



Wilfried
Martens Centre
for European Studies

Suspicious Minds

Conspiracy Theories
in the Age of Populism

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Policy Brief

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Summary

In the last few years, digital platforms and social networks have provided a space for conspiracy theorists and theories to reach thousands of online users. As a consequence, some conspiracy theories have become part of the political debate at both the national and international levels. This policy brief provides a data-driven comparative analysis of a group of conspiracy-oriented Twitter accounts in Spain, Germany and Poland. The analysis suggests that there is a thematic alignment between conspiracy circles and populists. In particular, the data shows that both have similar positions on the mainstream media, the corrupt nature of governmental institutions and migration. Moreover, the analysis indicates that there are users who are active both nationally and internationally and give a conspiratorial reading of current affairs that influences populist approaches to these same issues.

Keywords Conspiracy theories – Populism – Social media – Fake news



Introduction

This short policy brief provides a data-driven introduction to some of the ways in which conspiracy theories are spread through online networks, and to the places and channels through which this is done. By comparing the networks and links shared in conspiracy-minded public conversations in three countries—Germany, Poland and Spain—it aims to stimulate a debate: how does the web contribute to the rise and spread of conspiracy theories, and how worried should we be?

The last decade has seen a fundamental shift in how we learn about the world around us and come to hold opinions. The digital revolution has democratised content production. Recent research by the British think tank Demos has demonstrated that social-media platforms are now the primary source of news for young British adults, and this is likely to be replicated across Europe.¹ When we look at online media sources, we see that the proliferation of competing voices is accelerating. In a digital marketplace that prioritises engagement above education, traditional standards of evidence and accuracy are being eroded.

Digital platforms have provided platforms for conspiracy theorists to reach hundreds of thousands of users. Terrorist and extremist organisations, who weave conspiracy thinking into their propaganda, have been highly successful in using digital channels to spread their messages. Quick to adapt to digital channels, political groups not traditionally afforded a platform have found their voice online. And they have frequently used these platforms to attack mainstream media sources. Moreover, these groups compete with mainstream sources for both viewers/readers and revenue. Critics have accused governing and opposition parties in Europe and abroad of peddling conspiracy theories or encouraging conspiracy thinking. This decline in trust is generally believed to have contributed to the rise of ‘misinformation’ or ‘fake news’, which is helping to shape the current political climate.²

¹ C. Miller, *The Rise of Digital Politics*, Demos (London, 2016); R. Fletcher et al., *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2018*, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (Oxford, 2018).

² The definitions of ‘misinformation’ and ‘fake news’ have become blurred over the past two years. ‘Fake news’ originally referred to the for-profit circulation of fictitious stories optimised for click-through to generate advertising revenue. However, its repeated invocation by President Donald Trump as a term of abuse for the wider mainstream media has corrupted this narrow definition. ‘Misinformation’ refers to the broader pollution of the information environment by actors and states. The incentives for producing misinformation are not restricted to financial gain through advertising. Rather, the objectives are often social or political in nature. For an overview of the problem and policy recommendations, see K. Niklewicz, *Weeding Out Fake News*, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies (Brussels, 2018).



In this environment, a range of groups have flourished whose politics is built on conspiracy thinking. Conspiracy theories are central to a wide variety of political forces that include neo-Nazis in Poland and Germany, anti-capitalist ‘black blocs’ and Islamic fundamentalists. Alongside these extreme examples, conspiracy themes are increasingly visible in mainstream political life: Donald Trump’s ‘deep state’; Bernie Sanders’ ‘one percent’; and in the UK a gamut of conspiracy theories around multiculturalism, immigration and the EU.

The role of the web in spreading conspiracy thinking is poorly understood. On the one hand, academics have pointed out that, even in the digital age, a broadly stable proportion of the population believe in specific conspiracy theories. On the other hand, the web has had a profound effect on the way these theories are transmitted. News is being proliferated that fails to conform to long-standing journalistic standards. The news cycle has been accelerated. The Internet has provided a stable and far-reaching public platform for conspiracy theories. Moreover, it has facilitated the international networking of conspiracy thinkers and the building of vast ‘ecosystems of falsehood’, with conspiracy theories now being promulgated with the help of thousands of videos, photos, essays, wikis and so on.

Shedding light on all this is crucial, and this must be done with the help of new data sources and methods of analysis. This policy brief attempts to do just that. Using Twitter as a case study, it attempts to provide a narrow window into the ways in which conspiracy theories are propagated in three countries.

Ethics

The research for this policy brief was conducted by Demos on behalf of the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies. Demos follows the British Social Policy Association’s ethical research guidelines. All data obtained for this project was stored securely on our internal server, was encrypted while in transit and has now been deleted. When analysing Facebook and Twitter, this project used only publicly available data, viewable by and visible to any user of the Internet. Moreover, all data was collected in compliance with the developer policy and terms of access defined by each data source.

As the study of conspiracy theories involves discussing influential individuals, including prominent journalists, bloggers and politicians, I have chosen to present some unaltered content sent from accounts belonging to these users. Aside from



these exceptional cases, all content presented below has been aggregated or anonymised. Where quotations from ‘regular’ users are used as examples, they have been bowdlerised: they have been altered to hide the identity of the users involved, but in such a way that the overall meaning is retained.

Methodology and findings

Demos researchers began the project with a short evidence-gathering phase that focused on the existing academic and journalistic coverage of conspiracy theories in the three countries: Germany, Poland and Spain. The objective was to select key conspiracy theory themes that were present in conversations across all three.

It is easier to provide a theoretical definition of ‘conspiracy theory’ than to determine what counts as a conspiracy theory in real life. Although the term is often used as a slur, it is used here to refer to views that (a) run counter to widely accepted understandings of facts, news or history and (b) lay responsibility for changes in the world at the door of a malicious, powerful elite—most frequently a political or economic elite. Conspiracy thinking embodies both of these elements. Conspiracy thinkers reject the commonly held consensus as false. They contend that the average man or woman has been misled by the efforts of the central elite, whose machinations are behind every event and activity that shape the world.

Our efforts were focused on capturing a segment of these online conversations. Some of the conspiracy theories we identified were restricted in circulation to a single country or a pair of countries. Examples include theories about the role of the EU in destroying European national identity through immigration, and the suppression of Catalan independence. In all three countries, analysts identified conspiracy theories that concerned

1. George Soros, and related topics with anti-Semitic overtones;
2. the Bilderberg Group;
3. vaccination; and
4. global warming.

Theories about these four areas were selected as the criteria for identifying public social-media accounts spreading conspiracy theories or at least content related to such theories. Our aim was to use this data to better understand the themes,



networks and influential accounts linked to conspiracy thinking in and across the three countries selected, with a view to supporting a discussion of the relationship between conspiracy thinking and populist politics.

Twitter analysis

The primary source of data for this project was Twitter's free public application protocol interface (API).³ Facebook data was unavailable during the research timeframes. Demos researchers hoped to be able to identify in each of the 3 countries a sample of 30 accounts that were sharing content related to the 4 themes noted above. We decided on the number 30 because we thought that a sample of this size could be thoroughly analysed, both qualitatively and quantitatively. Further research will be required to estimate how representative the views of our sample are within the wider conspiracy ecosystem.

To identify these accounts, a month-long data collection process was run on hashtags and keywords, in three languages, that are related to the four conspiracy theories noted above. This produced 22,100 tweets from 14,200 users. Of the accounts that had contributed at least 30 tweets during the month, 30 were chosen at random.

For each account, we recorded the public timeline of all tweets ever sent from it. Then we pseudo-anonymised these timelines by hashing usernames and IDs before our analysis.⁴

This data collection process resulted in 289,408 tweets from 85 users. Five users opted out of public data collection by protecting their tweets. The number of tweets collected from each country is shown in Table 1.

³ Twitter's API is the means by which a user can download public data about platform activity. It is provided by the platform.

⁴ Hashing generates a unique relational value based on the original username string. This allows analysis to be conducted independently of the username.



Table 1 Tweets and users per country

COUNTRY	NUMBER OF TWEETS	NUMBER OF USERS	AVERAGE NUMBER OF TWEETS PER USER
Germany	96,688	28	3,453.1
Poland	82,230	28	2,936.8
Spain	110,490	29	3,810.0

Link analysis

The first step in our analysis focused on the links to external sites that people had shared on Twitter. Link sharing was analysed to identify the similarities and differences between the users across the three countries with respect to the news and other websites they were sharing. This gave us a window into the digital ecosystem surrounding conspiracism. The users shared links to 45,653 pieces of online content from news websites, social-media posts and groups, and discussion forums. The 20 most frequently linked-to sites are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Top links shared

WEBSITE	SHARES	DESCRIPTION
ivoox.com	674	Podcast sharing
youtube.com	647	Video sharing
facebook.com	314	Social media
unfollowspy.com	119	Social media
smoloko.com	113	Conspiracy theorism/anti-Semitism
veteranstoday.com	109	Conspiracy theorism
usfreedomarmy.com	73	Conspiracy theorism
wp.me	66	Website builder
philosophia-perennis.com	57	Right-wing news (Germany)
goo.gl	57	Search engine
mirdig.wordpress.com	57	Conspiracy theorism/right-wing news (Spain)
gf24.pl	56	Finance (Poland)



WEBSITE	SHARES	DESCRIPTION
VK.com	56	Social media
dailymail.co.uk	53	Right-wing media (UK)
befitnowblog.com	53	Health
wyborcza.pl	51	Media
politikversagen.net	47	Far-right media (Germany)
guidograndt.de	46	Conspiracy theorism/right-wing news (Germany)
faz.net	46	Media (Germany)
thetruthseeker.co.uk	43	Conspiracy theorism

Commonly linked-to social-media and content-sharing platforms dominate the dataset. It is particularly striking that a lesser-known podcast and radio sharing site was linked to most often, an indication of the multichannel approach made possible by the online world. The external websites that the users share make it clear that they are interested in both conspiracy theories and far-right ideas. Six of the 20 sites are little-known websites and blogs pushing a range of conspiracy theories. Sites like Smoloko.com,⁵ VeteransToday.com and TheTruthSeeker.co.uk produce a range of conspiracy-related commentaries and editorials. These focus on anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, far-right anti-socialist narratives, and discussions of the deep state and false-flag terror.

The provenance of these websites is unclear. Some of the content on them bears a striking resemblance to fake news in that it is aimed at distributing misinformation and conspiracy theories under the guise of genuine reporting. Others are low-budget blogs apparently operated by a handful of authors or editors.

An overlapping category is represented by a small group of right-wing and far-right media outlets, such as philosophia-perennis.com⁶ and mirdig.wordpress.com.⁷ These outlets produce content that focuses on immigration, cultural and national identities, and criticism of the EU.

⁵ You can find an example here: <https://web.archive.org/web/20180605105347/http://smoloko.com/>.

⁶ Here are two examples: <https://philosophia-perennis.com/2018/04/21/linke-islamophile-homoverbaende-hoert-endlich-auf-eure-brueder-zu-verraten/> and <https://philosophia-perennis.com/2018/04/19/antisemitischer-guertelschlaeger-von-berlin-ist-syrischer-asylbewerber/>.

⁷ You can find an example here: <https://mirdig.wordpress.com/2018/04/24/la-irritante-superioridad-europea-que-nos-sigue-tratando-como-atrasados/>.



Hashtag analysis

The use of a hashtag on Twitter tends to signify an intent to comment on an issue and is a good indicator of the subject of the tweet. The users in our sample contributed 48,100 unique hashtags to the dataset. An analysis of the most prominent hashtags used by these users helps shed light on the topics they most frequently discuss.

Table 3 Top hashtags (in terms of the number of users who include a specific hashtag in tweets)

HASHTAG	NUMBER OF USERS	NUMBER OF TWEETS IN WHICH THE HASHTAG APPEARS
soros	70	914
trump	65	1,032
fakenews	65	446
usa	62	719
merkel	51	2,581
Israel	51	861
eu	50	807
putin	49	488
facebook	47	198
islam	44	652

A look at these hashtags suggests that the users in our sample focus on political issues: there is content pertaining to the US (#Trump, #USA), the EU, Germany and Israel.

Fifty-two per cent of the users tweeted using the hashtag #Islam. These tweets tended to be derogatory and complained about immigration, the lack of integration, the 'Islamification' of Western countries and the incompatibility of Islam and 'Western values'.

Seventy-six per cent of the users sent a tweet containing the hashtag #FakeNews. The majority of these tweets focused on Russian interference in Western countries, including the allegations of interference in the American elections in 2016, the 2018 chemical attack in Syria and the nerve agent attack in Salisbury in 2018.



Fifty-five per cent of the users tweeted about #Facebook. The focus here was on alleged cooperation between the giant tech companies and Western governments. Tweets sent by the users in our sample alleged that Facebook was censoring ‘real news’, promoting fake news, and banning conservative and alternative voices.

These themes are closely aligned with what we know about populist narratives in the period leading up to 2018. The censorship of ‘conservative’ voices, scepticism about the mainstream media and government centralisation, anti-Islamic arguments and support for populist politicians have been mainstays of populist discussions over the past years.

It is likely that the #Soros hashtag is over-represented due to our user selection criteria. But this suggests those criteria have been effective in identifying a core group of conspiracy-minded users.

Populist narratives and conspiratorial beliefs

A look at the hashtags and wider ecosystem of the users included in the study clearly indicates that the themes within our dataset are closely related to the themes frequently encountered in populist politics. To explore this further, our analysts took a sample of 750 tweets sent by users in the 3 countries (250 from each of the 3 countries included) and categorised them by theme. The results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4 Main themes in a sample of 750 tweets

THEME	NUMBER OF TWEETS IN WHICH THEME APPEARS	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL TWEETS IN WHICH THEME APPEARS
Cultural identity and immigration	211	28%
Domestic politics	164	22%
Crime	98	13%
International politics	91	12%
Media	57	8%
Other	129	17%

Cultural identity and immigration

The most common theme within the dataset was cultural identity and its preservation or destruction, and the incompatibility of the native cultural identity



with immigration. This theme is central to populist politics in 2018, and has formed a core part of the messages delivered by Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, Trump in the US, the Five Star Movement and Northern League (Lega Nord) in Italy, the Law and Justice Party in Poland and others.

Within conspiracy circles it is thought that mass immigration is being brought about intentionally: malevolent powers are deliberately allowing and encouraging immigration as part of a campaign of subjugation or ethnic-cleansing directed against the white race. Though the lines have increasingly become blurred, this is a position more commonly held by the far right, who campaign against what they consider to be white genocide. Here are two examples.

‘die migrantenpartei werden sie unsere heimatland bis zur unkenntlichkeit entstellen.’ (The migrant-friendly parties will change our homeland beyond recognition.⁸)

‘en una actitud de traición al país con la inmigración minando nuestra desarrollo y identidad’ (In an act of treason against the country, immigration is undermining our development and identity.)

Domestic politics

Tweets discussing domestic issues made up approximately a fifth of the dataset. Most identified mainstream politics as being corrupt, undemocratic or in some other way unfit for government. As will be discussed later, this is another theme that is prominent in both conspiracist and populist narratives: the centre is corrupt and unfit to govern, while the radical periphery represents the true voice of the people. The following two statements illustrate this theme.

‘Panie Przewodniczący! Żądam opublikowania sprawozdania na temat życia na wsi! natychmiast! twoja skorumpowana partia pluje nam w twarz!’ (Mr President! I demand the immediate publication of the report on rural life! Your corrupt party is spitting in our face!)

‘Qué defensa fuerte y valiente de aquellos luchadores que tienen la conciencia tranquila. busca políticos sobornados: ataca a la familia, les falta experiencia y autoridad moral. ¡fuera!’ (What a strong and brave defence of those fighters who have a clear conscience. Look at the corrupt politicians: attacking the family, they lack experience and moral authority. Out!)

⁸ All translations are by Demos translators.



Crime

Thirteen per cent of the tweets in the sample discussed crime and criminal activity. These tweets take a number of recognisable forms. Most often, the language in these tweets replicated a commonly used populist technique: relentlessly highlighting crimes committed by immigrants and non-whites, most commonly when the crime itself fits a given populist trope, such as the link between Islam and sexual offences. Alongside this reporting are expressions of outrage against the so-called mainstream media, which is accused of under-reporting crimes committed by migrants and non-whites to support a political agenda. Both of these approaches make use of selective evidence and news reporting to support an anti-migrant or anti-Islam political narrative.

Finally, accusations of criminal activity—frequently sex crimes against children—are central to conspiracy theories about governments. Notable recent examples are the accusations against Edward Heath in the UK, and John Podesta and the #PizzaGate conspiracy in the US. Although this is not a central theme among populists, it is worth noting that right-wing groups are extremely vocal about sex offences, particularly those involving children. Once again, one sees links between conspiracism and populism. Here are two examples of crime-related tweets.

‘Wir suchen nach diesem Raubtier nach einem Angriff auf einen 18-Jährigen aus #hannover am frühen Sonntag #Rapefugees #refugeesnotwelcome’ (We are looking for this predator following an attack on an eighteen-year-old from #Hannover early on Sunday #Rapefugees #refugeesnotwelcome)

‘aresztowany seryjny gwałcieciel’ (serial rapist arrested)

International politics

Tweets focusing on international politics made up 12% of the sample. For the most part, these focused on the conflict between Israel and Palestine, and contained significant amounts of anti-Semitic language. There were also tweets supportive of populist leaders in foreign countries, particularly Trump, Orbán and Putin. The following are two examples from this category.

‘israel y (((soros))) deben ser detenidos. son la causa de los problemas y son responsables de la crisis de refugiados’ (Israel and (((Soros))) must be stopped. They are the cause of the problems and are responsible for the refugee crisis.)



‘Die Geschichte wird sagen, dass die syrische armee hunderttausende von Terroristen aus 101 Ländern besiegt hat, die von #nato, #saudiarabia, #qatar und #israel finanziert und bewaffnet wurden.’
(History will show that the Syrian army defeated hundreds of thousands of terrorists from 101 countries financed and armed by #NATO, #SaudiArabia, #Qatar and #Israel.)

Media

Accounting for 8% of the tweets, the final category centres on the media and journalism. This category was predictably negative towards the media, accusing journalists of corruption, malpractice and bias: fake news. This is another theme that is shared by conspiracy thinkers and populists: both accuse the media of corruption and of failing to report on their causes in a neutral and fair manner. Here are two examples from this category.

‘@xxx jesteś oszustem i kłamcą, a twoja gazeta będzie pierwsza, kiedy ludzie się obudzą’ (@xxx, you are a cheat and a liar, and your magazine will be first [to go] when people wake up)

‘der neueste Idiot für @XXX zu schreiben. verschone mich die Lügen. #BLOCKED’ (The latest idiot writing for @XXX. Spare me the lies. #BLOCKED)

Others

The remaining 17% of the tweets were for the most part irrelevant or made no sense outside of their context. They include expressions of support or agreement, or are simply abusive.

Trust and overt conspiracism

Alongside the thematic analysis, the researchers coded the 750 tweets in accordance with whether a tweet showed a lack of trust in mainstream institutions and whether it referenced a commonly known trope of conspiracy thinking. Our aim was to determine the extent to which the language used by conspiracy thinkers on Twitter revealed trust or a lack of the same, and the extent to which their discussions directly dealt with known conspiracies. We found signs of mistrust in mainstream institutions in 48% of the 750 tweets. Moreover, 30% of these tweets explicitly referred to a well-known conspiracy theme.



Overt conspiracism

Fewer than a third of the tweets in the sample referred to well-known conspiracy theories. Given the basis on which we had identified the accounts in our sample, it was to be expected that theories about George Soros, the Bilderberg Group and global warming would be represented. However, other tropes of conspiracism were also well represented. In particular, anti-Semitic narratives, the QAnon conspiracy,⁹ white genocide,¹⁰ Antifa¹¹ and false flag¹² theories were all present in the data. Here are two examples.

‘attention #rothchild #bilderberg attempting to centralize, control #qanon’

‘Żydzi nie są zainteresowani nieruchomościami. miliony są dla nich ważne, ale nie ludzie . . . #jewishlies #soros’ (Jews are not interested in real estate. Money is important for them, but not people . . . #jewishlies #soros)

Nevertheless, it is striking that 70% of the tweets had nothing to do with known conspiracies. Rather, they focused on the themes discussed above: domestic politics, national identity and immigration, and crime. Despite being prominent voices in digital conspiracism, our sample dealt with issues that went far beyond conspiracy theories.

Trust and mistrust

Nearly half the tweets expressed a lack of trust in the media or mainstream institutions. This involved a broad range of themes, including accusations of bias, selective reporting and misinformation in the media. Mainstream politicians and institutions of government were derided as unfit for purpose, as shown in the domestic politics category above. Hashtags such as ‘#JewishLies’ were used to refer to alleged Jewish conspiracies, and more specifically, to accusations that Jewish interests control or influence the media. Left-wing and liberal figureheads

⁹ QAnon is a 2018 conspiracy theory that focuses on a wide-ranging plot by members of the US and global political elite to destabilise America, profit from child trafficking and bring down President Trump.

¹⁰ ‘White genocide’ is the catch-all term used by conspiracy theorists to describe the destruction of traditionally white territories through migration. The theory leans heavily on statistics related to migrant numbers and birth rates.

¹¹ ‘Antifa’ refers to left-wing anti-fascism movements. They often take part in violent confrontations with far-right groups and are the subject of conspiracy thinking about funding from left-wing sources.

¹² False flag conspiracy theories contend that accidents and deaths are deliberately carried out or fabricated by the state to scare the population. School shootings, for instance, are regularly discounted as having been staged by ‘crisis actors’.



were accused of lying, corruption and perpetrating criminal activity. Twitter itself was frequently under fire, with the users in our sample alleging that their tweets or accounts were being censored. Here are three examples.

‘die größten fake news kamen in den letzten jahren immer noch von den mainstream-medien. “es kommen familien.” “es kommen fachkräfte.” “sie werden unsere demographischen herausforderungen lösen.” “sie werden keinen cent kosten.”’ (The biggest fake news in recent years has always come from the mainstream media. ‘Families are coming.’ ‘Expert workers are coming.’ ‘They will solve our demographic problems.’ ‘They won’t cost a penny.’)

‘muchos políticos de ambos bandos y miembros del cuarto poder están en la nómina’ (Many politicians from both sides and members of the fourth estate¹³ are on the payroll)

‘this site is apparently getting millions of hits a week as people around the world want to find the facts that the mainstream media and politics are hiding from them.’

It is difficult to determine how representative the breakdown of categories noted above is. More research is required.

Remarks on the themes common to conspiracism and populism

One finds in our sample of conspiracy-oriented social-media accounts a political narrative that turns on themes similar to those found in common populist narratives. As shown below, these findings are consistent with existing research that points to a connection between conspiracy thinking and populist politics.¹⁴

Some politicians have explicitly capitalised on the weaponisation of conspiracy theories as a method to gain public support. The founder of Italy’s Five Star Movement built up the movement by using ferocious anti-mainstream campaigning that mixed classic populist rhetoric with conspiratorial anti-elitism. ‘Politicians are parasites,’ he has said. ‘We should send them all home!’¹⁵

¹³ This term is often used in reference to the press.

¹⁴ E. Bergmann, *Conspiracy and Populism: The Politics of Misinformation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); B. C. Silva et al., ‘The Elite Is Up to Something: Exploring the Relation Between Populism and Belief in Conspiracy Theories’, *Swiss Political Science Review* 23/4 (2017).

¹⁵ Quoted in J. Bartlett, ‘Italy’s Five Star Movement and the Triumph of Digital Populism’, *The Spectator*, 5 March 2018.



In the US, Trump's flirtation with conspiracism is even more blatant: from the Birther movement he spearheaded to the never-ending attacks on what he considers fake news and the deep state. Trump has used conspiracy theories as a media strategy, tweeting them out from his personal account. In the past he hinted that Judge Antonin Scalia had been murdered, that presidential rivals were not eligible for the presidency, that vaccines cause autism and that the true story of 9/11 had not been told. This baffled many, who tried to respond with traditional, fact-based arguments. By building support among unconventional ideological groups, Trump managed to galvanise voters that had either found their way out of the mainstream or never subscribed to partisan politics in the first place.

President Magafuli came to power in Tanzania in 2015 on a platform centred on removing the corrupt ruling party and taxing foreign corporations punitively on the grounds they had exploited the people of Tanzania. In situations where trust in government institutions is on the decline, using conspiracy theories to distract from institutional failures is a way to regain control of the narrative. This has regularly been done in a number of countries, from Duterte's Philippines to al-Sisi's Egypt.

Those who adhere to conspiracy theories tend to have lower levels of education and to come from lower socio-economic backgrounds. One study found that the average household income was \$47,000 for people who were inclined to believe in conspiracy theories and \$64,000 for those who were not.¹⁶ The 2012 Congressional Election Survey showed that conspiracy theorists are more likely to be poor and poorly educated and less likely to participate in political activity such as voting. Moreover, they were found to be less likely to work in financial services, government or the military.¹⁷ Further evidence has been provided by a series of studies by Jan-Willem van Prooijen. He has found that the relationship between education, on the one hand, and the perception of power and social class, on the other, provides further insight into what drives belief in conspiracies.¹⁸

Demographic studies on populist supporters have shown similar trends. As progressive tides move voters away from traditional views to more cosmopolitan

¹⁶ R. Bentall and D. Freeman, 'The Concomitants of Conspiracy Concerns', *Social Psychiatry* 52/10 (2017).

¹⁷ S. Ansolabehere and B. Schaffner, 'CCES Common Content, 2012' Harvard Dataverse, V9, UNF:5:Eg5SQysFZaPiXc8tEbmmRA== (2013).

¹⁸ See, for example, J.-W. Van Prooijen, 'Why Education Predicts Decreased Belief in Conspiracy Theories', *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 31/2 (2017).



ones, the older generation, men, the less educated and the economically insecure find themselves left behind.¹⁹ However, it is important not to make resentment of economic inequality the sole indicator of whether a person will vote along populist lines. A link between this resentment and supporting populists was found to be strongest among the petty bourgeoisie, and not among unskilled manual workers as one might have expected. Other research suggests that personality traits can also be relevant for identifying those who are more likely to subscribe to populist messaging. A 2016 study points to agreeableness as a strong predictor of whether one will vote for populists. Individuals scoring low on this personality trait are less likely to perceive others as trustworthy or reliable.²⁰ This lack of trust is not found among ethnic minority communities and educated urbanites, who are less likely to vote for populist parties.

The right-wing populist uprising we are currently witnessing is due not only to demographic factors, but also to a shift in cultural values. The five key cultural values shared by right-wing populist voters can be seen in the core messaging of rising populist movements today. Anti-immigrant sentiment, authoritarianism, and mistrust of global or national governance are all indicators of populist attitudes and voting behaviour. A comprehensive approach is necessary to determine the roots of populist voting. Inglehart and Norris find that a broader view encompassing changes in cultural values and demographic characteristics helps to accurately identify populists. This is reinforced by a study detailing the demographics of Trump voters, which are not explained fully by economic insecurity.²¹ His supporters are in line with the voters behind populist movements across Europe, many of whom are motivated by the fear of a complicated mix of rapid cultural changes. This rate of change has left them raging against an urban elite and against a wave of immigrants who do not adhere to the basic values and customs of Western societies.²²

Populism, conspiracy thinking and trust

At their cores, both conspiracism and populism share a common engine: mistrust. In the data presented above, one in every two messages was in some

¹⁹ R. Inglehart and P. Norris, *Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash*, Harvard Kennedy School of Government (2016).

²⁰ B. Bakker, M. Rooduijn and G. Schumacher, 'The Psychological Roots of Populist Voting: Evidence from the United States, the Netherlands and Germany', *European Journal of Political Research* 55/2 (2016).

²¹ P. Diego-Rosell and J. Rothwell, 'Explaining Nationalist Political Views: The Case of Donald Trump', draft working paper, Gallup (2016).

²² R. Inglehart and P. Norris, *Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism*.



way sceptical, untrusting or wary. There is, simply put, a lack of confidence in the institutions of politics, society and the media. At its most extreme, conspiracy thinking veers towards the ridiculous: there are people who believe the earth is flat, that the moon landings were fake or that the world is run by reptiles. Much more common—and much more dangerous—are those whose politics is driven by mistrust, those who now flock to the alternatives offered by populist politics. The numbers are significant: researchers at Pew found that, in eight European countries, people with populist sentiments trust media outlets between 8% and 31% less than those with other political views.²³ A 2017 study found a correlation between the rising unemployment, declining trust in the European Parliament, a rise in the fortunes of populist parties and, in the case of the UK, the likelihood of voting Leave in the Brexit referendum.²⁴ (Here one should bear in mind that the Leave campaign was characterised by a populist anti-elitism.) Uscinski and Parent have shown how conversations around conspiracy theories oscillate back and forth depending on which party holds power.²⁵ In *American Conspiracy Theories* they analyse the conspiracy theories mentioned in letters to the *New York Times*. The researchers found that when the Republicans are in power, conversations around conspiracy theories are primarily driven by the left, while conspiracy theories are mainly promulgated by the right when the Democrats are in the White House. In response to the findings, the authors comment that ‘conspiracy theories are for losers’: being excluded from politics and society increases the likelihood that a person will become involved in conspiratorial politics.²⁶ The same message runs through populist narratives, that for too long, too many people have been excluded from an elitist and corrupt political system.

Though the phenomenon remains poorly understood, when conspiracy thinking is combined with populist messaging, its power to infiltrate populations is immense. To what extent did conspiracy thinking inform UKIP’s messaging in 2013–16, when the party first fully embraced immigration as an issue and then tried to fuse it with the idea of Britain leaving the EU? How much did the success of that messaging ultimately influence the vote to leave the EU in June 2016? Looking to the Continent, to what extent does the Five Star Movement owe its rise to tapping into popular conspiracy theories? There are no quantifiable

²³ R. Fuchs, ‘Populism and Media Mistrust Go Hand in Hand, PEW Study Says’, *Deutsche Welle*, 14 May 2018.

²⁴ Y. Algan et al., ‘The European Trust Crisis and the Rise of Populism’, BPEA Conference Drafts, 7–8 September 2017 (2017), 15.

²⁵ J. Uscinski and J. Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). See also J. Edelson et al., ‘The Effect of Conspiratorial Thinking and Motivated Reasoning on Belief in Election Fraud’, *Political Research Quarterly* 70/4 (2017).

²⁶ See especially Chapter 6 of *American Conspiracy Theories*: ‘Conspiracy Theories are for Losers’.



answers here as yet. What we do know, however, is that the public's ability to separate fact from conspiracy theory or populist narrative is weak. A recent Harvard study showed the degree to which people overestimated the number of immigrants in their own countries, with the US, the UK, France and Germany all overestimating by a factor of at least two.²⁷ An Ipsos Mori survey found that in all but 2 of the 34 countries surveyed, survey respondents overestimated the numbers of migrants that were serving prison time in their countries.²⁸ One in five UK residents believes that vaccines cause autism, another classic trope of conspiracy thinking.

Ultimately, both conspiracism and populism understand the world to be in permanent, dualistic conflict, with the evil forces that are currently in control on one side, and the people on the other. Both aim to awaken the public consciousness. Both emphasise the quest for truth and the need to tell the truth in the face of centrally coordinated lies and smears by the powerful, whether the political establishment; the mainstream media; the economic elite; or the abstract, shadowy cabals of Illuminati, Freemasons and others. These groups are not to be trusted. Not all populists are conspiracy theorists, and conspiracy theories do not always have a populist message. Nevertheless, the thematic alignment between the two worldviews is unmistakable.

Network analysis

At this point we must return to the data. Our researchers attempted to plot the wider ecosystem within which the users in our sample operated. To do this, they collected the names of all the Twitter accounts from which tweets were retweeted or that were mentioned by a user within our sample group. This data is best represented by means of network maps.

Network map: an explanation

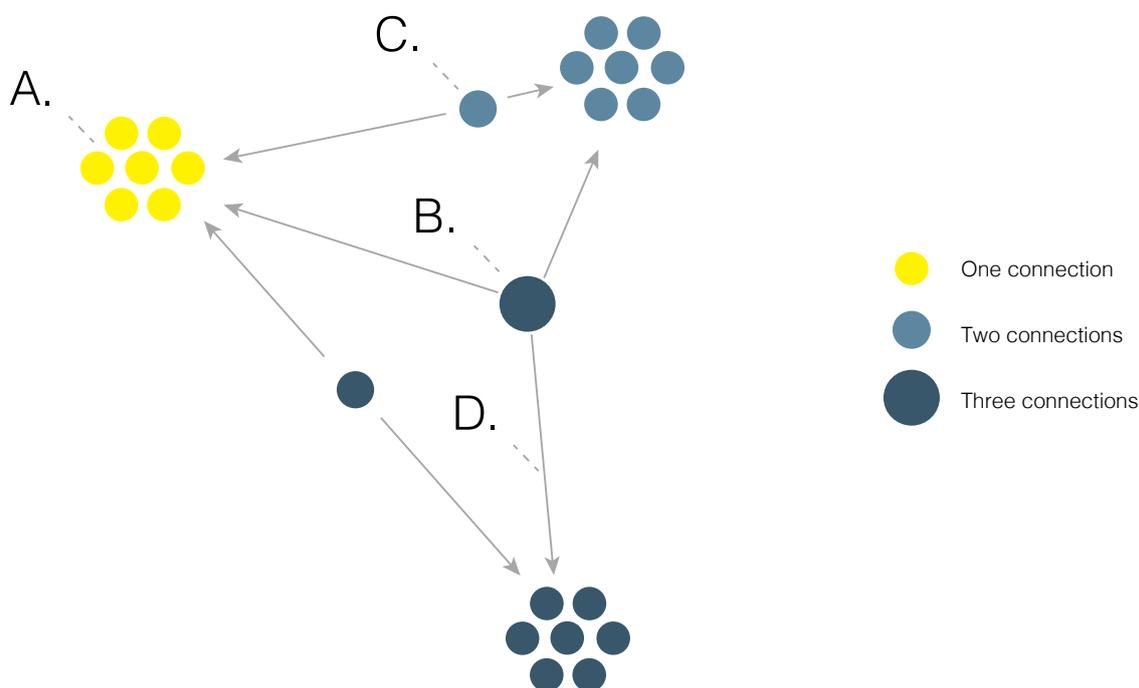
The network analyses presented below might seem confusing. Thus, some explanation of how to understand them is needed.

²⁷ A. Alesina, A. Miano and S. Stantcheva, *Immigration and Redistribution*, working paper, National Bureau of Economic Research (2018).

²⁸ B. Duffy, *The Perils of Perception: Why We're Wrong about Nearly Everything* (London: Atlantic Books, 2018).



Figure 1 Sample network map



Each dot in Figure 1 represents a Twitter user. The size of the nodes represents the number of different groups the user interacts with: a large node is a user who is a member of many groups.

Two clear patterns are consistent across all of the network charts presented below. Clusters of small nodes in a single location portray users who are active in one group (A): they have not posted across multiple groups. Nodes not clustered around a single point are those users who are active across multiple groups (B and C).

Where nodes fall in the chart is determined by which groups they are most strongly affiliated with. A node in the centre of the chart, for example, will have links with a number of different groups (B). A node outside the main collection of nodes surrounding a group, but still nearby, is a user who is active in a number of groups but is primarily a member of one (C). A group exerts a 'pull' on the nodes (D). Finally there is the colour of the node. This represents the 'cluster'. Blue nodes connect to other blue nodes most frequently.

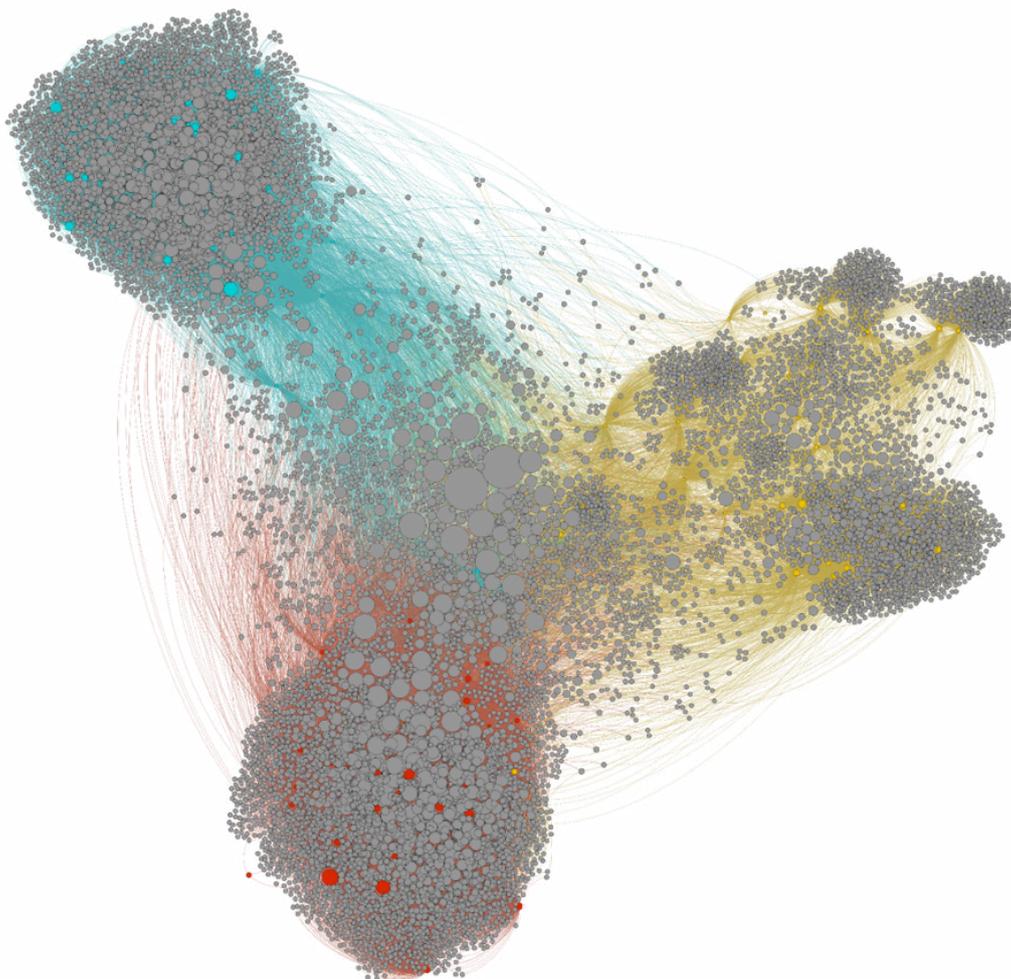
Retweet analysis

We moved to a new dataset (1) all of the accounts in our sample and (2) all other Twitter accounts that were mentioned in the sample accounts or from which tweets



are retweeted in at least two of these accounts. They are visualised in the network map shown in Figure 2. This map represents 14,205 individual Twitter accounts connected by 58,589 retweets or mentions.

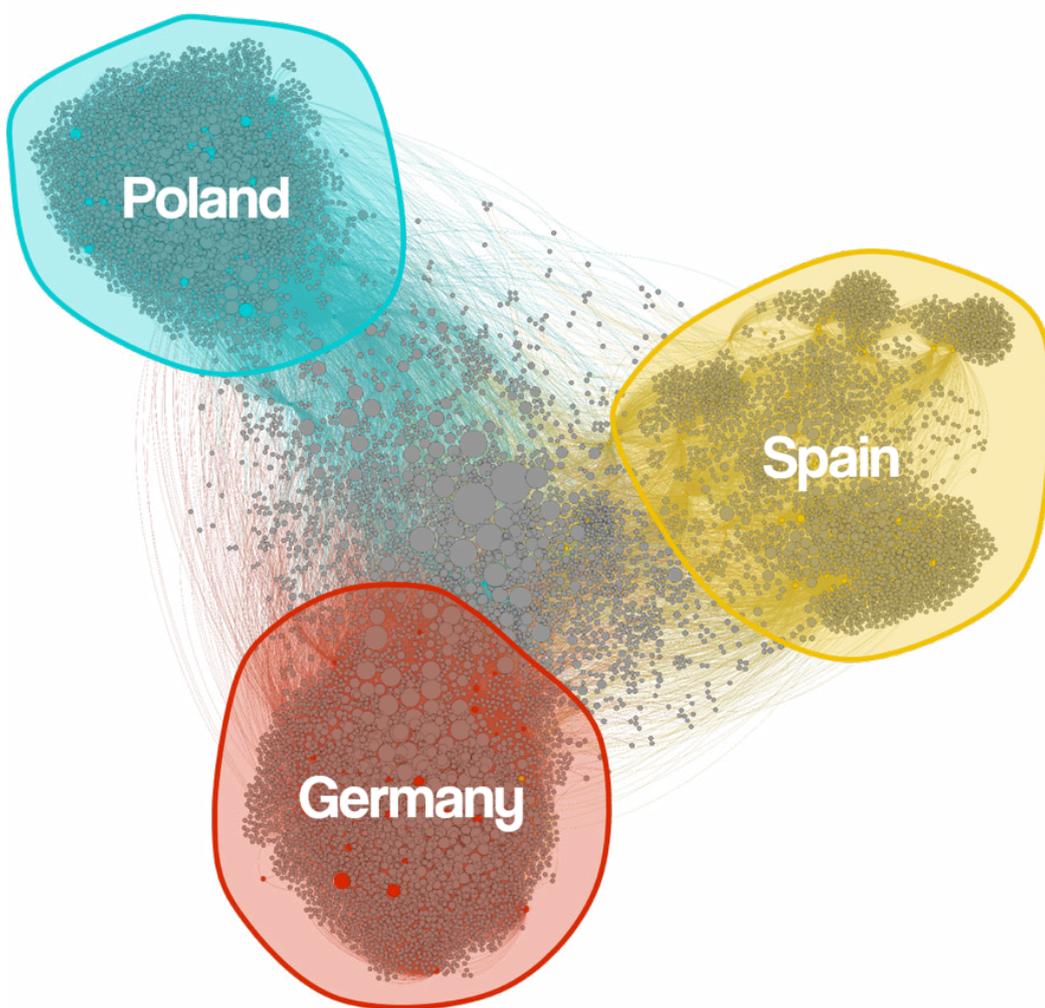
Figure 2 Network Map 1: retweets and mentions



Network Map 1 (Figure 2) shows four distinct communities: one for each of the three countries examined and a central cluster containing accounts that were interacted with by accounts from all three countries.



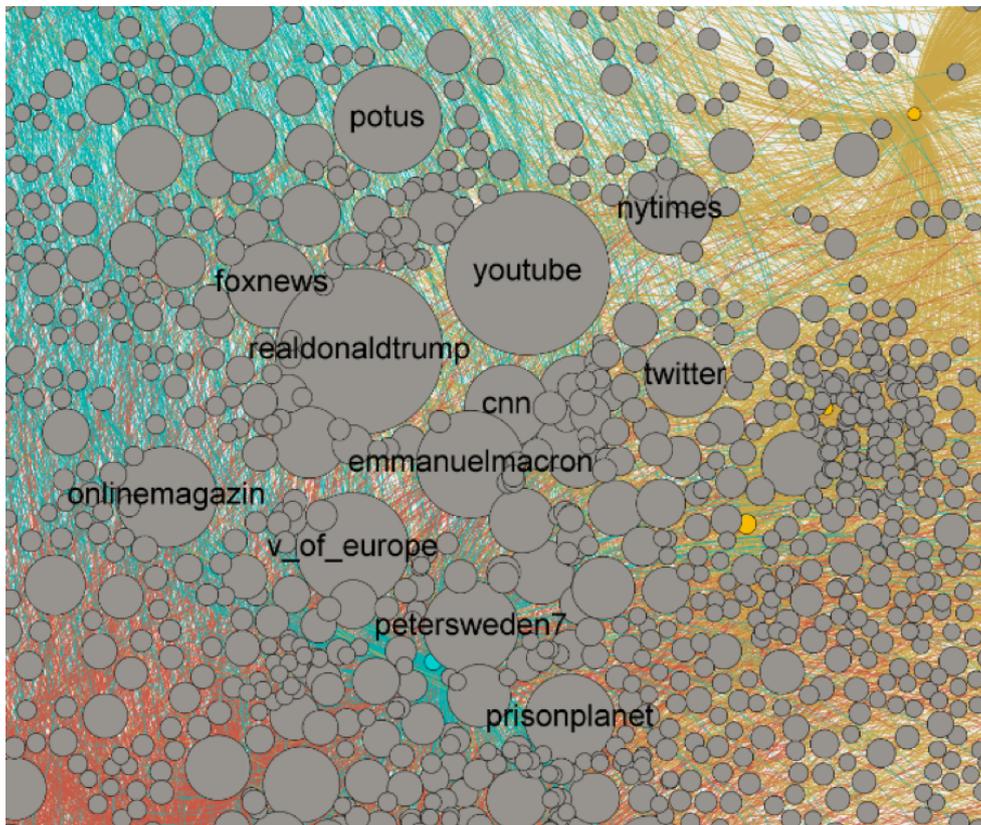
Figure 3 Network Map 2: retweets and mentions (by country)



Network Map 2 (Figure 3) shows the extent to which conspiracy-related communities can take form at both a national and international level. Each of the three countries has strong, distinct clusters of nodes reflecting a national-level conversation, while the central cluster shows that there are also a number of accounts with which users from all three countries interact. These accounts are labelled in Figure 4.



Figure 4 Network Map 3: key international accounts



The key accounts that the users in the sample mentioned or retweeted tweets from are shown in Table 5.

Table 5 Key international accounts

ACCOUNT	NUMBER OF USERS RETWEETING TWEETS FROM THE ACCOUNT OR MENTIONING IT	DESCRIPTION
realdonaldtrump	68	Donald Trump
youtube	67	Social media
v_of_europe	44	Right-wing media
potus	42	Donald Trump
emmanuelmacron	42	French politics
onlinemagazin	39	Right-wing media
petersweden7	36	Conspiracy theorism/right-wing politics
prisonplanet	34	Conspiracy theorism/right-wing politics



ACCOUNT	NUMBER OF USERS RETWEETING TWEETS FROM THE ACCOUNT OR MENTIONING IT	DESCRIPTION
nytimes	33	Centrist media
foxnews	33	Right-wing media
cnn	31	Trump and US politics/media
twitter	30	Social media

The most striking accounts listed above are the conspiratorial, right-wing accounts @V_of_europe, @petersweden7, @onlinemagazin and @prisonplanet. All four are prominent non-mainstream voices focusing on right-wing and far-right political messaging and conspiracy theories. Although we cannot compare the activity of this network to a control group, it is highly likely that these voices are over-represented in our dataset and that their influence is disproportionately high among our conspiracist user group.

The popularity of Trump’s account, the POTUS account, CNN and Fox News indicates an interest in US politics and in Trump’s tweets in particular. Without a control group, it is difficult to estimate how far our conspiracist accounts diverge from the norm.

The following three tables provide an overview of the number of retweets and mentions in the three countries under consideration.

Table 6 Retweets and mentions (Poland)

USERNAME	RETWEETS AND MENTIONS
pisorgpl	2415
tornadonewslink	1928
andrzejduda	1577
morawieckim	1395
kasialiszka76	1136
anitaschelde	1135
prezydentpl	1064
kasiabie78	1037
tvp_info	886
oziunia_26	837



Table 7 Retweets and mentions (Germany)

USERNAME	RETWEETS AND MENTIONS
miriamozen	2158
welt	1457
tagesschau	1261
afd	980
einzelfallinfos	957
lawyerberlin	738
doragezwitscher	733
beatrix_vstorch	730
zdfheute	718
zeitonline	645

Table 8 Retweets and mentions (Spain)

USERNAME	RETWEETS AND MENTIONS
soniagrotto	1742
canaldnradio	1482
mcanduel	1430
youtube	1081
lopezobrador_	1063
hillaryclinton	799
olgauq	787
realdonaldtrump	773
d_nacional	767
marianorajoy	748

In each country there is a similar pattern. The most common retweets and mentions fall into three broad categories: domestic political parties and politicians, mainstream and alternative media outlets, and conspiracy theorists. Prominent conspiracy theory accounts such as MiriaMozen, SoniaGrotto, d_nacional and TornadoNewsLink all share (1) overt conspiracy theories and (2) right-wing and populist content, such as content targeting migrants and ethnic minorities.



Conclusion

This short analysis provides a window into the online activity linked to a group of conspiracy-oriented Twitter accounts. It paints a picture of users who are active at both the national and international levels and who focus on the key political issues driving the mainstream conversation, but are influenced by, and influence, a small set of alternative voices.

The analysis suggests that the themes and voices dominating our dataset are closely aligned with populist narratives. Mainstream and alternative populist voices are prominent in the dataset. Conspiracist, populist and far-right websites are frequently linked to, and the messages deal with themes that are in harmony with populist sentiments. There is particularly close alignment on immigration, Islam and the alleged censorship of conservative voices. Thematically, we see a close relationship between conspiracy thinkers and populist politics. A strong scepticism and high level of mistrust are pervasive among our conspiracy thinkers: in alignment with the messages coming from populist politicians around the globe, there is a rejection of the centre.

The picture painted above should serve as a warning to remain alert to the alignment between conspiracist mindsets and populist politics. Underpinning the arguments of both populists and conspiracy theorists is a rejection of the institutions of government as devoid of trustworthiness. This runs counter to the possibility of sustainable democratic debate. For this debate to be constructive, there must be a middle ground. At its heart, democracy is negotiation, compromise and concession, all of which require common ground, and all of which are threatened by a conspiracist mindset. To counter belief in conspiracy thinking and populist appeals in the long term, it is crucial that trust and legitimacy in the institutions that make up the public sphere should be rebuilt.



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