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CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN small-scale expert meeting 'The role of conspiracy theories in radicalisation processes'

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Online

HARMFUL CONSPIRACY MYTHS AND EFFECTIVE P/CVE COUNTERMEASURES

Summary

Conspiracy theories, which should rather be called conspiracy myths due to their anti- or pseudoscientific narratives, continue to pose a key challenge for the prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE) in Europe, since they play vital roles within extremist ideologies and recruitment and radicalisation. In order to efficiently plan P/CVE interventions, it is necessary to understand which conspiratorial narratives could constitute a danger to the individuals believing in them and, by extension, to society. Fixed indicators are difficult to define, but three main types of narratives, when believed in combination, may help practitioners identify if a person is on a potentially dangerous path:

- 1) Us vs Them: "We are superior, only we know the truth!"
- 2) Them vs Us: "We are victims, we are being threatened by evil forces!"
- 3) Apocalyptic dimension: "The threat to us is existential, hence violence is legitimate!"

If the biographical or social context of a person gives further indications of them being at risk, an intervention might be warranted. While much research on how conspiracy myths can best be prevented or countered is still necessary, some key advice can already be identified:

- Focus on building skill sets like critical thinking, tolerance of ambiguity and media literacy. These classic competencies have proven to be amongst the most effective resilience factors.
- Pre-bunking (or inoculation) in an educational setting, aiming to explore and demystify the underlying manipulation mechanisms of conspiracy myths, is likely to increase resilience.

Context

Conspiracy myths⁽¹⁾ continue to pose a larger threat to liberal democracies, as can be observed in numerous Member States of the European Union and beyond in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. But also long before COVID-19, throughout human history, conspiracy myths have fuelled conflict, hate and violence (e.g. in the form of witch hunts, pogroms, genocides, terrorism), and in more modern times seemingly contributed to eroding trust in governing institutions and scientific facts, thereby also contributing to the revival of diseases that were believed to have been eradicated ⁽²⁾.

While conspiracy myths can be harmful on a number of different levels, they are of special relevance for extremist ideologies, recruitment, processes of radicalisation and, therefore, also for P/CVE. Every extremist ideology encountered by research and practice presents at least some elements of conspiratorial belief; in many cases, conspiracy myths even form the pillars of their world view.

Classic examples of this are the openly anti-Semitic “New World Order”, the right-wing extremist “Great Replacement/White Genocide” and the Islamist “War against Islam” narratives. Additionally, some conspiracy myths, while not necessarily misanthropic and extremist themselves, might act as a gateway into extremist mindsets. One example is the anti-vaccination conspiracy myth that vaccinations are being used to implant microchips into unsuspecting citizens’ bodies, either to surveil them or even to fully control them. Another example is “QAnon”, a convoluted conspiracy myth that claims that United States President Trump is waging a secret war against Satan-worshipping elite paedophiles, which has become quite prominent in the context of anti-COVID-19 restrictions demonstrations. These conspiracy myths provide a dangerous framework of thinking and are potentially making people receptive to even more harmful conspiratorial beliefs and extremist ideologies. At the same time, many, maybe even most, conspiracy myths do not lead to involvement in extremism or violent extremist action. Examples of less harmful myths include the belief that the moon landing was a hoax or that the Earth is flat.

Good news

It is also important to highlight that studies conducted in Germany and the United Kingdom indicate that, in contrast to popular perception and polarised media reporting of COVID-19 deniers, overall trust in scientists actually increased significantly between 2017 and 2020 (tripled in Germany) ⁽³⁾. Also, disagreements between scientists are largely accepted as a part of the scientific process. As a result, it is important to contextualise debates and research on conspiratorial thinking and not assume that merely because conspiracy believers are loud, that they are also the majority.

P/CVE and conspiracy myths

At the same time, surveys and studies in different EU Member States show that a significant proportion of their populations believe in different conspiracy myths. As shown above, some myths pose a critical threat to society, especially in the context of P/CVE. It is therefore necessary to identify key elements of conspiracy myths that are potentially harmful and therefore most relevant for P/CVE practitioners. The purpose of P/CVE in the context of conspiracy myths is to:

- a. prevent people from believing in conspiracy myths related to (violent) extremism in the first place;
- b. try to (help) disengage or deradicalise individuals who already believe in conspiracy myths.

A number of different approaches can be explored, ranging from individual counselling, to workshops, to large-scale communication campaigns, and many more. Some measures will be primarily characterised by individualised work, for example, within the scope of deradicalisation or exit programmes. However, for all of this to be effective, a number of key questions and challenges concerning the relationship between conspiracy myths and (violent) extremist radicalisation need to be further explored. With regard to P/CVE, the most pressing challenges related to conspiratorial thinking discussed at the meeting were:

- 1) Which conspiracy myths (potentially) lead to violent extremism? Why is this the case? What makes them different from less harmful conspiracy myths?

⁽¹⁾ Since no unwarranted credibility should be given to these narratives and to be in line with the current academic consensus, this paper will use the term conspiracy myths from here on. The official meeting title, however, used the term ‘theories’ and was left unchanged.

⁽²⁾ Douglas et al., ‘Understanding Conspiracy Theories’, pp. 3–4.

⁽³⁾ Wissenschaft im Dialog, *Science barometer special on corona*.

- 2) Which indicators can be identified to detect harmful conspiracy myths?
- 3) What are the individual benefits of believing in conspiracies? What is the psychological functionality that leads individuals from all ways of life to believe fringe ideas? What keeps individuals believing in narratives they might know are false?
- 4) How can resilience towards potentially dangerous conspiracy myths be strengthened and how can practitioners be supported to counter conspiracy myths effectively?

The following section takes a look at some preliminary conclusions and outcomes related to these questions.

Key outcomes

Individual & psychological benefits of believing in conspiracy myths

The three main benefits resulting from believing in conspiracy myths discussed during the expert meeting were:

1) Psychological relief:

Conspiracy myths can be attractive because they are simple and flattering, while the truth, or better, the quest for it, is complicated and painful. Personal crisis, for example after losing a partner or a job, or feeling excluded and irrelevant, can create an urgent psychological need (cognitive opening) for a ready-made solution that makes a person feel better. In that sense, conspiracy myths can feel like a tool of self-empowerment, since they promise clarity, belonging and status. Respectively, they offer a means for blaming everything that is wrong with a person's life, and the world in total, on, for example, a minority or a supposed all-powerful hidden elite. In many cases, anti-Semitic stereotypes are at the core of conspiracy myths.

2) Pragmatism:

While some people might use conspiracy myths as a form of (destructive) coping mechanism, conspiratorial belief can also be used much more pragmatically to reject notions that would threaten internalised beliefs, their world view or profits, or serve as an opportunity to make money.

3) Satisfaction of psychological or personal disposition:

Research indicates that some people are prone to conspiratorial thinking, for example due to certain personality traits ⁽⁴⁾.

Indicator categories for potentially harmful conspiracy myths

The narratives forming the core of all conspiracy myths almost always follow a similar pattern. Three main beliefs form any conspiracy myth's centre, according to Farinelli ⁽⁵⁾:

- 1) "Nothing happens by accident."
- 2) "Nothing is as it seems."
- 3) "Everything is connected."

In addition to these, the European Commission also includes elements such as: a clear **division into good and bad** (black and white world views), often based on a **clear designation of people to blame, or "scapegoats"** ⁽⁶⁾, and Lewandowsky and Cook present factors such as: **nefarious intent of the conspiracy**, the possibility to accept **contradictory beliefs**, an **immunity to evidence** (which is believed to form part of the conspiracy) and, importantly, **the idea that the people who believe in the conspiracy are being persecuted** and victimised ⁽⁷⁾.

⁽⁴⁾ Darwin et al., 'Belief in conspiracy theories'.

⁽⁵⁾ Francesco Farinelli, Presentation at the RAN small-scale expert meeting on 'The role of conspiracy myths in radicalisation processes'.

⁽⁶⁾ European Commission, *What are conspiracy theories? Why do they flourish?*

⁽⁷⁾ Lewandowsky & Cook, *The Conspiracy Theory Handbook*, pp. 6-7.

According to Ritzmann, when debating indicators to identify potentially harmful conspiracy myths in the context of violent extremism and P/CVE, some key narratives seem especially relevant, especially when believed *in combination*. They can be consolidated as follows:

- 1) **Us vs Them:** Strong sense and articulation of superiority/supremacy of the in-group over out-groups.
- 2) **Them vs Us:** Focus on being victims and feeling under attack/threatened by the enemy out-group.
- 3) **Apocalyptic dimension:** A supposed existential threat to the in-group is eminent and/or supposed outrageous crimes are being committed (e.g. child abuse/murder) by an out-group. An urgency to act is being articulated, and the (support of) violence is therefore implicitly/explicitly justified.

Friends, family, teachers and especially professionals working in a P/CVE context should take a close look whenever they encounter conspiratorial beliefs, and by taking these three factors into account, they may be able to better understand the potential danger of the set of beliefs they are encountering.

It remains important to state that the mere fact of a person adopting a conspiracy myth that exhibits these elements does not automatically mean that they are on a path towards violent extremist radicalisation. An individualised analysis and assessment of the personal biographical, social and functional contexts in which the person is active would have to be carried out. Only in doing so could it be clarified whether additional risk factors, or a lack of resources, could give indication that the person is actually at risk.

Potential preventive and countermeasures

- 1) **General efforts to increase critical thinking skills, including efforts to increase media literacy of both young people and adults.** These classic competencies have shown the potential to be amongst the most effective resilience factors.
- 2) **Socratic dialogue – Inducing doubts by asking questions leading to self-realisation of inconsistencies in the myth.** A method that has a long-standing and successful history in one-on-one counselling (often in but not limited to deradicalisation or exit settings) is a way of conducting dialogue and questioning related to the Socratic dialogue. Here, individuals are not lectured about right and wrong. Instead, their thought process and critical thinking skills are stimulated through targeted questions, ideally leading to the realisation of inconsistencies in the ideology or narrative.
- 3) **Efforts to increase ambiguity tolerance.** One key attraction factor of conspiracy myths is their ability to supposedly simplify and clarify complex situations. To be able to cope with complex situations and circumstances without needing to resort to conspiratorial mindsets, ambiguity tolerance needs to be fostered. This can take place in larger educational settings but also in close one-on-one counselling sessions with individuals, as is often already the case in exit and deradicalisation work.
- 4) **Pre-bunking/inoculation.** By making people aware of the underlying manipulation mechanisms of conspiracy myths, and therefore demystifying and exploring them, the appeal of conspiratorial thinking may be weakened and resilience could be fostered. It is important to note that this does not mean calling out specific conspiracy myths and simply “informing” the audience that they are “wrong” or “bad”. Pre-bunking/inoculation should always be carried out in an open educational setting in which participants are enabled to reach their own conclusions.
- 5) **Debunking,** that is exposing conspiracy myths as false, may still work. For larger alternative or counter-narrative campaigns aimed at debunking, the [RAN GAMMA+](#) model may serve as a useful framework ⁽⁸⁾.

⁽⁸⁾ Ritzmann et al., *Effective Narratives: Updating the GAMMA+ model*.

Relevant practices

Some initiatives have shown positive potential to increase balanced but critical thinking skills, such as [Ecole Citoyenne's "Les Joutes Verbales"](#) (Belgium). Few organisations have significant experience in doing online youth work, which is necessary to engage young people confronted with conspiracy myths in the digital sphere. The programme [WebWalkers / les Promeneurs du Net](#) (France) is one such effort, also used to work on advancing digital media literacy.

Further reading

Stephan Lewandowsky & John Cook (2020): [The Conspiracy Theory Handbook](#)

European Commission (2020): [What are conspiracy theories? Why do they flourish?](#)

Annelies Jansen, Merle Verdegaal, & Lieke Wouterse (19 March 2020), RAN YF&C & RAN C&N Conclusion Paper: [How to do digital youth work in a P/CVE context: Revising the current elements](#)

Francesco Farinelli (14-15 November 2019), RAN EDU Ex Post Paper: [Dealing with religion-inspired extremist ideologies in school](#)

Annelies Jansen & Merle Verdegaal (29 November 2019), RAN YF&C Ex Post Paper: [Doing digital youth work in a P/CVE context](#)

Alexander Ritzmann, Lieke Wouterse, & Merle Verdegaal (14-15 November 2019), RAN C&N Ex Post Paper: [Effective Narratives: Updating the GAMMA+ model](#)

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