*21/07/2022*
## CONCLUSION PAPER
**Cross-cutting event 'Conspiracy narratives and anti-government sentiments in relation to *(V)RWE and other forms of extremism*'**
*26 April 2022, Online meeting*

# Taking stock of how conspiracy narratives drive anti-government sentiment and radicalisation leading to violent extremism

## Key outcomes

Conspiracy narratives are not new but have recently become a more pressing policy concern, as they have become prominent "drivers" of anti-government and anti-establishment sentiments. More specifically, EU Member States have seen the emergence of a protest movement that is partially driven by adherents of conspiracy narratives around the COVID-pandemic. Against this background, a RAN cross-cutting event took place on 26 April 2022 with the purpose of bringing together the perspectives of policymakers, practitioners and researchers. The participants discussed elements of (violent) extremist ideologies linked to anti-establishment sentiment and conspiracy narratives in the context of anti-COVID protests, exploring ways to prevent violence driven by such narratives.

The aim of this conclusion paper is to highlight the main points of the discussions, relevant recommendations including promising practices, and the following key outcomes as listed below:

- People who believe in conspiracy narratives are not part of a homogenous group. Although anti-government sentiment as well as right-wing and left-wing extremist actors were present at COVID-related protests in the past, we cannot draw a clear line between protesters, anti-government sentiment and radicalisation leading to violent extremism.

- What is clear is that in many cases, persons who believe in conspiracy narratives are in some kind of personal crisis (e.g. financial debt, reputation loss, job loss, partner loss) when they decide to subscribe to stories claiming, for example, that Bill Gates is using the pandemic to put microchips in people's bodies to control them. Some narratives call for the degrading of others (members of out-groups) or are proclaiming an existential, apocalyptic threat that justifies or even mandates violence, which makes those narratives particularly relevant for prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE) practitioners and policymakers.

- This being said, the political situation in which people turn to conspiracy narratives needs to be acknowledged. As freedom-restricting decisions were taken by governments across the EU during the pandemic, people might have felt that they have little influence on decisions that have a direct impact on their lives, find it difficult to follow or understand what governments are doing and why, have to deal with uncertainty, have lost touch with mainstream political parties, etc. Therefore, this is also an issue of public communication.

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Most conspiracy narratives promise a caring community, belonging, safety, agency, adventure and often even heroism. Simply put, people believe in conspiracy narratives to feel better. In order to help them distance themselves from such narratives, policy, research and practice must build on past experience in P/CVE and come up with new strategies to replace whatever personal benefits people gain from believing in them.

# Highlights of the discussion

- **Conspiracy narratives are mostly <u>not</u> about information deficits.** Many "believers" claim to be well-informed critical thinkers who spend a lot of time researching "facts". The main issue here is not to make them see "the truth" as an end point of research but the lack of "trust" in established mainstream government, universities and civil society organisations as a starting point. **In that sense we have not entered a post-truth but a post-trust era**. Previous "gatekeepers" of information, like established newspapers and TV stations, have been largely replaced by partisan cable TV stations and algorithmically amplified polarisation and identity politics on social media.

    o It was highlighted that most people who believe in conspiracy narratives do not become violent or violent extremists.

- **Old stories in new frames:** While new conspiracy narratives related to, for example, the COVID pandemic or migration have become somewhat more widespread and visible recently, these are mostly just updates of very old stories. The internal structure of those conspiracy narratives as well as the supposed benefits for its "believers" remain mostly unchanged over time, since they can serve to satisfy basic human needs like belonging, status and safety.

    o **"Tales of heroes and dragons":** The basic structure and functionality of most (dangerous) conspiracy narratives follow a universal principle, drawn from one of the oldest stories on the planet: the tale of a hero who fights a dragon to rescue a maiden or community. The basic principle of conspiracy narratives works as follows: Individual crisis of the protagonist + stories about scapegoats (blame) and threats to a community (danger) + promises of a better life + a mission to protect the community, a call to adventure and heroism. This principle can be applied to understand the functionality of COVID-19-related conspiracy narratives, the supposed "great replacement", the supposed "war against Islam" and many others.

    o **Similarities between extremist ideologies and conspiracy narratives.** Many, if not all, extremist ideologies are based on meta conspiracy narratives, for example, that a hidden Jewish elite is in control of the world's governments and therefore is also behind the supposed wars against "the White race", Islam, "the people", etc. Conspiracy narratives claiming that "Big Pharma" or "Big Finance" are in control of world politics and that politicians are mere puppets to their hidden masters are often based on similar beliefs of a hidden Jewish conspiracy. Some anti-government groups also follow this approach, in particular highlighting individuals like Bill Gates and George Soros as visible faces of the supposed secret conspiracies.

- **What makes conspiracy narratives potentially dangerous?**

    o "Upgrading by downgrading": The promised status upgrade of the "believer" is based on the degradation or dehumanisation of "the others" (out-group).
    o "The end is near": The "believers" are facing supposedly existential, apocalyptic threats by out-groups.
    o "Moral outrage": Unbearable crimes are supposedly being committed by out-groups, e.g. the abuse or killing of children.

- The question of **how to respond to conspiracy narratives if they do not promote violence** was discussed, in particular what the role of practitioners could be. Disinformation is seen as being particularly hard to tackle as it is very difficult to find the line between what is harmful and what is not.

    o Discussion showed that there are different perspectives on the question of how to categorise the threats emanating from conspiracy narratives and anti-government RWE sentiment, which entails the question of jurisdiction. Possibilities included categorisation as disinformation, a public health management crisis, P/CVE or even as counterterrorism issues.

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o Most governments did not produce or finance alternative or counter-narratives to address conspiracies. Specific P/CVE measures were implemented rarely; rather, existing P/CVE infrastructures were used to address anti-vaccination sentiments and conspiracies, based mostly on work done already in communities, for example, through helplines.

o Participants discussed the potential for using disciplinary action against professionals and respected public figures who are spreading conspiracy narratives, in order to delegitimise them.

# Recommendations

## Recommendations for practitioners

In general, before considering an intervention aimed at helping conspiracy believers to change their mind, please ask yourself if you are the "right" person to do this. An intervention gone wrong can have negative effects on your relationship with the person. Ask yourself questions like "Why should this person listen to me and trust me?" and "Why would they change their mind?". When in doubt, reaching out to another professional with a counselling background is recommended.

If you are planning an intervention, consider the following:

- **Rank the confidence of the "believer":** If a (somewhat) trusted relationship between the practitioner and the "believer" exists, find out if the "believer" is open to change by asking them if they have any doubts about their narratives or group and what kind of evidence they would need to consider changing their mind. This can also be done by asking the person to rank how confident they feel about their narratives and group on a scale from 1 to 10, 10 meaning absolutely confident. If a high number is selected, this might not be the time for an effective intervention. It might be better to keep up the relationship and wait for a more appropriate time for an intervention.
- **Look for common ground:** Without commonalities there can be no understanding. Find out if there is something you agree upon. Are you both concerned about the safety of, for example, vaccines, about security issues related to your city, limitations of individual freedoms and civil liberties, cultural change that moves "too fast"? Are you both mothers, fathers, do you have similar interests in sports or culture? If you don't find any common ground, you might not be the right person for this intervention.
- **Ask yourself: What am I offering?:** Helping people change their minds on values or identity is NOT about facts, but about NEEDS, TRUST (messenger/institutions) and SAFETY. Ask yourself: What are you offering more than saying "you are wrong!"?
  - o If there is a need or openness to change on the side of the "believer", help/co-create an alternative narrative and an alternative life. People often stay in situations even if they know they are bad for them if there is no realistic better alternative. If you have nothing to offer, you might not be the right person for this intervention.
- **Stick to your own expertise:** Don't discuss issues you are not an expert on. "Believers" of conspiracy narratives rarely need better information, they rather don't trust the information and institutions you trust. They often claim to be well informed critical thinkers who spend a lot of time researching "facts". So the main issue here is not "the truth" as an end point of research but the lack of "trust" in mainstream messengers as a starting point. Find out if the "believer" credits you as a (somewhat) trusted expert. If they don't trust your expertise, you might not be the right person for this intervention.
- **Prepare to say no and ask for help:** Establish rules of engagement and protect/distance yourself when necessary by ending the conversation if no understanding or agreements can be achieved. Ask for help/support from colleagues, and possibly consider that the "believer" speaks with another colleague or professional.

## Recommendations for policymakers

- **Be realistic and don't overexaggerate the threat:** It is important to highlight that studies indicate that, in contrast to popular perception and polarised media reporting of COVID-19 deniers, overall trust in scientists has increased significantly between 2017 and 2020. Conspiracy narratives, like all ideas, cannot be defeated but

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only be forgotten. Don't overexaggerate the threat; don't perpetuate fears and possible negative scenarios in your strategic communication without good reason.

- **Do no harm and don't foster polarisation:** Openly accept that opposition to government policies is legal and legitimate until it is not. Do not stigmatise citizens based on articulated concerns you disagree with and do not frame them in a degrading way if you want them to move towards the mainstream again anytime soon. Governments should continue to better explain the level of uncertainty they operate on in crisis mode and be transparent about the mistakes they make. Trying to hide mistakes will likely enforce conspiracy narratives.
- **Focus on the "conspiracy entrepreneurs":** Many of those who are committing or organising harmful and/or illegal activities online and offline have been doing this for years, for example, in the context of issues related to the financial/euro crisis, immigration, refugees, anti-Islam protests, etc. Focus the government response on the "conspiracy entrepreneurs" and "super-spreaders" of conspiracy narrative-driven activities. Consider applying "follow the money" and "network hubs" approaches, including investigations into tax fraud or money laundering since evidence suggests that some "conspiracy entrepreneurs" embezzle donations or don't pay their taxes properly.
- **Focus on social media and algorithmic amplification:** Invest in practice-oriented monitoring and analysis capabilities by state agencies and civil society organisations to study the effects of algorithmic amplification in the spread of polarising conspiracy narratives and disinformation. While some messenger apps are a relevant part of the problem because they allow for the large-scale spreading of false information amongst the subscribers of a specific channel, the recommender systems of many social media platforms have been suggesting conspiracy narratives to users who were previously "non-believers".
- **Freedom of speech is not freedom of reach:** While it might be legal to share conspiracy narratives amongst your "friends" online, as soon as this is being shared and amplified by a recommender system outside your personal network, the platform itself becomes a super-spreader and should be addressed accordingly within the legal frameworks, for example, through the upcoming EU Digital Services Act and its risk assessment and auditing mandates.

## Recommendations for researchers

- **Co-create helpful info hubs:** Consider cooperating closely with practitioners to co-create up-to-date conspiracy narrative information hubs that make relevant information easily accessible, practical and useful. A co-creation approach can ensure that researchers have access to primary information from practitioners and that the hubs will be tailored to the needs of practitioners.
- **Understand underlying factors:** Research should be focused on the social and political factors that make it more likely that people will adhere to conspiracy narratives. There is no question that, as has been mentioned above, conspiracy narratives serve a purpose on a personal level, but that should not blind us to more structural factors. For instance, if conspiracy narratives are ways for their adherents to restore a sense of agency, how do we explain the need to restore a sense of agency? In answering such analyses, it may be helpful to make country comparisons. Why is it that in some countries people appear to be more susceptible to conspiracy narratives than in others? Building on and expanding the work that has already been done on this will lead to insights that broaden our views of potential measures to take to keep conspiracy narratives from becoming a serious problem.
- **Understand trajectories towards action:** Conspiracy narratives can inspire people to various kinds of actions. They may take to the streets, they may commit isolated acts of violence, they may threaten and intimidate their perceived enemies, or they may simply stick to spreading their views online. Researchers should direct their efforts at explaining under what circumstances what type of action is more likely, as that will help policymakers in assessing the various risks. It is conceivable that the risks depend on local-level factors, so perhaps a comparative analyses of various regions could be instructive. Another interesting research direction could concern the impact of conspiracy entrepreneurs: do their calls for action indeed increase the chance of a certain kind of action?
- **Draw lessons from the COVID-19 period:** During the pandemic, many Member States have had to deal with conspiracy narratives. Taking stock of the lessons learned and the dos and don'ts from this period could be helpful in formulating a response to conspiracy narratives around other topics, or around a new COVID-19 variant, should it emerge.

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# Relevant practices

The Austrian Bundesstelle für Sektenfragen consults family members of persons believing in and engaging with conspiracy narratives.

RESIST 2 Counter Disinformation Toolkit (UK)

EU DisinfoLab

The Canadian Centre for the Prevention of Radicalization Leading to Violence (CPRLV) campaign 'What if I was wrong? When we talk, we learn'! aims to raise awareness and does not aim to convince anyone to abandon their beliefs but addresses attitudes that can lead to violent radicalisation, such as ideological convictions, cognitive isolation, and intolerance of alternative ideas, values or beliefs.

The CPRLV has further developed a 'Small Illustrated Guide to Hatred in Quebec', which classifies and raises awareness of hate signs (and underlying ideological positions) to make them easier for everyone to recognise and understand.

The Cambridge Social Decision-Making Lab at the University of Cambridge Department of Psychology, Dutch media collective DROG and design agency Gusmanson developed a fake news intervention called Bad News Game. The social impact game exposes users to weakened doses of strategies used in the production of fake news, with the aim of stimulating the production of so-called *mental antibodies* against misinformation.

# Follow-up

During the COVID-19 pandemic, milieus and groups have mobilised against government policies that, in many cases, had not cooperated or demonstrated together before. Some milieus or groups are even in clear opposition to each other. This development indicates that cross-ideology cooperation is likely in upcoming crisis situations. The RAN could host an expert meeting with a focus on foresight and scenario development to prepare practitioners and policymakers for potential future polarisation and large-scale conspiracy narrative-driven events.

# Further reading

RAN C&N Conclusion Paper, 2022: Conspiracy Narratives: Current State and Future Expectations for P/CVE in the EU, 16-17 November 2021, online meeting.

RAN Specialised Paper, 2021: Conspiracy theories and right-wing extremism – Insights and recommendations for P/CVE

RAN Specialised Paper, 2021: Capitalising on Crises – How VRWEs Exploit the COVID-19 Pandemic and Lessons for P/CVE

RAN FC&S Conclusion Paper, 2021: Supporting families in fostering resilience against (Covid-19-related) conspiracy narratives, 28-29 September 2021, online meeting.

RAN C&N Conclusion Paper, 2020: The Impact of Conspiracy Narratives on Violent RWE and LWE Narratives, 24-26 November 2020, online meeting.

RAN Conclusion Paper, 2020: Harmful conspiracy myths and effective P/CVE countermeasures, 28 September 2020, online small-scale expert meeting.