



**TARGETING
EXTREMISM
AND
CONSPIRACY
THEORIES**

**Relevant Conspiracy Theories in
Austria**

National Report



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1. Definitions of conspiracy theories

There is no general definition of conspiracy theories, therefore several definitions of terms should be discussed.

The origin of the term *conspiracy theory* can be traced back to the Latin *conspirare*, which means coinciding or cooperating (Butter 2018, p. 21). Didier Fassin speaks of conspiracy theories as interpretations of phenomena that are considered unwelcome and as a result of the malicious intentions of powerful and secretive agents. The followers themselves believe in these theories and are convinced of their correctness. Unlike Fake News, conspiracy theories are not deliberate lies to pursue one's own interests (Greber 2019, p. 12).

Furthermore, conspiracy theories usually cannot be traced back to their origin, the author is often unknown. Conspiracy Theories have certain characteristics in common: They try to explain certain phenomena or events by blaming certain people or groups who might profit from them (Haidinger 2019, p. 5). Barku (2013) names three elements of conspiracy theories: nothing happens by accident, nothing is as it seems, and everything is connected.

Raab/Carbon/Muth put forward a rather broad definition, according to which a conspiracy theory is an explanation for an event which contains a secret appointment of at least two people. The size of the conspiracy does not matter to them (Raab/Carbon/Muth 2017, p. X).

Michael Butter (2018), on the other hand, names specific criteria for conspiracy theories. It must be a group of conspirators secretly pursuing and following a plan. They want to control or destroy something (e.g. institutions, a state, a certain group), for any reason. Furthermore, these conspirators are always evil and act against the good of others (Hummel 2018, p. 188-189). Butter also assumes that the conspirators believe that nothing is a coincidence. Furthermore, he sees the idea of doubting and uncovering as central. Nothing is what it seems at first glance, conspiracy theorists see everything connected (Petz 30.04.2018 [online]). Sebastian Bartoschek extends this definition to the aspect that a conspiracy theory must be an alternative version of an event or procedure in contrast to the "official" version (Hummel 2018, pp. 188-189).

Andreas Peham from the Dokumentationsarchiv des Österreichischen Widerstands (DÖW Documentary archive of Austrian resistance) and leading researcher in extremism and anti-semitism in Austria states that every conspiracy theory has an anti-semitic core, even if that is not represented in the actual discourse or wording used; sometimes people may believe in theories without even being aware of that. Another important motive is that of envy (especially obvious in conspiracy theories and

Core elements of conspiracy theories:

- A group of conspirators secretly pursues a plan
- The plan foresees the control or destruction of something (e.g. institutions, state, certain group)
- Nothing is a coincidence, everything is connected
- Idea of doubting the "official version" of events and of uncovering some secret

prejudices around migrants and asylum-seekers). A working hypothesis could be that also anti-feminism (almost) always plays an important role in the ideological core of conspiracy theories.

2. Susceptibility to conspiracy theories

Most of the conspiracy theories, which have followers in Austria, suggest a connection to a right-wing political view. So the theory of a population exchange is represented in right-wing circles, theories around Jörg Haider's death and the making of the so called "Ibiza Video" as well as state objectors, especially the "Reich citizens", can be assigned to the right political spectrum (see below).

Unfortunately, there are no comprehensive studies on the susceptibility or awareness of conspiracy theories in the Austrian population. However, in Salzburg (city and state) a study on authoritarian attitudes, which also provides results on conspiracy theories, was carried out. According to this study, almost 50% of respondents tend to agree that our lives are determined by conspiracies. Furthermore, two-fifths of respondents believe that our sins will be avenged by a higher power (Aschauer/Heinz 2018, p. 28).

The Salzburg study shows furthermore that the susceptibility for conspiracy theories tends to be higher in people who vote for right-wing parties. This also applies to people with lower formal education (Aschauer/Heinz 2018, p. 40), women in the low-wage sector and construction workers (Aschauer/Heinz 2018, p. 95). These results also coincide with those of Sebastian Bartoschek's research. He also notes that susceptibility to these theories is higher among women than men. Bartoschek attributes this to women's tendency to be more religious because religious people are also more susceptible to conspiracy theories (Braun 2019, p. 8). Didier Fassin also states that especially those who feel powerless and oppressed believe in these ideas. However, it should be noted that there are conspiracy theorists in the educated upper classes as well (Greber 2019, p.12). There seem to be conspiracy theories for every socio-political group and "interest".

3. Emergence and dissemination of conspiracy theories

There are several reasons for the emergence of conspiracy theories; some of them have already been mentioned. Political and social reasons are very important for conspiracy theories. Many people feel disadvantaged, suffer from fear and insecurity, distrust politics because of lack of transparency, etc. World events are perceived as complex, impenetrable or unintelligible, which is why many are looking for simple and comprehensible solutions. This also promotes political apathy and frustration (Aschauer/Heinz 2018, p. 16-17, 28, 67, 84, 106; Freitag 2019, p. 14).

Furthermore, social media and filter bubbles play a major role. First of all there are infinite possibilities to investigate, publish and debate any opinion, theory or “evidence”. Furthermore Algorithms, mechanisms of filter bubbles, echo chambers, confirmation bias and the like are relevant factors in the recent growth of prominence of various conspiracy theories (Raab/Carbon/Muth 2017, p. 211; Kuhn 19.05.2019 [online]; Greber 2019, p. 12).

There seems to be a parallel “universe” of “alternative media” (mainly) online, ranging from YouTube Channels to blogs, online magazines, chatting platforms, leading to yearly “conventions” where leading “truthers” or “theorists” explain their latest findings (and sell merchandise articles). The German-speaking area of Germany, Austria and Switzerland seems to be highly connected when it comes to famous blogs, speakers, but also which theories are shared and endorsed.

There are also reasons that relate to the interest and motivation of the conspiracy theorists. Feeling that you know more than other people can be very motivating to deal with conspiracy theories. In addition, some theories are not looking for simple but complex explanations. This complexity can also be motivating and generate interest (Kuhn 19.05.2019 [online]; Raab/Carbon/Muth 2017, p. 110).

In general, it must be stated there is a lack of empirical evidence in Austria regarding the presence and importance of certain conspiracy theories, how many people believe them, or at least think they might be plausible or possible. This may be a major challenge in the TEACH-project.

4. Discourse in Austria

In Austria, there are adherents of international conspiracy theories (e.g. Flat Earther, vaccine opponents, chemtrails), but also theories with a national focus have emerged. A well-known example is the death of Jörg Haider in 2008, an Austrian right-wing populist politician, which – according to conspiracy theorists – can be attributed to an attack by the Freemasons, not to an ordinary car accident under the influence of alcohol and/or other drugs. Evidences are seen in the position of the car's wipers and in the absence of a shoe. Other theories blame Haider's death on Israeli secret service or the politically and economically most influential bankers (anti-Semitic theory) (Hohl 10.10.2018 [online]).

After the publication of the so called Ibiza-Video showing former FPÖ-politicians Heinz-Christian Strache and Johan Gudenus being very open and prone to corruption, conspiracy theories emerged almost immediately around the origin of the video, who made it, what were their motives, why was it published almost 2 years later, shortly before the elections to the European Parliament in May 2019 etc. Even Strache himself said in his resignation statement as vice-chancellor that it is unclear, which “powers” could profit from this video and its publication.

Most common conspiracy theories in Austria suggest a connection to a right-wing political view, e.g. the “population exchange” or “great exchange”, Freeman or “Reich citizens” neglecting the legitimacy of the Republic of Austria or various theories around the death of populist politician Jörg Haider 2008.

Another conspiracy theory is the “population exchange”, the “Umvolkung” or the “great exchange”. Especially since the former Austrian vice-chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache (FPÖ) used this term, more articles on the subject were published. The conspiracy theory states that politicians (or some form of (Jewish) elite, the US-Hungarian Jewish Billionaire Soros, etc.) coordinate and control a massive immigration of persons (especially Muslims) in order to replace the Austrian (white, Christian) population. The motivation behind this exchange is – according to this theory – that only an “ethnically homogeneous people” (Volk) can resist their domination and exploitation; that is why some kind of elite tries to break up

this (supposed) homogeneity. This theory has its origins in the Nazi era. For this reason, the theory of a population exchange can be seen as a radical, anti-Semitic and xenophobic conspiracy theory (Gensing 30.04.2019 [online]; Schmid et al. 30.04.2019 [online]; Wiener Zeitung 08.05.2019 [online]; Bauböck 07.05.2019 [online]; DerStandard 28.04.2019 [online]).

Another conspiracy theory present in Austria and hostile to democracy is the defamation of the state of Austria. The followers are so-called Freeman, Reich citizens or devotees of “Staatenbund Österreich”. They all have in common that they are state objectors, although there are also differences between these groups. They reject the authority of the state and its laws, but they have different explanations for their point of view. Some of them act more like peaceful “hippies”, others try to found their own states. Daniela Grabovac, head of the extremism prevention office, states that these people want to isolate themselves from democratic and liberal values. Most of them long for an authoritarian state, which they create themselves. A big problem is that they act violent or intimidate others and they proceed illegally against the democratic state (ORF Steiermark 16.01.2019 [online]).

The previous conspiracies have politics and politicians in focus and find their followers in people at the political right, far-right, extremists and neo-Nazis.

However, there are also conspiracy theories that are based on distrust in science and research. Ideas of dying animals and mind control through the new 5G network are currently being spread. Even some doctors are sceptical about 5G, but without wanting to support these conspiracy theories. Currently, there are no comprehensive studies to determine the consequences of 5G (DerStandard 14.06.2019 [online]; Anonym 2019, p. 6).



5. Prevalent conspiracy theories in adult education

In preparation of this report we discussed the presence and importance of conspiracy theories in Austrian adult education with trainers in different regions of Austria (rural and urban) and different socio-political contexts (religious institution, NGO, peace initiative, university, citizenship education, holocaust education). The topics and formats the different institutions offer vary in many ways, but have in common that they are voluntary, so people choose the course they want to take. This may be one explanation for their almost unanimously lack of direct experience with people who really believe in conspiracy theories. Some had experiences with people attending public lectures and discussions where they offered their “conspirative” explanations, mostly regarding 9/11, different wars and armed conflicts or massacres in the last 30 years or so. One of the strongest topics that trainers as well as participants of the courses are aware of (but not necessarily share or believe in) are conspiracy theories regarding migration, asylum-seekers and refugees, e.g. Soros is controlling or organizing a massive influx of (Muslim/culturally different) persons to Europe to destroy some kind of homogenous or white European race or population. Conspiracy theories and prejudices/fake news with xenophobic, anti-Semitic and anti-democratic ideas seem to be more present in a “right-wing” milieu, at least in Austria the right-wing populist party FPÖ (until recently part of the coalition government), and a big share of the yellow press, as well as influential “alternative media” around the FPÖ and their personnel are “playing” with all sorts of xenophobic, racist and anti-Semitic resentments, sometimes mixed with real conspiracy theories (see e.g. Soros, Chemtrails, death of Jörg Haider, scandal video of Heinz-Christian Strache at Ibiza).

6. Summary

Based on this first investigation into the subject in Austria, we derive some preliminary suggestions and questions for the project:

- Emergence and dissemination of Conspiracy Theories are closely connected with the logics of social media and “alternative” (online) media.
- There seems to be a close connection between theories, sources and proponents in the German-speaking area, “influencer” in Germany, Austria and Switzerland tend to cite each other.
- Where to draw the line between paranoid/psychological problems and conspiracy theories on the one hand, and between CT and “just” prejudices and xenophobic, racist, etc. ideas of people?
- There are some „all-time hits“ of conspiracy theories that seem to change in wording every once in a while, but basically refer to the same things such as anti-semitic, anti-capitalistic, anti-migrant, anti-science theories.
- Focus on anti-feminism as basis of (violent) extremist ideologies and conspiracy theories, as well as intersectionality

Based on experiences of trainers in adult education, several aspects could be of special interest in the project:

- Gap between rural and urban areas (regarding to logics of dissemination of CT, strategies in dealing with them in educational contexts)
- Probably very young and older persons are more prone to CT, but to different types of theories
- Different conspiracy theories in different sub-cultures in society (e.g. some Muslim teenagers believe that ISIS is the invention of US/Jewish elite to discredit Islam as a religion)
- How to engage the “hard to reach” groups in adult education (in this project)?
- How to engage multipliers, left-leaning, well-educated people that think of them as immune to CTs/anti-Semitism?
- Focus on non-voluntary types of adult education, e.g. professional trainings, trainings for unemployed persons (AMS-trainings)

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