

13/01/2022

CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN C&N Conspiracy Narratives

16-17 November 2021, Digital meeting

Conspiracy Narratives: Current State and Future Expectations for P/CVE in the EU

Key outcomes

Two years into the Covid-19 pandemic, it has become clear that the spread of misinformation and disinformation, as well as conspiracy narratives, has emerged as a big issue – an even bigger than before the pandemic. The focus of this meeting was on mapping the current state and future outlooks of conspiracy narratives throughout the EU.

During the RAN Communication & Narratives Working Group meeting on conspiracy narratives, practitioners and researchers from 25 EU Member States, as well as from the United States, discussed the current state of conspiracy narratives in the EU. They also explored the outlook for P/CVE in view of conspiracy narratives.

The key outcomes of the meeting are presented below.

1. When talking to someone who believes in conspiracy narratives, **validate their feelings** without validating what they are saying. This can help in understanding the underlying issues that make an individual vulnerable to conspiracy narratives.
2. Conspiracy narratives are **flexible** and **adaptive** and are often influenced by the **local context**. In the case of conspiracy narratives related to Covid-19, these are often connected to local situations and events, or even (local) historical dynamics. **Language** also plays an important role in regional differences of conspiracy narratives. Russophone population in Eastern Europe and the Baltics, for example, are more influenced by Russian disinformation and conspiracy narratives.
3. Conspiracy narratives should be considered as part of the **broader radicalisation landscape**, not as a separate issue. Nearly all extremist narratives have underlying conspiracy narratives. A **whole-society approach** is also needed in order to tackle the complex dynamics underlying the spread of conspiracy narratives. Not only practitioners, but also the media, social media platforms, governments and the general public have a role in promoting issues like media literacy, critical thinking, clear communication and moderating content that can help in preventing the spread of conspiracy narratives.

The remainder of this paper will elaborate further on the discussion points highlighted during the two-day meeting and formulate the most relevant recommendations that emerged. The paper will conclude with potential follow-ups for future RAN activities.

Highlights of the discussion

During the first day of the meeting, the focus was on the current state of conspiracy narratives throughout the EU. In preparation for the meeting, participants were invited to answer the following question: 'What is the current state of conspiracy narratives in your country?'

With at least one representative from each of the 25 participating EU Member States, as well as from the US, this question allowed for a broad overview of conspiracy narratives in Europe ⁽¹⁾. This was followed by a panel discussion on the topic. The most important insights are presented below.

- One of the most pressing current issues facing nearly every EU Member State is dealing with **misinformation and dis-information**, as well as **conspiracy narratives** around the **Covid-19 pandemic**. Narratives around the origins, spread and cause of the virus appear to be prevalent in most EU countries. More recently, narratives around the vaccines have also rapidly spread.
 - The current situation (as of November 2021) of the pandemic in the EU has increased the **risk of polarisation** (and potential **radicalisation**). Across the EU, vaccination rates differ greatly. Moreover, despite the mostly successful vaccination campaigns, the number of Covid-19 cases are on the rise again. On the one hand, there are people who believe in Covid-19 related conspiracy narratives and are unwilling to be vaccinated because of this. On the other hand, the general public now has to deal with stricter Covid-19 restrictions despite the vaccination campaigns. This can lead to a more polarised situation due to **less tolerance** for people who believe in conspiracy narratives.
 - The spread of disinformation from **outside of the EU** is visible regarding Covid-related conspiracy narratives. For example, participants have witnessed Russian conspiracy narratives being spread discrediting Western vaccines and promoting the Russian Sputnik vaccine.
- **Social media** are playing an important part in spreading conspiracy narratives.
 - The findings of a study in Germany show that **Telegram** is used by conspiracy believers to mobilise others, using anti-elitist narratives combined with narratives tied to Covid-19. ⁽²⁾
 - Other social media platforms also affect the belief in and spread of conspiracy narratives. A recent comparative study on different platforms in 17 EU Member States shows that Facebook, YouTube and messenger services like Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp are fertile places for the spread of conspiracy beliefs. Only Twitter appears to have a negative effect on the spread of conspiracy narratives. ⁽³⁾
 - Meme-culture and trolling might lead to situations where messages, that are meant to be funny, are taken seriously by a segment of the audience, unintentionally leading to further spread of and belief in conspiracy narratives. ⁽⁴⁾ This can be seen as related to 'Poe's law', which states that 'without a clear indicator of the author's intent, every parody of extreme views can be mistaken by some readers for a sincere expression of the views being parodied. ⁽⁵⁾
- Conspiracy narratives are **flexible** and **adaptive**, and often fit themselves to the **local** or **regional context**.

¹ This does not provide a representative overview of conspiracy narratives throughout Europe. Rather, it is based only on the answers and insights of the participants from different EU Member States.

² A study on this was presented during the panel on Day 1 of the meeting and can be found under 'further reading'.

³ Theocharis, Y. et al. (2021) 'Does the platform matter? Social media and COVID-19 conspiracy theory beliefs in 17 countries', *New Media & Society*. Link: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/14614448211045666>.

⁴ One example is the spread of a conspiracy narrative that Finland as a country does not exist. It started out as a joke, but rapidly spread online. The original 'author' of this 'conspiracy narrative' indicated he believes most people see it as a joke, but that there are also people really believing the narrative. See: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/xyd48w/this-dude-accidentally-convincing-the-internet-that-finland-doesnt-exist>.

⁵ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poe%27s_law.

- **Language** is an important factor. Many conspiracy narratives originate from the **English-speaking part of the world**. While these are translated into other languages throughout the EU, a poor-quality translation can further influence the nature and spread of the conspiracy narrative.
- On the other hand, the **Russophone population** of EU Member States in Eastern Europe and the Baltics are more easily influenced by disinformation and conspiracy narratives being spread in Russian. In Estonia, a lower vaccination grade can be seen in provinces close to the Russian border (with a higher percentage Russophone population). This can be related to Russian disinformation about Western vaccines, while promoting the Russian Sputnik vaccine. This leads to a lower vaccination grade among the Russophone population because the Sputnik vaccine is not approved in the EU.
- **Historical backgrounds** and **dynamics** can also shape conspiracy narratives according to the local or regional context. Conspiracy narratives related to contemporary issues, like the current pandemic, are tied to a historical issue. In this way, it becomes possible to 'attach a 'new threat' to an 'old enemy'. One of the conspiracy narratives spreading in Greece is that Germany is behind the virus (the virus being the 'new threat'), because the Germans do not want to pay for the pensions of the Greek population (the 'old enemy' from EU financial support in Greece's financial crisis).
- There are also clear links between conspiracy narratives and **politics**. On the one hand, right-wing politicians seem to be embracing and promoting conspiracy narratives for political gain, as this might lead to more popularity (more voters and followers). On the other hand, there were cases in which the government maintained high levels of trust, despite having to take drastic measures in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Participants from Finland indicated this was the case in their country. They said votes regarding Covid-19 regulations were all approved unanimously and transparently in parliament, preventing heated discussions and unrest.
- Aside from politicians, the mainstream media have increasingly disseminated conspiracy narratives since the start of the pandemic. Unintentionally, this could also lead to the further spread of the narratives. In this way, conspiracy narratives are being actively mainstreamed, which is playing into the hands of extremists as these narratives provide a fertile **breeding ground** to lure people into **extremist** beliefs. The best way to address this **mainstreaming** of conspiracy narratives is one of the challenges for the near future.
- During the panel discussion, the specific viewpoint of a **survivor of terrorism** was shared, explaining the impact of conspiracy narratives on survivors. One participant noted that in the aftermath the 2014 Boston Marathon bombing, several **conspiracy narratives denying the attack** spread on social media, one of them being that the survivors of the bombing were actors who helped in faking the bombing. Another interesting idea from this presentation was to **work alongside former conspiracy believers** in order to create preventative tools so that future narratives can be prevented or countered.
- During the panel session, **reasons for spreading or believing conspiracy narratives** were discussed. Two perspectives were raised. The first is that the reason behind the spread of these narratives is mainly financial or political gain. The second is that the reasons for believing conspiracy narratives is to find a sense of purpose in a (simplified) explanation of a complex situation in difficult times (such as the Covid-19 crisis, which has served as a catalyst).
 - The fact that some conspiracy narratives prove to be true (such as the Watergate scandal in the US in the 1970s), hereby being 'legitimate' conspiracies, makes it easier for people to believe in all conspiracy narratives.
- Interesting insights from **different EU regions** shared during the meeting are:
 - Participants from Northern Europe (Nordics & Baltics) feel they are under pressure from Russia, which is targeting the Russophone population in the Baltics/Finland. The language barrier, combined with disinformation can lead to belief in conspiracy narratives around Covid-19 vaccines and can influence vaccination rates in lower socio-economic areas in Denmark and Sweden, for instance.

- Eastern European participants are noticing political actors using conspiracy narratives for their personal gain. For instance, they are connecting the refugee situation to local/national conspiracy narratives.
- An interesting observation from several Southern European countries is that church institutions appear to be part of the spread of conspiracy narratives.
- Participants from Western Europe are caught up in English-language conspiracy narratives originating from the US. Also, the (unintentional) spread of conspiracy narratives through mainstream media is visible in Western Europe.

Recommendations

During the break-out sessions on Day 2 of the meeting, participants discussed how different target groups are addressing conspiracy narratives. This discussion resulted in the following recommendations.

Dealing with conspiracy thinkers

An important aspect of addressing conspiracy narratives is *how to deal with conspiracy thinkers*. The following insights were shared during the meeting.

- Unpacking **underlying grievances of individuals**: When talking to a conspiracy thinker, validate their emotions and feelings, without validating what they are saying. Try to uncover the underlying reason for their feelings, instead of a face-value reasoning of their belief in a particular conspiracy narrative.
- **Counselling of individual cases**, but also of their **direct environment**, is important. Advising family members about how they can deal with a conspiracy thinker in their family, for example, can ultimately make it easier to help that individual.

Building resilience against conspiracy narratives

In building resilience against conspiracy narratives, the most obvious need is to educate practitioners and the general public in media literacy and critical thinking. In addition to this broad need, which has been identified before, the following recommendations can be made.

- Consider ways to **approach certain target groups**. Training and education on media literacy or critical thinking should not only be implemented for young people, but also for **vulnerable adults**. Think, for example, of ways to reach parents who are susceptible to conspiracy narratives through their children. The youth, often more digitally savvy than their parents, can be credible messengers in this sense.
- Invest in the potential **role of influential actors** like religious leaders in communities. These influential figures can serve as credible messengers within their community.
 - Firstly, **awareness** on the issue among influential actors (for example through training in media literacy and critical thinking) can boost the community's resilience.
 - Secondly, the community's **trust** in these influential actors can help prevent conspiracy narratives from gaining a foothold.
- Educate, train and carry out other initiatives on media literacy and critical thinking in **different European languages** to reach a larger part of the population. For example, the fake news pre-bunking/media literacy game 'Bad News' has been translated for the Baltic States and Poland. It is also available in Russian.

Overarching approach and strategy

A large part of the discussions during the break-out sessions concerned overarching approaches or strategies in addressing conspiracy narratives. The need for this has become clear after almost two years of the Covid-19 pandemic and the pandemic-related conspiracy narratives.

- **Increase capacity and funding** of initiatives around the prevention of conspiracy narratives (i.e., media literacy training) and interventions for conspiracy thinkers. Numerous participants indicated there is currently more demand than they can service.
 - This needs to be considered on multiple levels: EU/international (funding international initiatives), national (how to structurally fund initiatives to create more capacity) and local (how to support local initiatives).
- Acknowledge **the position of conspiracy narratives in the broader radicalisation landscape**. Almost all extremist narratives are building on some form of conspiracy narrative. The clearest examples are the far-right QAnon and Great Replacement theories.
- Whole-of-society approach to counter misinformation and disinformation. The key is to discuss **responsibilities of governments and media**.
 - Discuss the current **legal framework** and possibilities in relation to the spread of disinformation, fake news and conspiracy narratives. It is not always clear what the legal possibilities are on this theme, especially when comparing different EU Member States. Mapping an overview of this is something that could be organised at EU level. This can help governments and media understand their **responsibilities** and their **accountability** in countering such narratives.
 - **Social media** can play a role in **moderating content** and potentially deplatforming (if deemed appropriate), especially in languages other than English. While a lot of conspiracy narratives come from English-speaking areas, there is also a lot of disinformation spread in Russian and conspiracy narratives translated into other languages in Europe. Today's social media platforms mainly moderate English. ⁽⁶⁾
 - **Mainstream media** can also play a role, for example in **pre-bunking** by putting **disclaimers** in their content when it covers a sensitive topic with potential disinformation. This touches on the dilemma of mainstream media of covering or not covering conspiracy narratives: when you cover a conspiracy narrative, you risk giving the narrative more attention and spreading it further (this goes against the 'do-no-harm' principle). But if you do not cover a conspiracy narrative, you can easily be seen as part of the conspiracy, hereby fuelling the narrative. Putting up warnings and disclaimers can help foster critical thinking.
- Fostering critical thinking and teaching media literacy will not solve everything. There is also a need to discuss the underlying issue of **mistrust in governments, politics, media, and research/science**. This is a fundamental problem that has also become more visible during the Covid-19 pandemic.
 - Consider ways to **clearly and coherently communicate** government decisions and relevant academic research outcome. Making this kind of information understandable for the broader public is an important step in gaining and maintaining trust.
 - Looking back to the example of Finland, **transparent** and **unanimous decisions** around government regulations appeared to maintain a high trust in the government. If the government communicates in a uniform and clear way, there is less room for doubt and ultimately for

⁶ One of the practitioners from Slovakia shared the following article: <https://blog.gerulata.com/how-successful-is-facebook-at-removing-covid-19-disinformation/>. The article states that there is only one Facebook fact-checker for the whole of Slovakia, and that it appears they are not very successful in removing disinformation content around Covid-19.

susceptibility of conspiracy narratives. This could serve as an example, although a causal relation is of course not proven – this is based on observations from participants from Finland.

Relevant practices

1. **DebunkEU.org** (Lithuania – <https://www.debunkeu.org/>) – a website dedicated to researching and debunking fake news and disinformation around multiple topics in the Baltic area and Eastern Europe (for example Covid-19-related disinformation spread by Russia). DebunkEU has also cooperated with the fake-news pre-bunking game [BadNews](#) and has translated the game for the Baltic States, Poland and in Russian.
2. **OneWorldStrong** (USA – <https://www.oneworldstrong.org/>): Platform created by survivors of terrorist attacks, letting both survivors and formers share their story. They will be publishing a worldwide app soon and has the potential to tackle conspiracy narratives through stories of former believers.
3. **Fakescape** (Czech Republic – <https://www.fakescape.cz/en>): Provides training in media literacy and critical thinking using game-based activities, for example for high schools.
4. **Veritas Counselling** (Germany – <https://veritas-beratung.de/counseling.html>): Counselling programme that supports family members and friends of people who believe in conspiracy narratives (or disinformation/fake news).

Follow up

Considering the highlights of the discussion and recommendations, the following suggestions can be made.

- Organise a meeting to further explore the influence of conspiracy narratives as the basis of many extremist narratives. For example, the way conspiracy narratives about Jews are related to anti-Semitism in extremist narratives.
- Organise a meeting to further explore the legal framework around dealing with misinformation and disinformation and conspiracy narratives in different EU Member States.
- Organise a meeting to discuss how relevant practices can reach a larger audience, or various target audiences, through different (local) languages.

Further reading

Schulze, H., Hohner, J., Desta, I., Gebauer, M., Girgnhuber, M., & Streitwieser, L. (2021, August), 'Far-right Radicalization on Telegram? A Longitudinal Analysis of QAnon and Identitarian Movement Online Communication during the COVID19-Pandemic.' *Paper presented at the ECPR General Conference Online.*

Cătălin Augustin Stoica & Radu Umbreş (2021), 'Suspicious minds in times of crisis: determinants of Romanians' beliefs in COVID-19 conspiracy theories', *European Societies*. Link: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14616696.2020.1823450>.

Theocharis, Y. et al. (2021) 'Does the platform matter? Social media and COVID-19 conspiracy theory beliefs in 17 countries', *New Media & Society*. Link: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/14614448211045666>

Multiple relevant publications and projects can be found on the European network <https://conspiracytheories.eu/>.

RAN Spotlight on Conspiracy Narratives & Disinformation (Dec 2021), https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran/ran-media/ran-spotlight/spotlight-conspiracy-narratives_en.