basis of an alleged electoral fraud, *QAnon* conspiracy theories inspired single violent incidents when individuals led by dubious beliefs committed violent crimes against their family members or strangers.³¹

Similarly to the American *QAnon*, the *Querdenken* movement (literally translating as 'cross-thinking', meaning thinking out of the box, connecting the dots) in Germany started as a protest platform against government restrictions to curb the COVID-19 pandemic. Although not centrally organized and not inherently extremist, it embraced some of the conspiracy theories about the harmful effects of vaccinations or the origin of the novel coronavirus. Gradually it also opened to right-wing extremism, like the neo-Nazi party *Der III. Weg*, the right-wing extremist party NPD, the far-right AfD party, as well as the extreme far-right organization *DIE RECHTE* and the Identitarian Movement. They also overlapped with the *Reichsbürger* movement (citizens of the Reich, referring to the German statehood prior to 1945), which rejected the existence of the Federal Republic of Germany and its legal system, denying the legitimacy of democratically elected representatives.³² In 2021, six individuals of the Saxony *Querdenken* milieu were suspected of plotting the murder of the local Prime Minister Michael Kretschmer and other members of the Saxon cabinet.³³ In 2022, as a result of a country-wide raid, 25 members of the *Reichsbürger* scene were arrested on suspicion of terrorism (planning a coup).³⁴ There were clear indications that the movement was becoming increasingly violent.

²⁸ Jeremiah Morelock, Felipe Ziotti Narita, The Nexus of QAnon and COVID-19: Legitimation Crisis and Epistemic Crisis, *Critical Sociology* 2022, Vol. 48(6) 1005–1024 DOI: 10.1177/08969205211069614.

²⁹ PRRI Staff, Understanding QAnon's Connection to American Politics, Religion, and Media Consumption, Public Religion Research Institute, 27 May 2021, <https://www.prrri.org/research/QAnon-conspiracy-american-politics-report/>.

³⁰ Moskalenko, Sophia, and Clark McCauley. "QAnon: Radical Opinion versus Radical Action." *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2021, pp. 142–46. JSTOR, p. 142, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27007300>. Accessed 23 Sept. 2024.

³¹ Sophia Moskalenko, The perfect storm: Radicalization into QAnon, April 2022, Conference: International Studies Association (ISA), Nashville, TN USA, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/359828335_Radicalization_into_QAnon.

³² „Reichsbürger“ und „Selbstverwalter“, Begriff und Erscheinungsformen, Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/DE/themen/reichsbuerger-und-selbstverwalter/begriff-und-erscheinungsformen/begriff-und-erscheinungsformen_node.html.

³³ Daniel H. Heinke, "The Security Threat Posed by the Corona-skeptic Querdenken Movement in Germany", CTC Sentinel, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, March 2020, Volume 15, Issue 3, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-security-threat-posed-by-the-corona-skeptic-querdenken-movement-in-germany/>.

³⁴ Exekutivmaßnahmen gegen Vereinigung aus „Reichsbürger“-Spektrum, Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, <https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/SharedDocs/hintergruende/DE/reichsbuerger-und-selbstverwalter/exekutivmassnahmen-gegen-reichsbuerger-spektrum.html>; <https://www.generalbundesanwalt.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/DE/2022/Pressemitteilung-vom-07-12-2022.html>.

The most prominent impact of proliferating fringe conspiracy movements was physical attacks on symbolic buildings: on August 29, 2020, the eclectic crowd, among them *Reichsbürger*, led by *Querdenken* movement, stormed the Reichstag in Berlin; on January 6, 2021, the armed mob led by *QAnon* conspiracy attacked United States Capitol in Washington DC. There were striking similarities between these events. Riots in the United States and Germany used similar patriotic nomenclature demanding “taking their house back” and rejecting the legitimacy of current governments. A study conducted on a group of veterans who participated in the U.S. Capitol riot revealed that they were driven by patriotism in reaction to alleged election fraud and a strong sense of injustice.³⁵ This echoes interviews conducted with followers of the *Querdenken* movement who during the pandemic saw the country slipping into authoritarianism, a trend towards dictatorship, “total enslavement”. They drew comparisons with the Nazi regime or the communist German Democratic Republic (DDR).³⁶ Other veteran participants of the U.S. Capitol riot were driven by a proclivity for militarism combined with exclusionary patriotism and nationalism³⁷, which resonates with three types of *Querdenken* followers: conspiracy believers, esotericists, and the most radical right-wing nationalists.³⁸ Also, the idea of organized child abuse by elites central to *QAnon* was present in *Querdenken* in Germany,³⁹ which joined forces with *Reichsbürger* and the German chapter of *QAnon*.⁴⁰ The same communication tools (social media and popular communicators) and mirroring mobilization tactics were used in both countries to create momentum for attempted insurrections. But single events are unlikely to overturn a government overnight. Their instigators and the most violent individuals faced consequences. In the United States, 1.116 people were charged and 602 so far sentenced.⁴¹ In Germany, a total of 85 cases have been under investigation.⁴² On both sides of the Atlantic, these attacks were considered symbolic assaults on democracy⁴³. A taboo was broken when words

³⁵ Hodges, E. B. (2021). “Storming the Castle.” Examining the Motivations of the Veterans Who Participated in the Capitol Riots. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 7(3), pp. 46–59. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v7i3.274>.

³⁶ Johannes Pantenburg, Sven Reichardt und Benedikt Sepp, *Wissensparallelwelten der »Querdenker«*, in: *Die Misstrauensgemeinschaft der »Querdenker« : Die Corona-Protteste aus kultur- und sozialwissenschaftlicher Perspektive / Reichardt, Sven (Hrsg.). - Frankfurt : Campus Verlag, 2021. - S. 29-66. - ISBN 978-3-593-51458-1, p. 34, <https://kops.uni-konstanz.de/server/api/core/bitstreams/42268454-795b-4502-95cf-b9409f9f87a0/content>.*

³⁷ Hodges, E. B. (2021). “Storming the Castle.” Examining the Motivations of the Veterans Who Participated in the Capitol Riots. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 7(3), pp. 46–59. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v7i3.274>.

³⁸ Oliver Nachtwey, Johannes Truffer, Nadine Frei, Typen des Querdenkertums. Befunde der Mixed-Methods-Analyse der Coronaprotteste, in: *Ad-Hoc: Polarisierung und Pandemie: Protteste gegen Corona Maßnahmen, Polariserte Welten. Verhandlungen des 41. Kongresses der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Soziologie 2022, https://publikationen.sozioogie.de/index.php/kongressband_2022/article/view/1595/1749.*

³⁹ Zehring, M., & Domahidi, E. (2023). German Corona Protest Mobilizers on Telegram and Their Relations to the Far Right: A Network and Topic Analysis. *Social Media + Society*, 9(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231155106>.

⁴⁰ Josef Holnburger, Maheba Goedeke Tort, Pia Lamberty, *Q VADIS? Zur Verbreitung von QAnon im deutschsprachigen Raum*, CeMAS – Center für Monitoring, Analyse und Strategie, Berlin, März 2022, https://cemas.io/publikationen/q-vadis-zur-verbreitung-von-qanon-im-deutschsprachigen-raum/CeMAS_Q_Vadis_Zur_Verbreitung_von_QAnon_im_deutschsprachigen_Raum.pdf; Bárbara Molas, *The Insurrection Wave: A Comparative Assessment of AntiGovernment Attacks in Germany, the US, and Brazil*, ICCT Policy Brief, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, September 2023, p. 5-6, <https://www.icct.nl/sites/default/files/2023-09/Molas%20-%20The%20Insurrection%20Wave%20final%20to%20publish.pdf>.

⁴¹ The Jan. 6 attack: The cases behind the biggest criminal investigation in the United States history, NPR, 8 September 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/09/965472049/the-capitol-siege-the-arrested-and-their-stories>; Most wanted, the United States Capitol Violence, FBI, <https://www.fbi.gov/wanted/capitol-violence#Seeking-Info>; the United States Attorneys, District of Columbia, Capitol Breach Investigation Resource Page <https://www.justice.gov/usao-dc/capitol-breach-cases>.

⁴² Schmalz A. Sturm auf Reichstag: 85 Verfahren, *Berliner Zeitung*, 22 June 2022, <https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/news/sturm-auf-reichstag-85-verfahren-gegen-corona-kritiker-li.238946>.

⁴³ The Symbolism Behind The Capitol Building's Architecture, NPR, 10 January 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/10/955384378/the-symbolism-behind-the-capitol-buildings-architecture>; Sturm auf den Reichstag: "Ein Angriff auf die Demokratie", *Zeit Online*, 28 August 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=11&v=CEs2B4-ITpl&embeds_referring_euri=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.zeit.de%2F&source_ve_path=Mjg2NjY&feature=emb_logo.

were put into action. Procedural justice worked, yet the problem of proliferating fringe conspiracy movements persists.

Meanwhile, during the neck-and-neck 2024 presidential campaign in the United States, conspiracy theories were instrumentalized to mobilize certain segments of voters, especially the most radical MAGA supporters. Particularly, the topic of illegal migration was exploited in diverse contexts. First, during the presidential debate, the Republican candidate claimed that prisons around the world were emptying as criminals and terrorists were sent to the United States and hunting pets of Americans.⁴⁴ During a rally in Aurora, CO, he also claimed that Venezuelan gangs were taking over American cities and rural areas.⁴⁵ Second, in response to extreme weather events of hurricanes Helene and Milton, Georgia's congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene, a staunch MAGA supporter, claimed that government agencies were controlling the weather.⁴⁶ Fact-checking does not support this thesis, identifying it as misinformation.⁴⁷ Last but not least, diverse conspiracy theories emerged around the legitimacy of the elections. One claimed that in an orchestrated effort, the Biden-Harris administration was admitting illegal immigrants to the United States in order to increase the participation rate in the elections in favor of the Democratic candidates to beat Donald Trump. Such views about 'importing voters' were expressed for example by the influential owner of X, Elon Musk⁴⁸, active Republican politicians, like Florida's Senator Rick Scott⁴⁹ and Florida's Congressman Brian Mast⁵⁰, and Donald Trump himself. Independent research does not support this thesis,⁵¹ but a similar narrative is expressed by the AfD in Germany, whose representatives claim that expanding voting rights to residency holders is a strategy to improve the election performance center-left and green parties.⁵²

The dramatic lessons learned on January 6 made many concerned about the possible reaction of MAGA supporters to the unfavorable election result. Fear of yet another brutal riot is not unfounded. In the last weeks of the U.S. campaign, there were at least three attempted assassination attempts on Donald Trump. The combined impact of fringe conspiracy theories, deep partisan divisions, and the mainstreaming of politically motivated violence have made this campaign distinct from others.

⁴⁴ DEBATE REPLAY: VP Harris and former President Trump | ABC News Presidential Debate, ABC News, 11 September 2024, see: 29:30-29:50, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4dOgWZsDB6Q>.

⁴⁵ Trump plays up fears of Venezuelan gang in Colorado, Reuters, 12 October 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3iQT_xg-T8Y

⁴⁶ See: the official X account of Marjorie Taylor Greene: <https://x.com/mtgreenee/status/1842039774359462324>, <https://x.com/mtgreenee/status/1844810416720920675>, <https://x.com/mtgreenee/status/1844056573892579788>.

⁴⁷ Misinformation Floods Hurricane Season, FactCheck.org, 13 October 2024, <https://www.factcheck.org/2024/10/misinformation-floods-hurricane-season/>.

⁴⁸ See: the official X account of Elon Musk: <https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1765024395217473996>, <https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1817999713641062811>.

⁴⁹ See the official website of Rick Scott: <https://www.rickscott.senate.gov/2024/9/the-save-act-is-essential-in-preventing-illegal-immigrants-from-voting-and-protecting-integrity-of-us-elections>.

⁵⁰ See: the official website of Brian Mast: <https://mast.house.gov/2024/7/stop-joe-biden-from-importing-votes>.

⁵¹ Theresa Cardinal Brown, Theo Menon, Feyisayo Oyolola, Four Things to Know about Noncitizen Voting, Bipartisan Policy Center, 13 March 2024, <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/blog/four-things-to-know-about-noncitizen-voting/>.

⁵² See: the official website of the AfD faction in Bundestag: <https://afdbundestag.de/albrecht-glaser-wahlrecht-ist-ein-buergerrecht/>.

According to U.S. data, 41% of Americans heard about and believed in at least one conspiracy theory. About one-in-five Americans recognized and believed in at least one claim that originated from QAnon.⁵³ In Germany, 30% of the population believe that conspiracy theories are probably true or certainly true.⁵⁴ Recent incidents of politically motivated violence which culminated in consecutive attacks on government buildings in both capitals call for a more solution-oriented analysis of the politicization of conspiracy beliefs.

Mitigating risks, neutralizing the impact

Conspiracy beliefs might lead to distrust in institutions and science as legitimate sources of knowledge. They might also divert people from standard ways of political participation and provoke minor antisocial behaviors. These are, without doubt, all negative effects that conspiracy beliefs can have on individuals. But, a real threat occurs when conspiracy theories are purposely exploited to create mass mobilization, transcending beyond the individual level and reaching social and political dimensions. The commodification of conspiracy theories plays a central role in analyzing how they are instrumentalized by political actors and their allies to serve political agenda and communication platforms to generate revenue.

The orchestrated spread of fringe conspiracy theories based on anti-government and identity messaging via communication technologies for the purpose of threatening mainstream politics should be perceived as a security threat and requiring public policy approach. Below are a few practical ideas on how to address the risks resulting from conspiracy theories, especially those rejecting the legality of the political status quo through extremist views and political violence. They refer to the control and regulation of content platforms, media and internet literacy (MIL) education, civic preparedness, and transparency and integrity in political practice.

Regulation of content platforms

Although conspiracy theories existed long before the emergence of mass media, indisputably, the rise of social media has rendered new technological possibilities for them not only to diffuse on a mass scale but also to be instrumentalized for different purposes and interests. The outreach potential of these echo chambers is visible daily and intensifies periodically in times of crises (like natural disasters or global health emergencies) or increased political competition (like in the pre-election period).

The European legislation is a role model for introducing a legal obligation for more accountability among content platforms and search engines. Adopted in 2022, the Digital Services Act aims at “ensuring a safe,

⁵³ QAnon and Conspiracy Beliefs, Institute for Strategic Dialogue 2020, <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/QAnon-and-conspiracy-beliefs/>.

⁵⁴ Jochen Roose, Sie sind überall Eine repräsentative Umfrage zu Verschwörungstheorien, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V., 2020, <https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/7995358/Eine+repr%C3%A4sentative+Umfrage+zu+Verschw%C3%B6rungstheorien.pdf/0f422364-9ff1-b058-9b02-617e15f8bbd8?version=1.0&t=1599152043148>.

predictable and trusted online environment.” It reflects broadly the rules applicable to the offline environment, such as illegal hate speech or terrorist content and unlawful discriminatory content. The regulation does not impose any general monitoring obligation, active fact-finding obligation, or a general obligation to take proactive measures in relation to illegal content. Instead, it authorizes Member States to act against specific illegal content or to provide certain specific information.⁵⁵ And so, in August 2024, Pavel Durov, the founder and CEO of the Telegram communicator was arrested in France on charges of hosting illegal content as a provider of intermediary services.⁵⁶ Outside the EU, recent decisive steps of the Brazilian government against the owner of X, investigated for obstruction of justice, involvement in a criminal organization, and incitement to crime as part of the Digital Militias Inquiry, will set a blueprint for government action.⁵⁷

There is little hope that digital platforms will take content moderation seriously, for technical reasons and due to their vested economic interest. Resources needed to clear social media and other digital communication channels of fringe conspiracy theories are infinite, and removing such content clashes with the logic of profitability through monetizing it. Therefore, introducing formal regulation of digital content platforms seems a promising strategy to improve the quality of hosted content.

Media and Internet literacy education

The opposite side of content moderation is content consumption. The amplified effects that conspiracy theories have had in recent years, including the outburst of political violence, have placed the issue of building individual resilience in the spotlight. Facing the limited readiness and capability of digital platforms to control and moderate content, media and internet literacy education need to balance the supply side.

A possible answer in the preventive action might come from the behavioral corner: training new skills and unlearning old habits when consuming content disseminated by social, digital, or even traditional media. Media and Internet literacy education (MILE) education can help control the demand for conspiracy theories in individuals. An approach departing from mere cognitive skills must be applied, creating a critical consumer equipped with the knowledge of the media environment and sensitivity to political and ethical dimensions of consumed content. Unfortunately, very few countries include such training in their school curricula.

⁵⁵ Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market For Digital Services and amending Directive 2000/31/EC (Digital Services Act) (Text with EEA relevance), PE/30/2022/REV/1, Official Journal of the European Union, L 277/1, 27.10.2022, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32022R2065>

⁵⁶ Barbara Ortutay, What is Telegram and why was its CEO arrested in Paris?, Associated press, 28 August 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/telegram-pavel-durov-arrest-2c8015c102c23c23d55c6ca82641c5>.

⁵⁷ Rishi Iyengar, “Brazil Bans X, Escalating Elon Musk’s Free Speech Fight”, Foreign Policy, 5 September 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/09/05/elon-musk-brazil-x-ban-free-speech/>.

Civil dimension of security

In the last decade, democracy has sparked more interest among security experts. For example, since 2019, the idea has been discussed to create a Centre for Democratic Resilience within NATO structures, however, so far, without final results.⁵⁸

When debating the democracy-security nexus, it is worth including the concept of civil preparedness. It overlaps with the efforts for media and Internet literacy by bridging bottom-up activities with a more systemic policy-making and coordinated implementation. The idea of “total defense” was coined in the specific context of the Cold War and aimed at “the mobilization of the entire society for the potential purpose of war”.⁵⁹ Although that era is over, new challenges emerged with the development of information technologies and the fragmentation of communication channels. Hybrid threats revived the concept, which today has been included in the security and defense strategy of Finland⁶⁰ and Sweden.⁶¹ In the Finnish concept of comprehensive security, psychological resilience is equally relevant to the military and infrastructural dimensions. In Sweden, psychological defense understood as “the society’s common capabilities for detecting and resisting malign information influence (...) by antagonistic foreign powers,” is part of the civil defense strategy.⁶²

The above-described policy approaches still seem to be rather unique for Nordic countries, building on the communitarian and pragmatic spirit of these societies. Yet, considering how politically motivated the latest successful incidents of using fringe conspiracy theories for crowd mobilization have been, fighting misinformation must receive more attention from the national security interest and be included in broader strategies of security governance.

Transparency in governance

Conspiracy theories that question the motives of authorities are not always irrational. They often are a lasting legacy of poor handling of real conspiracies in the past. The silence around the role of pharmaceutical companies in the opioid crisis in the United States or the systemic cover-up of sexual abuse by clerics of diverse denominations are just a few glaring examples of public institutions successfully eroding institutional trust.

⁵⁸ Joe Brinker, The Case for a Centre for Democratic Resilience in NATO, NATO Parliamentary Assembly, <https://www.nato-pa.int/content/case-centre-democratic-resilience-nato>

⁵⁹ Jyri Raitasalo, Finnish Defense “Left of Bang”, PRISM Vol. 10, No. 2, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3323915/>.

⁶⁰ Concept of Comprehensive Security – Building National Resilience in Finland, Turvallisuuskomitea Puolustusministeriö, <https://turvallisuuskomitea.fi/concept-of-comprehensive-security-building-national-resilience-in-finland/>.

⁶¹ See: the official website of the Swedish Psychological Defence Agency, <https://www.mpf.se/psychological-defence-agency>.

⁶² Our mission, Psychological Defence Agency, <https://www.mpf.se/psychological-defence-agency/about-us/our-mission>.

Examining different styles of managing the COVID-19 pandemic renders valuable advice on how the authorities can handle crises in a constructive way. The evidence from three Scandinavian countries shows that the trust was higher among the Norwegian and Danish than Swedish citizens. Whereas Swedish government officials often communicated their decisions as based on the indisputable recommendations of the Public Health Authority, Danish and Norwegian leaders admitted the uncertainty of political judgments, disagreements among institutions, and insufficient knowledge faced by public health authorities, simultaneously admitting the political responsibility for decisive actions.⁶³

Meanwhile, in the United States, only 22% of Americans say they trust the government in Washington, with the levels of trust in government historically low since 2007.⁶⁴ In Germany, the situation is only slightly better, with 38% of citizens rather trusting and more than half (55%) rather not trusting the federal government. However, the level of trust in Germany seems to be more affected by the instability in the international arena (war in Ukraine, inflation) than the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, developing transparency in governance, both in terms of communicating difficult, controversial decisions to the public is therefore critical to building and sustaining popular trust in institutions.

Integrity in politics

Of all other factors contributing to the mobilization potential of conspiracy theories, political integrity plays a unique role. A political culture in which social peace and human safety do not fall a pawn in political competition and that sets standards of political communication that does not build on national narcissism and economic nativism seems to be in denial these days.

Conspiracy theories are profitable content for political entrepreneurship as they generate attention. Evoking strong conspiracy beliefs can mobilize voters. Although politicians engage with conspiracy movements or even proactively disseminate conspiracy theories, they seldom take responsibility for any negative consequences caused by uncontrolled mobilization, particularly when they result in political violence. Till today, Donald Trump denies any responsibility for the January 6 riot.⁶⁶ The AfD faction boycotted the standing ovation in parliament held for the police for defending the *Reichstag* from an angry mob.⁶⁷ The

⁶³ M. Sørensen, D. Evensen (2023). Framing the Covid-19 pandemic: A comparative analysis of Swedish and Danish crisis communication. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 31, 960–967. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5973.12486>; Øyvind Ihlen, Sine Nørholm Just, Jens E. Kjeldsen, Ragnhild Mølster, Truls Strand Offerdal, Joel Rasmussen & Eli Skogerbø (2022) Transparency beyond information disclosure: strategies of the Scandinavian public health authorities during the COVID-19 pandemic, *Journal of Risk Research*, 25:10, 1176-1189, DOI: 10.1080/13669877.2022.2077416

⁶⁴ Pew Research, Public Trust in Government: 1958-2024, 24 June 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/06/24/public-trust-in-government-1958-2024/>.

⁶⁵ Statista, Wie sehr vertrauen Sie der deutschen Regierung?, May 2024, <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/153823/umfrage/allgemeines-vertrauen-in-die-deutsche-regierung/>

⁶⁶ Trump dodges responsibility for Jan. 6, points to other politicians, NBC News, 6 July 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/now/video/trump-avoids-responsibility-for-jan-6-points-to-other-politicians-213856325911>.

⁶⁷ Polizei kritisiert AfD für ihren Ovationen-Boykott im Bundestag scharf, WELT, 10 September 2020, <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article215366414/Bundestag-Polizei-kritisiert-AfD-fuer-Ovationen-Boykott-scharf.html>.

leadership of the AfD in Bundestag rejected any liability when their members had let aggressive party activists into the German parliament on another occasion.⁶⁸

It lies with political parties to decide how far they can go in pursuing political goals. It also is the responsibility of party leadership to assume a corrective role and halt conspiracy theories and other forms of disinformation, let alone violent mobilization. Unwritten norms, social control and peer pressure should encourage civil political competition. This ethical dimension of politics is possibly the most difficult to fulfill.

Conclusions

Fighting fringe conspiracy theories is like tilting at windmills. When thinking about ways of mitigating their social and political risks, it is crucial to identify the root causes of their malign influence and not attribute it to the mere existence of conspiracy beliefs or the rise of mass media. Mitigating the mobilizing potential should also focus mostly on fringe, anti-government, and identity-based conspiracy theories and pursue their orchestrated instrumentalization.

Possible strategies for containing fringe conspiracy theories and curbing the rise of organized movements around them should target simultaneously the supply and demand side.

On the supply side, developing policies and measures for more control over the content produced and shared on digital platforms is advised. In particular, more content moderation efforts should be encouraged by the platforms as it seems to be the most effective way of curbing disinformation online. Looking beyond technical solutions, a change in political culture is needed. First, more transparency and dialogue with citizens can help rebuild institutional trust, especially in times of crisis. Second, accountability for the conscious instrumentalization of fringe conspiracy theories should be established and enforced, both in terms of soft measures, like inner party good conduct standards as well as hard measures, like formal accountability to the law if necessary.

On the demand side, increasing citizen resilience against disinformation and malign influence offers the most promising perspectives. On the one hand, it can be done by increasing media and Internet literacy skills through bottom-up education. On the other hand, a more systemic policy approach is needed to achieve the results in a more coordinated way, reaching all segments of society. Understanding democracy as a crucial dimension of security has to find ways of practical implementation.

⁶⁸ Für die AfD kommen die Störer im Bundestag zur Unzeit, WELT, 19 November 2020, <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article220581374/Corona-Aktivisten-Warum-die-Bundestagsstoerer-fuer-die-AfD-zur-Unzeit-kommen.html>.

Epilogue

On November 5th, 2024, the United States held presidential and general elections. During the campaign and directly after the elections, the presence of conspiracy narratives around voter fraud in public debate intensified; however, it did not lead to destabilizing violent events. The result of the 2024 ballot was not questioned, and both opponents conceded, with Kamala Harris acknowledging Donald Trump's victory. However, undermining the 2020 election result remains a recurring theme in MAGA circles. The memory of the 2021 events cast a shadow over the upcoming transition of power. It remains to be seen what will happen closer to the inauguration day, and if conspiracy theories, particularly around health, vaccines, and Big Pharma⁶⁹ will long-term shape public policies of the new administration.

Meanwhile, after the sudden collapse of the governing coalition in Germany one day after the U.S. ballot, the next federal election to Bundestag will take place in early 2025. Although Germany and the United States represent two radically different political systems, problems such as partisan polarization and the proliferation of disinformation increasingly affect both societies. Both countries also experience the rise of politically motivated violent attitudes. Therefore, there is space for fruitful exchange of observations and good practices on both sides of the Atlantic to mitigate risks and control damage caused by political instrumentalization of fringe conspiracy beliefs. Conclusions can be later directly applied to help address similar challenges, highlighting the democratic foundation of the transatlantic alliance.

⁶⁹ Sara Dorn, Stephen Pastis, RFK Jr.'s Conspiracy Theories: Here's What Trump's Pick For Health Secretary Has Promoted, Forbes, 15.11.2024, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/saradorn/2024/11/15/rfk-jrs-conspiracy-theories-heres-what-trumps-pick-for-health-secretary-has-promoted/>.

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