Report on Conspiracy Theories in the Online Environment and the Counter-Disinformation Ecosystem in the Balkan Triangle

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Researching Europe, Digitalisation and Conspiracy Theories (REDACT)

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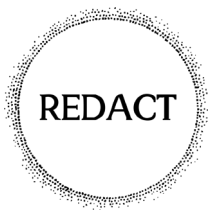

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The REDACT project analysed how digitalisation shapes the form, content and consequences of conspiracy theories, including online sociality and offline actions and effects. Rather than seeing digitalisation as a process that has universal outcomes, or conspiracy theories as the same over space and time, REDACT considered online conspiracy theories and counter-disinformation organisations in a selection of European countries. The project involved a team of 14 researchers analysing data from Western Europe, Central Europe, the Baltics and the Balkans.

Methodology

Using keywords from a range of conspiracy theory topics, the project gathered 6 million posts from Twitter/X, Facebook, Instagram and Telegram between 2019–2024. The researchers used a mixture of digital methods and close reading strategies to analyse the datasets. They focused on the political, cultural and economic contexts that explain how and why conspiracy theories spread in the online environment across Europe. Each regional team also conducted ethnographic interviews with key members of counter-disinformation organisations across Europe to understand the variety of approaches that are being used to tackle conspiracy theories.

About the Authors

The regional team is composed of four researchers, Prof. Nebojša Blanuša (University of Zagreb, PI), Prof. Jasna Milošević-Đorđević (Singidunum University Belgrade), Prof. Vladimir Turjačanin (University of Banja Luka) and Dr. Vedran Jerbić (research assistant).

Key Findings

- **Normalised political imagination:** Conspiracism has become a normalised mode of political imagination among both elites and citizens. Rooted in post-conflict victimhood culture, it often serves as a tool for mobilisation and affective polarisation. Political elites bear major responsibility for instrumentalising unjustified conspiratorial narratives, deepening mistrust and weakening democratic culture.
- **Deep historical roots:** Conspiratorial thinking is historically embedded in the region's experience of imperial domination, border shifts, dictatorial and authoritarian regimes, and recurrent external interference. These legacies – combined with fragile institutions and media – mean universal or US-centric models for addressing conspiracism are insufficient. This region requires context-sensitive approaches.
- **Regional ecosystem:** Linguistic and cultural proximity let conspiracy theories cross borders with ease. Regional portals routinely recycle each other's narratives, creating a transnational conspiracist ecosystem. War-related conspiracies mirror interethnic grievances, highlighting the need for coordinated regional responses.
- **Adaptiveness and connectiveness:** Regional conspiracy theories are highly adaptive – evolving from one topic to another (e.g., from COVID-19 to the Great Reset), linking diverse groups and merging into 'super-conspiracies'. Fuelled by existential anxieties, they forge alliances within overlapping disinformation networks.

- **Global–local fusion:** Global conspiracy narratives – the Great Replacement, COVID-19 denial, gender ideology, etc. – are woven into domestic grievances about internal and external 'enemies'. This hybridisation sustains conspiracism's relevance within regional identity politics.
- **Polarisation through cultural trauma:** Conspiratorial framing amplifies existing polarisation by weaponising historical wounds and culture war issues. It renders debate emotionally charged and resistant to facts, as seen in the polarised regional responses to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.
- **Reflection of systemic failures:** Conspiracy beliefs express disillusionment with corruption, clientelism, institutional fragility and persistent gaps between political promises and lived realities. More than mere misinformation, they are symptoms of democratic decay and deep mistrust accumulated over decades of weak governance.
- **Grey zones and illiberal rhetoric:** Conspiracist discourse often operates in a grey zone between legitimate dissent and manipulation – through memes, insinuation and coded speech. Illiberal political actors increasingly exploit this ambiguity, normalising conspiratorial rhetoric and further corroding democratic civility.
- **Fragile counter-disinformation sector under threat:** The counter-disinformation field is small, underfunded and reliant on civil society. Despite difficulties, it performs essential monitoring, fact-checking and media literacy work. Journalists and researchers face harassment and smear campaigns, while impunity for online abuse remains widespread. Funding remains precarious and vulnerable to geopolitics.
- **Misrepresentation of the field:** Critics often caricature the counter-disinformation sector, overlooking its democratic importance – thereby undermining public trust in one of the few institutions working to preserve factual discourse.
- **Limits of technological fixes:** Efforts to counter conspiracism often overvalue technological fixes, overlooking its deeper roots. Lasting change requires transforming civic culture and governance – not just digital platforms.
- **Beyond fact-checking and media literacy:** Fact-checking and media literacy are vital but insufficient, placing the burden on individual users rather than producers and platforms. Broader societal resilience, crisis preparedness and regulatory interventions are required to tackle the structural enablers of conspiracism.
- **Agency of everyday users:** Social media users actively challenge conspiracies online, yet their efforts remain under-researched. Large-scale studies often ignore these counter-narratives, overstating the reach of conspiratorial echo chambers – and research on warranted conspiracism is still absent.

Key Recommendations

1. **Create bespoke solutions for the whole region and examine other approaches:** Don't import automatically models of and solutions to conspiracism wholesale from other countries and regions.
2. **Understand conspiracy theories as a unique form of disinformation:** Consider what makes them 'stickier' than other forms of disinformation. The key questions are 'Why and How?'
3. **Identify the underlying causes of conspiracy theories:** Address structural causes rather than symptoms. Conspiracism resonates with perceived disruption, elite estrangement from ordinary citizens, power abuse, injustice and FIMI (foreign information manipulation and interference).

4. **Tackle root grievances with policy:** Prioritise anti-corruption, social welfare and judicial and public-service reforms so factual, functioning institutions reduce fertile ground for conspiracism.
5. **Disincentivise online disinformation:** This requires regulators and platforms to work together for the public good.
6. **Look beyond social media:** Consider the whole conspiracist ecosystem.
7. **Don't weaponise conspiracism to fuel the culture war:** Stand up against the normalisation of unwarranted conspiracy theories.
8. **Don't allow illiberal conspiracism to set the terms of national debates:** Media neutrality and balance do not mean that we have to tolerate veiled racism, homophobia, historical revisionism and counter-constitutionalism.
9. **Address current funding models for counter-disinformation work:** There is need for long-term projects and more sustainable planning, state support and investment in the sector.
10. **Acknowledge that disinformation is a political category:** From this starting point, organisations can be transparent about their criteria for fair decisions about the quality and efficacy of information.

1. History and Context of Conspiracy Theories in the Balkan Triangle

Conspiratorial thinking has long shaped how the Balkans interpret power, history and crisis. From early modern myths of betrayal to today's digital misinformation, conspiracy narratives form a durable political grammar rooted in the history of real external interference, recurrent imperial domination and border changes, domestic dictatorial and authoritarian regimes, regional and intra-state conflicts, institutional fragility and media systems vulnerable to manipulation – conditions that made suspicion a survival strategy and conspiracy a habitual explanatory model.

Foundational myths of betrayal, defeat and divine punishment anchor nationalist identity construction. The Serbian Kosovo myth (1389), Croatia's Krbava Field defeat (1493) and Bosnia's fall in 1463 are recalled as betrayals – by elites or absent allies – interpreted as divine punishment or providential suffering. Such supernatural and later mundane conspiratorial narratives (e.g. the Zrinski-Frankopan case) recast victimhood as virtue and resistance, becoming templates for modern nationalist mythmaking.

After the French Revolution, conspiracy became a trans-European political idiom. In the Habsburg and Ottoman empires, revolutionary ferment was cast as a diabolic plot against altar and throne. Local uprisings fused secrecy with rebellion: the First Serbian Uprising (1804–1813) unfolded amid intrigues among Ottoman, Russian and French agents. Western notions of 'Balkan conspiracies' merely mirrored Great Power practice – covert diplomacy and espionage managing the 'Eastern Question'. By the Congress of Berlin (1878), every Balkan state saw its borders as products of collusion, and by World War I, clandestine politics made conspiracy a rational perception of power.

In the early 20th century, imported antisemitic and anti-Masonic myths fused with local nationalisms. Croatian Catholic and Serbian Orthodox elites adopted European racial-conspiratorial tropes, casting Jews, Freemasons and 'foreign agents' as destroyers of national unity. *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* spread widely from the 1920s, inspiring multiple editions. In the Ustaša quisling state (1941–1945), such narratives justified genocide as pre-emptive defence against Jews, Serbs and communists.

Wartime propaganda portrayed every rival as a foreign puppet – partisans as 'Moscow's tools', Chetniks and Ustaša as 'domestic traitors'. This conspiratorial grammar endured into socialist Yugoslavia.

After 1945, the socialist regime institutionalised suspicion as a tool of governance. The label 'enemy of the people' justified purges of political opponents, collaborators, clerics and émigrés. The 1948 Cominform split intensified this logic: Moscow denounced Tito as an 'imperialist hireling', while Belgrade hunted Stalinist 'spies'. Goli Otok prison became both a warning and a monument to state paranoia – an organised campaign to expose the hidden and the disloyal. Real Soviet threats blended with manufactured suspicion, entrenching a political culture of secrecy, betrayal and repression.

Liberalisation in the 1960s and 1970s briefly widened public space but reaffirmed conspiratorial reflexes when unrest arose. The Croatian Spring (1971) was recoded as a counter-revolution coordinated with émigrés; its suppression at Karađorđevo restored central control. Serbia's parallel purges (1972) followed the same script. The 1972 Bugojno infiltration of Croatian Revolutionary Brotherhood guerrillas in Bosnia just strengthened the imagined unity of 'enemy emigration' and domestic dissent. The 1974 Constitution rebalanced power yet preserved the surveillance mentality.

After Tito's death, economic crisis and political paralysis revived siege narratives. Even school mnemonics reflected anxiety that 'Yugoslavia is surrounded by worries': (BRIGAMA), an acronym of neighbouring states. The 1980s debate space filled with conspiratorial readings of constitutional arrangements, centre–republic tensions, Kosovo and the economic crisis. Newspapers and leaders trafficked in outsized attributions – to 'Vatican–Comintern' designs in some Serbian narratives, or to 'Serbian hegemony' plots in Croatian, Slovenian and partially Bosnian ones. As socialist legitimacy eroded, nationalist conspiracism filled the vacuum, fuelling interethnic anxieties and mutual blame for exploitation.

During the 1991–1995 wars, these repertoires structured propaganda and policy. Serbian media also promoted 'Germany–Vatican–CIA' collusion, while Croatian and Bosniak elites invoked a 'Greater Serbia' masterplan; Bosniaks also feared a Croat-Serb 'Karađorđevo' partition of B&H. Furthermore, competing victimhood framing became further entrenched through the ICTY: Serbs denounced anti-Serb bias, while Croats claimed neglect of their suffering and protested the equating of victim and aggressor. After Dayton, these meta-narratives ossified into the right-wing identity templates. The 1999 NATO intervention entrenched anti-Western tropes in Serbia, while Croatia's first president reinforced isolationist conspiracism, casting regional cooperation as a hidden plan to resurrect Yugoslavia. Elite-controlled media amplified existential threat stories, entrenching conspiracy as a mainstream cognitive style.

In the 2000s–2010s, conspiracism adjusted to the politics of EU and NATO enlargement. A distinctive Euroambivalence emerged. Eurofundamentalists idealised Brussels as a saviour on the imaginary road to 'escape from the Balkans' and branded opponents 'anti-European', while Eurovilifiers depicted the EU as a soft empire dismantling sovereignty and national cultures. Comparisons between the EU and Yugoslavia – both seen as supranational constructs with unequal cores and peripheries – sustain Eurosceptic resentment. These frames intersect with global conspiracy theories about 'Soros', 'globalists' or migration, generating myths that undermine trust in European institutions.

The COVID-19 crisis intensified these tendencies. A 2020 BiEPAG survey found 77% of Western Balkan citizens believed at least one major conspiracy theory – over triple the Western European rate. In Croatia, PRO-FACT/ADMO research (2022–2025) showed 59% believed infection data were hidden and 54.5% thought vaccine harms were concealed, reflecting deep distrust in government and media. This scepticism fuelled vaccine hesitancy and defiance of health measures. Pandemic conspiracies soon morphed into narratives about the Great Reset, Great Replacement, QAnon and global conflicts, showing how international disinformation tropes are localised through Balkan historical grievances and reframed as stories of betrayal and subjugation.

The Balkan triangle conspiracist ecosystem differs from Western Europe's in two decisive respects. First, the legacy of the 1990s wars sustains a pervasive victimhood identity. Each community views itself as the historic casualty of external manipulation, making conspiracy explanations psychologically plausible and politically useful. Second, conspiratorial narratives are part of the mainstream. Unlike in most EU states, governing elites and media outlets – especially in Serbia, and to a smaller degree in B&H and Croatia – routinely circulate conspiratorial narratives. This top-down endorsement blurs distinctions between fringe and official discourse, deepening public cynicism and weakening democratic accountability.

Conspiracism operates simultaneously from the ground up (grassroots digital communities) and top-down (party-media complexes). Its endurance in the form of unwarranted conspiracy theories threatens democratic (de)consolidation by eroding factual consensus and enabling manipulation by domestic and foreign actors – including Russian influence operations exploiting anti-Western tropes. Combating it requires long-term investment in trust, accountability and critical-media capacity. It demands constructively confronting the traumatic historical experiences, institutional weaknesses and political economies of distrust that make conspiracism plausible.

2. Regional Online Environment and the Conspiracist Ecosystem

The three Western Balkan countries – Croatia, B&H and Serbia – form a linguistically and digitally interconnected region marked by sharp political and informational contrasts. Internet penetration is nearly universal, but trust in institutions and journalism lags behind the European average, creating fertile conditions for conspiracist narratives. Croatia's relatively pluralistic media ecosystem, Bosnia's ethno-fragmented media sphere and Serbia's politically captured media demonstrate three distinct variants of a problematic media environment.

According to DataReportal, in 2025, internet penetration in Croatia stands at 84.4% (3.27 million users), in B&H at 86.7% (2.97 million users) and in Serbia at 91.8% (6.63 million users). Social media usage is widespread across all three: approximately 75% of Croatian, 70% of Serbian and 65% of B&H citizens maintain at least one social account.

In Croatia, Facebook and YouTube remain the dominant platforms. Instagram counts around 1.40 million users (approx. 43% of internet users) and TikTok around 1.12 million (approx. 34%). In Serbia, Instagram reaches 3.15 million users (approx. 48% of internet users), while TikTok has 2.32 million (approx. 35%). In B&H, Instagram usage equals 44% and TikTok 33% of internet users. Furthermore, Telegram remains integral to online communication across the region as one of the key conduits for both interpersonal and conspiracist activity.

When focusing on news consumption, the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2025 provides a clearer picture of informational habits.[1] In Croatia, Facebook is used by 48% of people for news weekly, followed by YouTube (24%), Instagram (14%) and TikTok (12%). In Serbia, Facebook leads with 45%, followed by YouTube (33%), Instagram (33%) and TikTok (21%). Traditional television remains the dominant source of news (64% in Croatia, 73% in Serbia, 71% in B&H), while about half of adults use social media for news. Yet trust in news remains strikingly low: 36% in Croatia, 27% in Serbia and 28% in B&H – well below the EU average of 44%. This widespread scepticism fuels the appeal of 'alternative' outlets promising authenticity and dissent from perceived mainstream manipulation.

The media ecosystems of the three states diverge markedly in structure but converge in their vulnerability to politicisation and low trust. Croatia combines EU-aligned regulation and professional journalism with persistent political influence. The public broadcaster HRT retains formal independence but often

mirrors government priorities. Only about 28% of citizens express trust in the media, and over 80% report regular encounters with misinformation. Serbia's media system is characterised by extensive political capture: a highly centralised and politicised system where pro-government tabloidisation blurs the boundary between propaganda and journalism. Freedom House classifies Serbia as only 'partly free', and Reporters Without Borders describes a 'deep, ongoing propaganda campaign' affecting nearly all mainstream outlets. Tabloids such as *Informer* and *Alo* and broadcasters like Pink and Happy function as vehicles for pro-government and pro-Kremlin narratives. SEENPM (2025) reports that only 30% of Serbian citizens trust the media, and selective news avoidance reaches 65%.

According to the European University Institute (2025) B&H's information space is fragmented along ethno-political lines and produces three parallel media systems rather than one. In Republika Srpska, Dodik-aligned outlets (RTRS, ATV) frame Western actors and NGOs as conspiratorial threats; in the Federation, Sarajevo-based media (*Oslobođenje*, Klix.ba) counter these narratives but may advance their own ethno-partisan biases. The absence of a unified information space fosters multiple echo chambers, each nurturing its own conspiratorial subculture.

In all three countries, conspiracism thrives in the intersection of distrust, populism and digital fragmentation. In Croatia, ADMO found that the COVID-19 infodemic produced a lasting ecosystem of pseudo-media – Logično, Transformacija Svijesti, Istinom protiv laži and HOP portal – which blend genuine reporting with conspiracy narratives.[2] These outlets now propagate anti-EU, climate-sceptic and anti-immigration messages. In our research, Telegram channels such as InfoTeam1, Slobodni ZAjedno, ProbudjeniHR, iSTINITO, etc. illustrate the migration of conspiracism from moderated platforms to encrypted spaces, as well as the strong regional interconnectedness in sharing conspiracy theories going beyond the three countries covered by the research (Figure 1).

Serbia displays a much deeper fusion of conspiracy rhetoric with mainstream political communication. Anti-NATO, anti-LGBTQ+ and pro-Russian themes appear regularly on state-aligned media. A GLOBSEC study 2020 showed that 74% of Serbian citizens believe that 'the world is ruled by secret elites'.

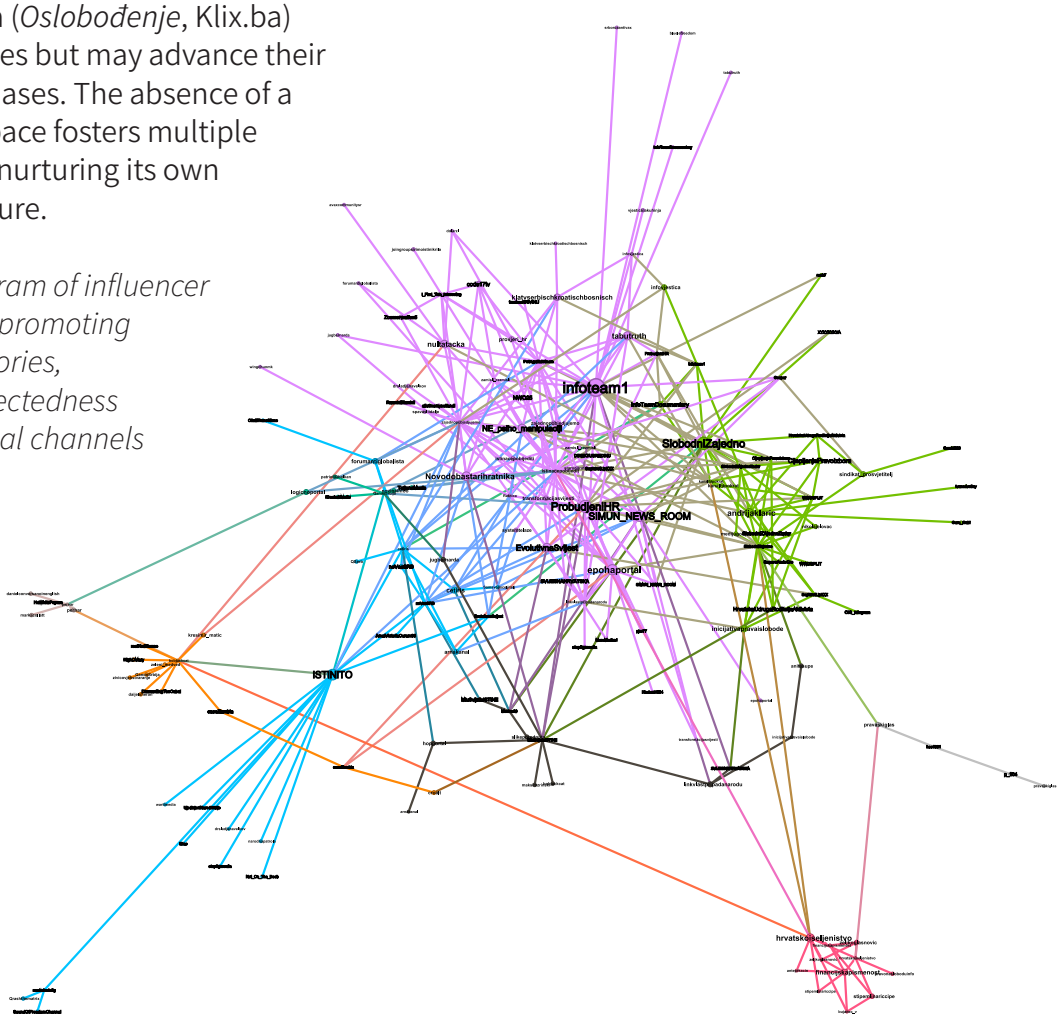

Figure 1. Network diagram of influencer accounts on Telegram promoting various conspiracy theories, showing the interconnectedness between mostly regional channels (source: REDACT).

Following content moderation during 2021–2022, BIRN reported that conspiracist communities relocated to Telegram, forming hybrid ideological hubs mixing Russian propaganda, vaccine scepticism and ultranationalism. Channels like Narodna patrola and Srpska istorija link online extremism to offline mobilisation against migrants and opposition protesters.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, conspiracy theories are both mainstream and localised. A 2022 Zašto ne survey found that 29% of respondents firmly believe in conspiracies, 47% are undecided and only 24% reject them. Narratives of 'foreign interference' and 'deep-state plots' cut across entities, while Srebrenica Memorial Centre found that secession and genocide-denial theories dominate Republika Srpska media. On the Bosniak side, anti-Russian or anti-Croat suspicions occasionally assume conspiratorial tones. The pseudo-archaeological myth of the Bosnian Pyramids exemplifies how pseudo-science merges with conspiracist tourism and online entrepreneurship.

Stronger moderation by global platforms has driven conspiracist migration to Telegram, private blogs and alternative video hosts. In Croatia, Facebook account deletions in 2022–2023 triggered reorganisation on Telegram. In Serbia, Telegram acts as the primary hub for conspiratorial communities combining political propaganda and extremist activism. In B&H, enforcement remains inconsistent, and cross-posting between Facebook, YouTube and Telegram is common. Linguistic proximity enables seamless regional spread. Serbian outlets often seed narratives that later circulate in Croatian and Bosnian online communities, illustrating a transnational conspiracist ecosystem that transcends political borders while exploiting a shared language and cultural reference points.

Fact-checking capacity varies across the region, but overall, the counter-disinformation sector remains far smaller and weaker than in Western Europe. Despite this, it plays a crucial role in monitoring, research, policy advocacy and media literacy.

Croatia hosts the most developed infrastructure, led by Faktograf.hr and the newer Točno tako initiative, a short-term NGO–academic partnership. In Serbia, independent outlets such as Istinomer, RasKRIKavanje.rs and FakeNews Tragač face state pressure and smear campaigns (Amnesty International, 2024). Bosnia and Herzegovina depends on Raskrinkavanje.ba and Istinomjer.ba. The SEE Check network coordinates regional verification but mainly reaches urban, educated audiences. Among broadcasters, only N1 – a CNN affiliate – has developed a sustained anti-disinformation strategy in partnership with ADMO.

Media literacy programmes in the region are mostly project-based, do not always have an institutional guarantee of funding and often depend on donor cycles. Although in Croatia there is a state framework, the country lacks continuous events and cooperation with NGOs, full institutionalisation and permanent budgets for all schools. In B&H and Serbia, this form of combating disinformation is left mainly to the civil sector, which has proven to be extremely creative in conditions of very weak institutional support.

Generally, conspiracism is more stigmatised in EU-member Croatia, normalised in Serbia and segmented in B&H. Whereas in Western Europe conspiratorial discourse is relegated to fringe spaces, in this Balkan triangle it overlaps with mainstream political and media narratives. Nevertheless, all three countries face similar structural drivers: low trust, at least partial media capture, socio-economic precarity of the counter-disinformation sector and geopolitical contestations embedded in the traumatic past from the end of the 20th century, which is often misused in the current turbulence of the international order. Addressing conspiracism thus requires coordinated regional strategies – enhancing cross-border fact-checking and media-literacy programmes, ensuring media transparency and reinforcing public-service journalism – to rebuild a shared factual baseline in an increasingly fragmented information space.

3. Case Study: Great Replacement Conspiracy Theories in the Region

Concerns of being replaced by non-European populations articulated in the Great Replacement narratives can be seen as part of 'the ultimate Europeanisation of the Balkans', i.e. the ethnicised nation-building process in the specific geopolitical context.[3] Cultural traumas have been central to national identity formation in post-conflict societies of the former Yugoslavia. Competing interpretations of 20th-century wars and life on shifting imperial borders deepened intra- and inter-ethnic divisions – especially between Croatia and Serbia – and fostered complex stereotyping in Bosnia and Herzegovina, shaped by the Ottoman legacy and Islamophobia. Political elites have exploited these narratives to fuel nationalism and mythologise unity through ideas of organic homogeneity of the body politic. Consequently, Balkan nationhood emerged with a heightened sense of vulnerability to Otherness.

In the 1990s, nationalist discourse equated nationhood with ethnic purity, embedding early forms of 'population replacement' thinking. Ethnic cleansing sought to purify the national space by expelling Others and resettling co-nationals. Though not explicit Great Replacement theories, these narratives fostered the ideal of an uncontaminated nation and later served as reference points for Replacement conspiracism.

However, the exact reference to these pretexts was brought directly by the most brutal proponents of the Great Replacement conspiracy theory. As John Feffer puts it: "[M]ass murderers like Anders Breivik in Norway and the Christchurch shooter in New Zealand have drawn a straight line between their brutal acts and the ethnic cleansing supported by war criminals like Serbian politician Radovan Karadžić during the breakup of Yugoslavia. In this way, the proponents of the great replacement are keeping alive the spirit of the worst war Europe has experienced on its soil since World War II."[4]

Explicit Great Replacement narratives in Croatia emerged during the 2015 migration crisis, when public discourse split between securitising migration and humanitarian concern for refugees. The securitised frame introduced tropes later central to Replacement myths – 'migrant floods', 'demographic shock' and 'threats to European identity and Christianity'. Yet, because the Balkan route largely bypassed Croatia, these narratives remained relatively muted, softened by the humanitarian context of the crisis.

Great Replacement narratives in Croatia gained traction during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, as relaxed labour rules brought large numbers of migrant workers for tourism and construction. Right-wing actors reframed this influx through existing anxieties about demographic decline – rooted in post-2008 economic strain and EU accession – casting it as part of a 'globalist agenda' to depopulate Croatia and replace its citizens with non-white foreigners.

In Serbia, Great Replacement narratives targeting Muslims draw on both historical legacies and the country's role as a transit zone on the Balkan migrant route. Centuries of Ottoman rule and the enduring Kosovo question sustain national myths of struggle against 'Turkish' domination, shaping perceptions of Middle Eastern and North African migrants as threats. This backdrop fuels conspiracist interpretations of migration. Studies show such beliefs are widespread, especially among citizens valuing sovereignty, conservatism and religiosity, framing migration as an orchestrated economic, security and religious plot by powerful elites.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Great Replacement narratives have grown amid demographic decline and rising migration. Since 2013, Bosnia and Herzegovina has lost nearly 20% of its population – over 500,000 mainly young, educated citizens emigrating due to economic and political stagnation. This exodus feeds ethno-nationalist fears of demographic erasure, especially among Croat and Serb communities, who cast it as an 'Islamification' plot by Bosniak elites or globalists. Such rhetoric echoes narratives from Serbia and Croatia. Surveys confirm widespread belief that refugee migration reflects a deliberate plan to replace Europe's native populations.

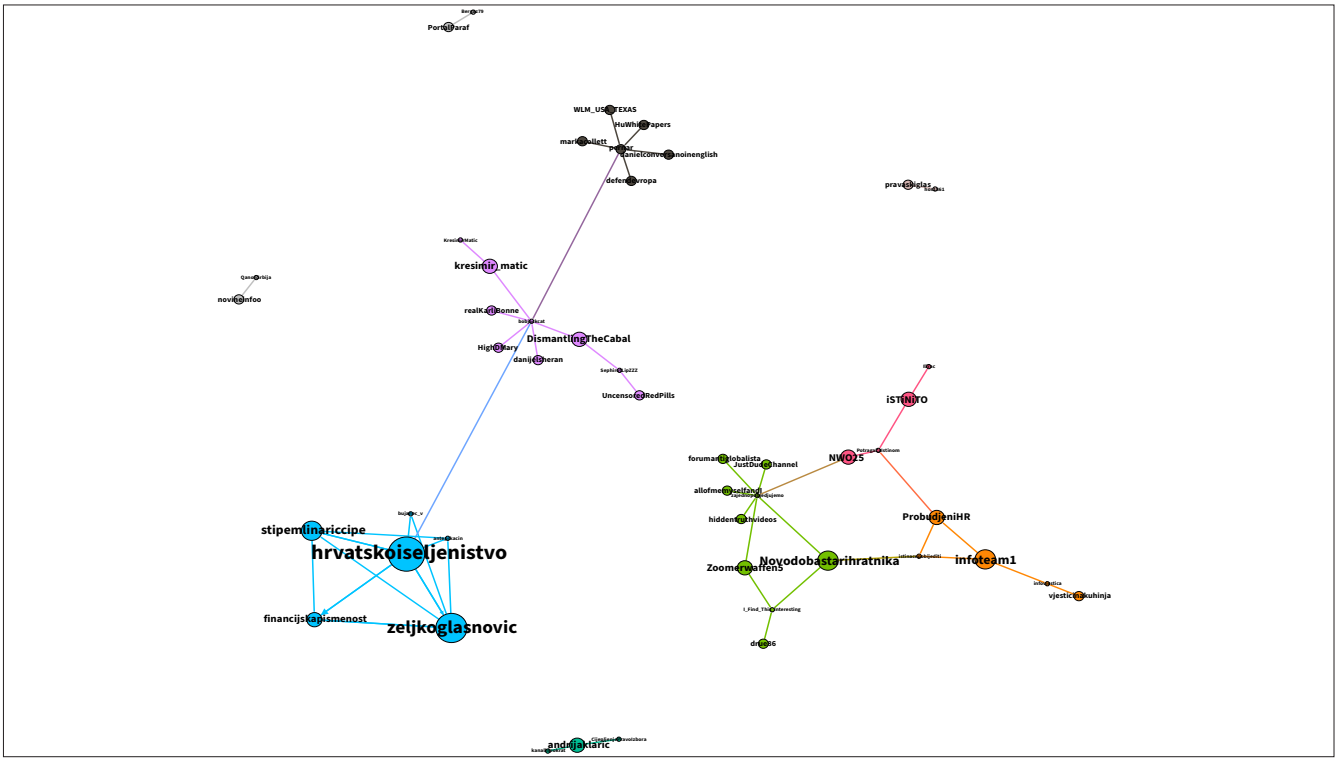

Figure 2. Network diagram of key influencer accounts on Telegram promoting the Great Replacement conspiracy theory in the Balkan triangle.

According to our analysis, in the online sphere Great Replacement narratives circulate mainly through Facebook and Telegram. Right-wing politicians, populist parties and diaspora networks use Facebook to amplify such content, often recycling material from mainstream outlets or fringe YouTube channels, like those of former MP Ivan Pernar, who reposts foreign conspiratorial content. On Telegram, channels such as iSTiNiTO, infoteam1, Novodobastarihratnika and bobjackcat blend local and global themes in fast-scrolling formats. Links to fringe portals and YouTube accounts like Mario zna sustain a closed, self-reinforcing ecosystem of 'alternative' information.

Telegram channels imitating legitimate media adopt a more overtly conspiracist and racist tone, depicting migrants as criminals, terrorists or pawns in global plots. Telegram thus attracts the most extreme variants of Great Replacement rhetoric. Yet by reach, Facebook dominates: posts in our dataset (Jan 2018–Apr 2024) amassed 652,353 views versus Telegram's 171,239. While more marginal, Telegram discourse is markedly more aggressive, simplified and elite-focused. Great Replacement themes are rare on Balkan Twitter/X, whose market share remains small compared to Western contexts.

Great Replacement posts on Telegram are often bilingual (Serbian/Croatian and English), a tactic aimed at projecting global credibility and maximising shareability. The content is multi-format – mixing emojis, images, YouTube videos (e.g., Balkan Info) and subtitled clips of local and foreign 'experts', celebrities like Roseanne Barr, religious figures such as a Jewish rabbi discussing 'Judeo-Bolshevik' plots and far-right politicians like former MEP Nick Griffin – linked across fringe and mainstream platforms.

Engagement patterns on the regional social media fluctuate. Facebook activity has fallen since the COVID peak but spikes during migration debates or crimes involving migrants. Politicians such as MP Marin Miletić, ex-MP Ivan Pernar and ex-MEPs Ivan Vilibor Sinčić and Mislav Kolakušić sustain visibility by portraying the ruling party as complicit in Croats' 'replacement'. On Telegram – free from fact-checking – discussions are longer, insular and community-building. Global and local identity politics intertwine: Figures like Bill Gates, George Soros, Klaus Schwab, Volodymyr Zelensky, Joe Biden, Ursula von der Leyen, Barack Obama and Kamala Harris are cast as architects of demographic engineering, while PMs Aleksandar Vučić and Andrej Plenković appear as national traitors. Conversely, Viktor

Orbán, Donald Trump, R. F. Kennedy Jr. and Marine Le Pen are exalted as defenders of sovereignty against a 'globalist' assault.

We identified three core themes in the regional Great Replacement discourse: antagonistic elites, racial anxieties and nationalist-populist fears. Propagators describe a grand plot by global elites – WEF, WHO, the European Commission – accused of engineering Europe's depopulation and 'replacement'. Framed as a 'globalist cabal', they echo tropes like the Kalergi Plan or an 'unholy alliance' of leftists, capitalists and Zionists. Leaders such as Andrej Plenković are portrayed as Brussels-controlled puppets. Migration is cast as a deliberate 'flood' of 'vandals' and 'soldiers disguised as refugees'. These narratives blend antisemitism and anti-globalism, invoking 'J€wropa', 'Big Israel' and 'Luciferian globalists' manipulating events through domestic 'fifth columns'. Migration thus becomes proof of an elite betrayal – a coordinated, existential assault on the nation.

Second, overtly racist motifs appear through phrases like 'hordes of non-white immigrants' and 'white genocide'. These narratives claim a 'multiracial experiment' aims to erase white Christian Europe, with Telegram images of non-white men attacking white women fuelling moral panic about racial annihilation.

Third, nationalist-populist rhetoric ties migration to the erosion of sovereignty, casting domestic elites as accomplices in demographic replacement. Even routine labour policies – like Croatia's post-pandemic recruitment of foreign workers – are framed as covert efforts to reshape society. Echoes of the Yugoslav wars' ethnic displacement emotionally intensify these narratives, recasting past nationalist traumas through the lens of globalist conspiracy.

Fears of demographic decline, emigration and identity loss give Great Replacement narratives strong mobilising power. Images of buses leaving for Western Europe at night symbolise state failure and national abandonment. Conspiracist actors weaponise these anxieties, framing migration and labour mobility as an 'unarmed occupation' or an elite plot to erase national identity. This monetised outrage thrives on Facebook, where fear fuels engagement. Mainstream politicians are cast as foreign puppets, deepening distrust in institutions. While racial tropes linger, Balkan versions focus more on sovereignty, demographic survival and cultural erosion than biological racism. Terms like 'democide' and 'ethnocide' depict the state as complicit in the nation's demise, binding demographic fears to populist and conspiratorial politics.

Figure 3. A Serbian Telegram post discussing the 'mass importation of non-white migrants with the aim that they will soon become the majority' as part of Agenda 2030. @ISTINITO, 30 August 2023.

4. Case Study: Reception of the War in Ukraine in the Balkan Triangle

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, mainstream media and political elites in the region interpreted the conflict through frameworks shaped by their own 1990s war experiences and prevailing geopolitical loyalties. To define their stance on the new war, they invoked national traumas from the recent past, reawakening nationalist sentiment and a collective sense of threat.

In Croatia, the dominant discourse drew direct parallels between Ukraine and Croatia in the early 1990s – an innocent victim attacked by a stronger aggressor – casting Russia in the role once occupied by Serbia. This Manichean framing, occasionally blending with elements of warranted conspiracism, has remained largely stable. The main exception is President Milanović, who, while supporting Ukraine, portrayed the war as a US–Russia proxy conflict 'fought over Ukrainian backs', sometimes in conspiratorial terms. In response, the prime minister and other officials have frequently branded him a 'Russian player'.

In Serbia, mainstream discourse was initially strongly pro-Russian, with tabloids even claiming Ukraine had attacked Russia. This stance drew on deep anti-Western and anti-NATO sentiment rooted in the 1990s sanctions and the 1999 NATO bombing, as well as Serbia's wartime experiences – especially in Kosovo. Historical ties and the view of Russia as a Slavic-Orthodox protector further reinforced support. While some media and far-right groups still uphold this narrative, official discourse has gradually shifted towards acknowledging Russian aggression, tempered by residual sympathy for Ukraine. Serbia's refusal to impose sanctions on Moscow reflects the political elite's balancing act between EU integration and concerns over Kosovo's status, still seen as integral to Serbia. Serbia's president even compared Kosovo's status to that of occupied Ukrainian regions, reinforcing his hard-line stance toward Kosovo – a rhetoric that intensified after Russia's invasion. Elsewhere in the region, Serbian actions and armed incidents in northern Kosovo were seen as mirroring Russia's tactics in Ukraine and as part of a joint Serbian–Russian effort to destabilise the Balkans and weaken NATO and the EU. These moves revived fears of renewed Serbian territorial ambitions from the 1990s. Such concerns had already surfaced in 2021, following official promotion of the 'Serbian world' concept – the Balkan analogue of Russia's 'Russian world'. Neighbouring governments and media interpreted it as a revival of the Greater Serbia project, fuelling political unrest in Montenegro and secessionist rhetoric in Bosnia's Republika Srpska. After the invasion of Ukraine, Bosniak and Croat leaders increasingly portrayed these dynamics as Russian-backed provocations. In Sarajevo, protests with slogans like 'Learn from Sarajevo – Save Kyiv' and 'Sarajevo Understands' expressed solidarity with Ukraine rooted in shared wartime trauma.

All mentioned turbulences and reverberations of the Ukraine war have reactivated the opposition between territorial integrity of the state versus autonomy of its constitutive parts and their further merging with the so-called home country in the mainstream politics, media and the public in B&H, Croatia and Serbia.

Figure 4: 'Behind (almost) every war or conflict stands the same dark clique: the "New World Order".' Comment on Facebook post, 2022.

Our analysis of Facebook pages and groups examined whether regional conspiratorial discourses reproduce, amplify or diverge from dominant national narratives. From a dataset of over 10,000 posts, the 100 most-engaged entries revealed that two-thirds were conspiratorial, mostly originating from fringe Facebook and YouTube channels, though some came from mainstream portals and public broadcasters. These patterns show how political interpretations of the Ukraine war were amplified through references to historical traumas and conspiracist framing.

Serbian and Republika Srpska sources largely framed the war as the beginning of World War III or a battle against – or for – the New World Order, circulating historically rooted pro-Russian, anti-NATO and anti-American narratives. A notable exception was the 'stab-in-the-back' narrative, portraying Putin's recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk as justified by the International Court of Justice's Kosovo precedent. Similar themes appeared less frequently in Croatian and B&H sources, which instead drew on 1990s analogies – depicting Ukraine as an innocent victim and equating Russia with Serbia and Putin with Milošević.

5. The Counter-Disinformation Sector in the Balkan Triangle

In addition to mapping the regional counter-disinformation sector, the REDACT team conducted 30 interviews with key NGOs, journalists, editors, programme directors and academics engaged in combating disinformation. The goal was to explore how disinformation and conspiracy theories in particular are understood and addressed, and to identify the sector's main challenges. Interviews revealed a nuanced grasp of conspiracism but highlighted difficulties in balancing analytical depth with limited human resources, along with the urgent need for stable, long-term funding. According to their experience, experts stress that even seemingly harmless theories have a negative effect in the Balkans, each one undermining confidence in facts, weakening trust in institutions and fuelling suspicion among citizens. They also emphasise:

Connection of conspiracy theories with populism and political rhetoric: Populism and conspiracism reinforce one another. Populist leaders – nationalist or anti-systemic – use conspiracy theories to mobilise supporters and discredit opponents through an 'us versus them' logic. Migrants, LGBTQ+ activists, the opposition and NGOs labelled as 'foreign agents' become enemies in hidden plots against the nation. Apocalyptic rhetoric – claims of secret plans to destroy the country or of a final battle between good and evil – has been normalised globally by figures like Trump and Putin and echoed across the Balkans. Far-right actors push Great Replacement and 'EU dictatorship' narratives, while mainstream populists exploit them when useful. Governments, too, invoke conspiracies to deflect blame, citing 'foreign interference' instead of governance failures. Such narratives reduce complex issues like corruption or economic decline to tales of secret enemies, enabling leaders to appear as defenders of the people while evading accountability.

Impact on trust, public health and democracy: Conspiracy narratives erode trust in institutions, experts and science – especially in the Balkan post-conflict societies where trust is already weak. During COVID-19, anti-vaccine misinformation fuelled hesitancy and reliance on pseudo-cures, costing lives. Politically, conspiracism intensifies polarisation and intolerance, reviving hate speech that once justified wartime violence. Though subtler today, such rhetoric still dehumanises migrants and neighbours, perpetuating a sense of threat. Claims of 'rigged elections' or 'puppet governments' corrode democracy by convincing citizens that secret forces control politics, fostering apathy and support for anti-system actors. Even minor conspiracy tales normalise belief in hidden powers, eroding rational debate and cooperation. Ultimately, disinformation weakens social cohesion, deepens cynicism and diverts attention from genuine challenges like climate change and public health.

The digital ecosystem and the role of the media: Social media and online portals drive disinformation across the region. Platforms like Facebook, YouTube and Telegram spread falsehoods within minutes, turning the Western Balkans into a shared information space. Traditional media, pressured by clickbait economics, occasionally amplify unverified stories, while tabloids and talk shows profit from sensational conspiracism. Weak regulation enables these practices, and algorithms boost polarising content, trapping users in echo chambers that deepen distrust. Experts warn that such online radicalisation has real social consequences, as credible information is drowned out by viral myths.

Institutional and civil-society responses: Official responses remain fragmented and insufficient. Governments have launched small-scale media-literacy projects and joined EU initiatives but lack coherent long-term strategies. In Serbia, where officials often spread disinformation, independent media and NGOs bear nearly the entire burden. Fact-checkers play a vital role in debunking viral claims and partnering with platforms, yet their resources are minimal and penalties for spreading falsehoods are rare. Regulators and police seldom act against fabricated stories or threats. Some progress comes from regional cooperation, as fact-checkers increasingly share tools and monitor cross-border networks. Media literacy remains the most promising long-term solution, but lasting impact requires integrated curricula, teacher training and sustained institutional backing. Without stronger political will, efforts remain confined to a few overstretched professionals.

Threats, burnout and resilience: Journalists and fact-checkers endure constant harassment, smear campaigns and death threats, while weak law enforcement enables impunity. Independent outlets face vandalism and coordinated intimidation. Chronic exposure to hate and falsehoods causes burnout, prompting some to offer psychological support and flexible schedules. Despite this pressure, many remain motivated by civic duty and first-hand awareness of misinformation's harm. A growing cross-border network of solidarity now links fact-checkers who share tools, expertise and encouragement – forming the region's most consistent and credible defence against conspiratorial narratives.

> *"I'd say the lack of systematic funding is our number one issue. Constantly having to write numerous project proposals outside our core activity requires staff to manage these projects instead of creating content, which is our main function."*

> *"People have a need for clear answers and to understand why their lives are difficult. Conspiracy theories offer this very effectively – if everything is an elite conspiracy, then I am powerless and that is why I am suffering. (…) It is much easier to blame an evil enemy than capitalism, and to avoid engaging in labour organizing and solidarity."*

> *The mental grooming done through conspiracy theories is far more effective than just throwing out some outrageous claim. If you simply say "there's a chip in the vaccine," it's hard for people to accept – but if it's woven into a broader narrative, they are much more likely to believe it."*

> *"Tabloid media operate at the edge of what is permissible. They've learned to avoid spreading explicit falsehoods, instead relying on nonsense and misleading statements – claims that are difficult to prove or disprove."*

6. Expanded Key Findings

Conspiracy Theories

- **Conspiracism in the region is a prominent form of political imagination, normalised among both political elites and citizens:** Shaped by its geopolitical history and a post-conflict culture of victimhood rooted in collective traumas, the region shows a strong propensity toward conspiracism. Political elites bear major responsibility for repeatedly weaponising unfounded conspiratorial narratives to mobilise supporters, heighten anxiety and deepen polarisation – thereby undermining the foundations of liberal democracy.

- **Conspiracy theories are adaptive and connective:** Driven by distrust and perceived threats to existence and freedom, conspiracy narratives shift easily between issues (e.g., from Covid to the Great Reset), serve to connect different political groups, sometimes merge into super-conspiracy theories and circulate in similar disinformation communities formed precisely on such topics.

- **The regional conspiracist ecosystem adopts global conspiracy theories and embeds them into home-grown conspiracism:** Global conspiratorial topics, such as the Great Replacement, Great Reset, Covid, climate change, current conflicts, gender issues, QAnon, etc. are well articulated in conspiracist networks. They are embedded into domestic grievances and connected with local conspiracy theories, especially about internal and external 'enemies'.

- **Conspiracism amplifies polarisation by relying on cultural traumas:** Conspiracy thinking intensifies political divisions, embedding itself in culture war narratives and making public debate more emotionally charged and intractable, especially those related to cultural traumas stemming from the twentieth century. A recent example is a polarised regional reception of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

- **Conspiracism has deep historical roots:** From early modern myths to today's digital-age populism, conspiracism became a persistent political imagination shaped by external interferences, recurrent imperial domination and border changes, domestic dictatorial and authoritarian regimes, regional and intra-state conflicts, institutional fragility and media systems vulnerable to manipulation. These legacies make universalist or US-centric approaches of understanding and countering conspiracy theories inadequate for the Balkans. One size does not fit all.

- **The regional online ecosystem knows no national borders – conspiracy theories are easily shared due to language similarities:** Linguistic proximity enables seamless regional spread. Serbian outlets often seed narratives that later circulate in Croatian and Bosnian online communities or vice versa. Such a transnational conspiracist ecosystem transcends political borders while conspiracy theories related to the 1990s wars often bring mirror-imaged mutual inter-ethnic accusations. Addressing conspiracism thus requires coordinated regional strategies.

- **Conspiracy thinking often reflects systemic failures:** Conspiracy theories are not isolated misinformation but expressions of public disillusionment with the gap between political promises and lived reality. In the region marked by decades of corruption, clientelism, instability and institutional weakness they reflect, rather than cause, democratic failure. Though often false or misleading, such narratives articulate genuine frustration with unfulfilled political and economic expectations.

Counter-Disinformation Sector

- **Grey zones complicate intervention:** Conspiracy talk often occupies a grey zone between legitimate debate and disinformation. On social media, it spreads through dog whistles, memes and insinuation, making it difficult to detect or regulate. As political language erodes under illiberal influence, many regional elites now operate within – or openly embrace – this conspiratorial style, further undermining already fragile democratic culture and civility.

- **The counter-disinformation sector is scarce, not supported enough and under threat:** The counter-disinformation sector is far smaller and weaker than in Western Europe, relying largely on civil society. Yet it plays a vital role in monitoring, research, advocacy and media literacy. Journalists and fact-checkers face constant harassment, smear campaigns and death threats, while funding remains precarious, resources scarce and impunity for spreading falsehoods widespread.

- **While fact-checking and media literacy are useful they have their limitations:** Such approaches push responsibility for addressing the problem of conspiracy theories on to consumers of digital content rather than those who produce or provide platforms for conspiracy theories. Wider approaches to improve societal resilience and crisis preparedness, as well as stronger regulatory solutions are needed.

- **Critiques often misrepresent the sector's work:** Online debates about the counter-disinformation sector are frequently based on unjustified accusations of censorship and caricature rather than reality, not recognising the sector's importance for fighting post-truth antidemocratic tendencies.

- **Technology-oriented solutions limit possibilities of deep and meaningful change:** Debates on counter-disinformation often overemphasise technological fixes. Yet conspiratorial thinking is not primarily digital – it stems from regional political culture, identity politics and low trust in science and expertise. Digital platforms enable its spread, but lasting change requires a deeper transformation of political culture, not technology alone.

- **Everyday users play a significant role in countering conspiracism:** Social media users often counter conspiracy theories online, yet their efforts are overlooked, exaggerating the dominance of conspiracist narratives. Many users care deeply about the integrity of information spaces and should be empowered to challenge falsehoods. Big data studies rarely capture this counter-discourse, risking an overly alarmist view of echo chambers. Moreover, research on warranted conspiracism as a potential civic virtue remains absent.

7. Expanded Recommendations

- **Create bespoke solutions and cooperate:** While it is valuable to learn from international best practices, regional responses should reflect the Balkans' specific socio-political context. At the same time, international coordination and oversight are essential. States should collaborate at the EU level to share threat analyses and best practices, and regularly publish open national briefs and public databases tracking conspiracist trends, reach and policy responses.

- **Understand how conspiracy theories stick:** Conspiracy theories are not just false information but narratives rooted in identity, belonging and social context – making them highly 'sticky' and resistant to refutation. Countering them requires equally compelling narratives, such as those centred on the democratic project, and stronger, trust-based relationships between democratic institutions and communities.

- **Identify underlying causes:** Conspiracy theories cannot be dismissed as paranoid delusions – they often tap into genuine social and political grievances. Understanding why specific narratives resonate is key to addressing their roots. Yet political, media and counter-disinformation debates focus too much on extreme cases and too little on the grey zone where conspiracism overlaps with legitimate discontent.

- **Tackle root grievances with policy and institutional strengthening:** Rather than lamenting declining trust, institutions must become worthy of it. The issue is not citizens' paranoia but the credibility of political actors and institutions. Since conspiracy theories are symptoms of democratic dysfunction, efforts should focus on strengthening fairness, transparency and accountability. Prioritising anti-corruption, social welfare and judicial and public service reforms can build trust and reduce the fertile ground on which conspiracies thrive.

- **Look beyond social media:** While digital platforms have amplified the speed and reach of conspiracy theories, online media are only one part of a broader media–political ecosystem. Focusing solely on digital interventions is insufficient. Effective strategies must also map the offline and online actors, institutions and channels that sustain unwarranted conspiracism.

- **Don't weaponise conspiracism:** When political leaders weaponise unwarranted conspiracy theories in culture wars, they do more than spread falsehoods – they erode public trust and democracy itself. Each use deepens institutional fragility and breeds new conspiracy theories. Breaking this cycle requires addressing the democratic failures that make societies vulnerable to such manipulation.

- **Disincentivise online disinformation:** To understand contemporary conspiracism, we need to examine how platform affordances and financial incentives shape online communication and, crucially, how they intersect with traditional media and the offline world. This requires platforms giving access to researchers.

- **Don't allow illiberal or populist conspiracism to set the terms of the debate:** Because conspiratorial framings of issues like immigration, homophobia or historical revisionism attract attention, mainstream politicians often feel pressured to respond within those terms. This reinforces rather than challenges the framing, gradually normalising conspiracy narratives.

- **Address current funding models for counter-disinformation work:** Funding models for counter-disinformation efforts should be redesigned in consultation with the sector to ensure timely and effective responses. Sustainable planning, stronger state backing and greater investment are essential. Governments should build civic capacity and rapid-response mechanisms, providing stable multi-year funding for NGOs and establishing cross-sector, nonpartisan units for coordinated communication, fact-checking and evidence-based outreach.

- **Acknowledge that disinformation is a political category:** Rather than dividing society into defenders of 'truth' and the 'brainwashed', we must recognise that defining misinformation or conspiracy is never fully neutral – it always reflects politics and values. Acknowledging this doesn't reject facts; it enables a more honest case for politics grounded in verified information and open debate as the fairest, most democratic basis for collective decision-making.

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