

**Abstract** – 22. January 2018

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## **Anti-immigrant conspiracy theories of right-wing nationalist populists in Europe – and how to respond to them –**

Rapid rise of right-wing populist political parties around Europe and across the Atlantic in the early new millennium coincided with simultaneous increased spread of conspiracy theories (CTs). The two phenomena are intertwined as here is explored. Studies have found conspiracy theories to be a catalyst for extremism (van Prooijen, Krouwel, & Pollet, 2015). Indeed, many of the most influential scholars of CTs (e.g. Pipes, 1999; Hofstadter, 1964; Popper, 2012; Barkun, 2013; Byford, 2011), have tended to treat conspiracy theorists as violent and dangerous extremists who are a threat to world order.

Populism has as now well gone mainstream. It can thus be argued that we have entered into the era of the populist – the conspiratorial populist. Both conspiracy theories and populism is now deeply integrated into contemporary democratic politics. These are no longer only the tools of powerless protestors and no longer not merely a symptom of crisis of democracy, rather these elements are being firmly woven into also democratic societies. However, although being widespread, that does not in itself levitate the threat conspiracy theories can pose in and to society. On the contrary, experiments have shown that being exposed to CTs decreases trust in government institutions. Thus, increased spread of CTs can undermine democracy and social trust.

For the purpose of this paper, definitions of specifically nationalist right-wing populists are framed through identifying a threefold claim for their support of *the people*. First they tend discursively to create an external threat to the nation. Secondly they accuse the domestic elite of betraying the people, often even of siding with the external forces. Thirdly, they position themselves as the only true defenders of the pure people they vow to protect against these malignant outsiders, that is; against those that they themselves have discursively created. These features, further discussed in later chapters, might help in identifying the links in the literature between populism and conspiracy theories.

When defining conspiracy theories then most obviously they tend to articulate a critique of powerful institutions and depart from progressive analysis by substituting simplistic populist vision of antagonism between *the people* and *the elites* for detailed analysis of complex power structures. Both right-ring populists and conspiracy theories unite in a Manichean world-view in which societies are seen as divided between *evil elites* who are in control of the *pure people*. According to this binary viewpoint the pure people are unaware of the malignant parasite forces exploiting not only their naivety but also their inherited goodness.

In recent years, nationalist right-wing populists have firmly turned their sights on Muslim immigrants, with rapid proliferation of conspiracy theories revolving around

*Islamification* of the West, for example of Sharia laws being instated in Europe and in the US. In many such cases, Muslim immigrants were portrait as invaders, often seen as soldiers in a coordinated cultural and religious quest of conquering Europe.

The main aim here is in framing how particularly right-wing Populists, primarily in the Western world, use CT's to advance their politics. The principal scholarly contribution is in exploring common tropes of both strands in the literature and in doing so identifying the nature of specific populist political CT's, particularly that of within the flora of right-wing populist politics. I will map the process of mainsteamization of both conspiracy theories and populist politics, who have in recent years come in from the fringe to feature as a prominent component of contemporary politics across the western world. Another contribution is in analysing the rapid proliferation of CTs spread from within the very power centres. Furthermore I will analyse the relationship between CTs and fake news and how the Internet and social media have led to proliferation and faster spread of both.

In warning against their negative consequences in democratic societies, it is vital to understand how right-wing populists apply conspiracy theories to advance their politics and support for their parties, which is the aim of this paper.