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Conspiracy Mentalities in Times of Crises

Authors:
Georgi Dragolov, Klaus Boehnke and Kai Unzicker



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— Introduction

Does Bill Gates implant a chip with every vaccine? Are refugee crises staged in order to replace the European population with immigrants from all over the world? Are contrails in the sky actually hazardous chemtrails that manipulate the weather? In times of crises, conspiracy beliefs are flourishing. The coronavirus pandemic has provided the perfect conditions for such an environment, because “epidemics are the most social of all diseases. They affect entire societies, fuel fears and exacerbate social tensions” (Thießen 2015: p. 11).¹

These beliefs have a palpable impact on society, politics and individuals: Conspiracy narratives² are at the root of witch-hunts and anti-Semitism, and also do play a role in terrorist attacks. People who believe in conspiracies opt against proven efficacious vaccines or tested medical treatments, which results in their own suffering and, in the worst case, the re-emergence of already eradicated diseases (see Douglas et al 2019: p. 3).

Extremism researcher Michael Barkun (2003) identifies three characteristic features of conspiracy narratives: First, it is assumed that nothing happens by chance; instead, behind each event and each phenomenon there is a force that plans and controls what happens. Second, conspiracy narratives always refer to a fake public “reality” that masks the true connections awaiting to be uncovered. Third, in conspiracy narratives, everything is deliberately connected to everything else. In summary, conspiracy narratives can be defined as explanations based on assumptions and beliefs about powerful forces that work together behind the scenes, hidden from the public, towards achieving – and this is another essential point – malicious goals (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018).

” Conspiracy narratives are characterized primarily by inducing a sense of security and control in situations of confusion and fear.

In order to fully grasp the potency of conspiracy narratives, it is important to examine the advantages they offer to their supporters. Conspiracy narratives are characterized primarily by inducing a sense of security and control in situations of confusion and fear. They provide catchy explanations of what at first glance appears hard to understand and even harder to control. This is also why not everyone is equally inclined to believe in conspiracies. According to social psychologist Pia Lamberty, a sense of powerlessness and loss of control are crucial for this – especially regarding politics and society and less so with regard to personal biographies. Believing in a conspiracy thus “helps” those affected to regain control as this way they allegedly know who is behind a specific event and how everything is connected to everything else. This belief can enhance their sense of self-worth as through the exchange with others they belong to those who know and can elevate themselves above the ignorant (cf. Lamberty, 2020: pp. 4 – 5; Rees & Lamberty, 2021: p. 286).

1 Own translation

2 In this context we rather speak of ‘conspiracy narratives’ than of ‘conspiracy theories’ in order to avoid the impression that we speak of scientific theories.

— Increased social science focus

A glance at social media posts about the current events may give the impression that we are currently experiencing an unexpected surge in conspiracy narratives. However, these narratives are neither new nor particularly widespread. They have, in fact, been present all the time. And even in our supposedly enlightened, science-oriented world, they remain very appealing (Butter 2021). What's intriguing is that conspiracy myths and narratives present themselves as rational. They are often supported with sophisticated arguments. At the same time, not all narratives are at first glance nonsensical, like the idea of "chemtrails." Some even rely on plausible assumptions, such as the claim that intelligence agencies routinely violate data protection, and occasionally turn out to be true, like the Watergate affair in the United States in the early 1970s (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018).

In liberal democracies attaching importance to free speech, it is not easy to come to grips with conspiracy beliefs, especially when they do not lead to concrete criminal offences. Nevertheless, it would be short-sighted to dismiss them as bizarre, abnormal conduct of isolated individuals. What stands behind conspiracy beliefs are perceptions of reality that are shaped by deep distrust in democratic institutions and thrive in conflicts between different societal groups.

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In recent years, social scientists have, therefore, recognized the importance of addressing conspiracy beliefs and take them as a serious societal challenge. As a result, empirical research in this field has increased significantly. It is important to better understand the factors and conditions that facilitate the endorsement of conspiracy myths and narratives, as well as the measures that a society can take to prevent this from happening on a larger scale.

With its *Social Cohesion Radar*, the Bertelsmann Stiftung has been examining for several years by now the degree of social togetherness at the international, national, regional and local levels.³ A broader study of social cohesion in the German federal state of Baden-Württemberg (Boehnke et al., 2022) created an opportunity to analyze more closely conspiracy mentalities, that is, deeper inclinations toward conspiracy narratives.⁴ For this purpose, an online survey was conducted from December 2021 to January 2022 among 2,716 people aged 16 and above living in Baden-Württemberg. The main study, published as part of the *Social Cohesion Radar* series, focused on changes in social cohesion as a result of the pandemic. The present report examines more closely the data on conspiracy mentalities and puts

3 Further *Social Cohesion Radar* publications are available at www.gesellschaftlicher-zusammenhalt.de

4 We distinguish specific conspiracy narratives from an underlying conspiracy mentality that involves a generalized structure of prejudices and beliefs. At a higher level, single narratives can be assigned to more comprehensive conspiracy myths. These include, for example, the "Jewish World Conspiracy" or the belief that extraterrestrial powers secretly rule the world (see Lamberty, 2020).

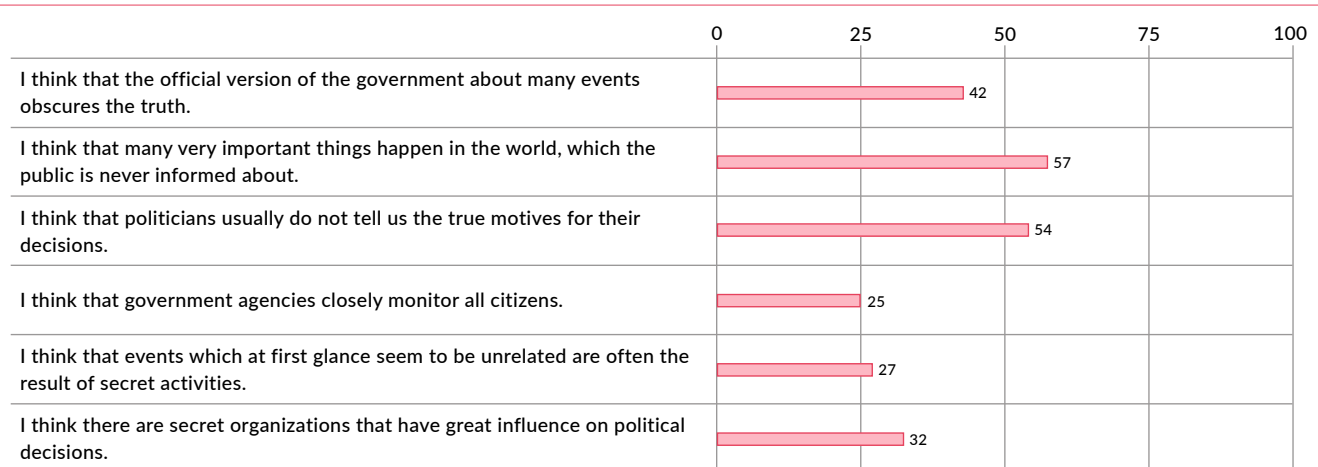
them in the context of the analysis of social cohesion.

Although the representative data used in this analysis exclusively refer to the federal state of Baden-Württemberg, we assume that they have relevance beyond its borders. This is supported by other studies that arrive at similar insights (see below for an overview).

— The Inclination to Conspiracy Narratives During the Pandemic

In order to determine the extent to which respondents in our Baden-Württemberg study are inclined to conspiracy narratives, we used a tried and tested instrument, the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire by Bruder et al. (2013). It consists of six statements for which respondents can express their agreement on a five-point response scale. The stronger the overall agreement, the stronger the inclination to conspiracy narratives. Figure 1 presents the statements.

Figure 1: Extent of Conspiracy Mentality in the Overall Sample



The figure shows the extent to which respondents agree with the six statements used to measure a conspiracy mentality. The values for “mostly agree” and “completely agree” were combined. The values for “neither agree nor disagree” as well as “disagree” and “strongly disagree” are not indicated.

The findings suggest that the belief in conspiracies is not a marginal societal phenomenon. The lowest level of agreement is found for the statement that government agencies monitor citizens, but even here, a quarter of respondents agree. Almost a third believe that there are secret organizations having major influence on political decisions. And more than half of the respondents (57% and 54%, respectively) are of the opinion that they do not have access to or have insufficient information about “many very important things in the world” and “the true motives” behind political decisions.



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Conspiracy narratives, as we pointed out in the beginning, are not a new phenomenon. We thus suppose that the extent of the conspiracy mentality we capture is not solely a product of the COVID pandemic. They rather evidence a widespread potential which, in the pandemic situation, seized the chance to relate to various, also new corona-specific narratives. At the same time, government measures such as restricting fundamental rights for the purpose of preventing the spread of infection and mandating vaccination for some healthcare workers provided ample opportunity for the public articulation of conspiracy narratives. However, this should not be taken for a growing dissemination. “In most cases, however, as the numbers evidence, already before that colleagues, friends and family members believed in conspiracy theories; we just didn’t know it,” writes Michael Butter (Butter 2021: p. 11).

This assessment is supported by a YouGov study from the pre-Corona year of 2018 (YouGov-Cambridge Centre, 2018). About one-third of the respondents believed then that the government would intentionally not disclose the actual number of migrants. Roughly one in five respondents was of the opinion that the side effects of vaccines would be concealed, that the pharmaceutical industry would cultivate disease-causing agents for profit, and that a small group would rule the country regardless of who is in government. Rees and Lamberty (2019: pp. 214f) also found a relatively high prevalence of conspiracy mentalities for 2018 and 2019: around 46 percent indicated that there were secret organizations with considerable influence on political decisions, 33 percent stated that politicians were mere puppets of hidden powers, and 24 percent believed that politics and media were in cahoots. Research from 2020 and 2021 even shows a decline in conspiracy mentalities during the pandemics (Lamberty and Rees 2021: p. 290f), with the belief in secret organizations, for example, falling considerably from 46 to 23 percent. The intensive public debates about conspiracy narratives and the efforts to shed light on the issue during the pandemic possibly had an impact here.



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— Influence of Belief Patterns and Social Factors

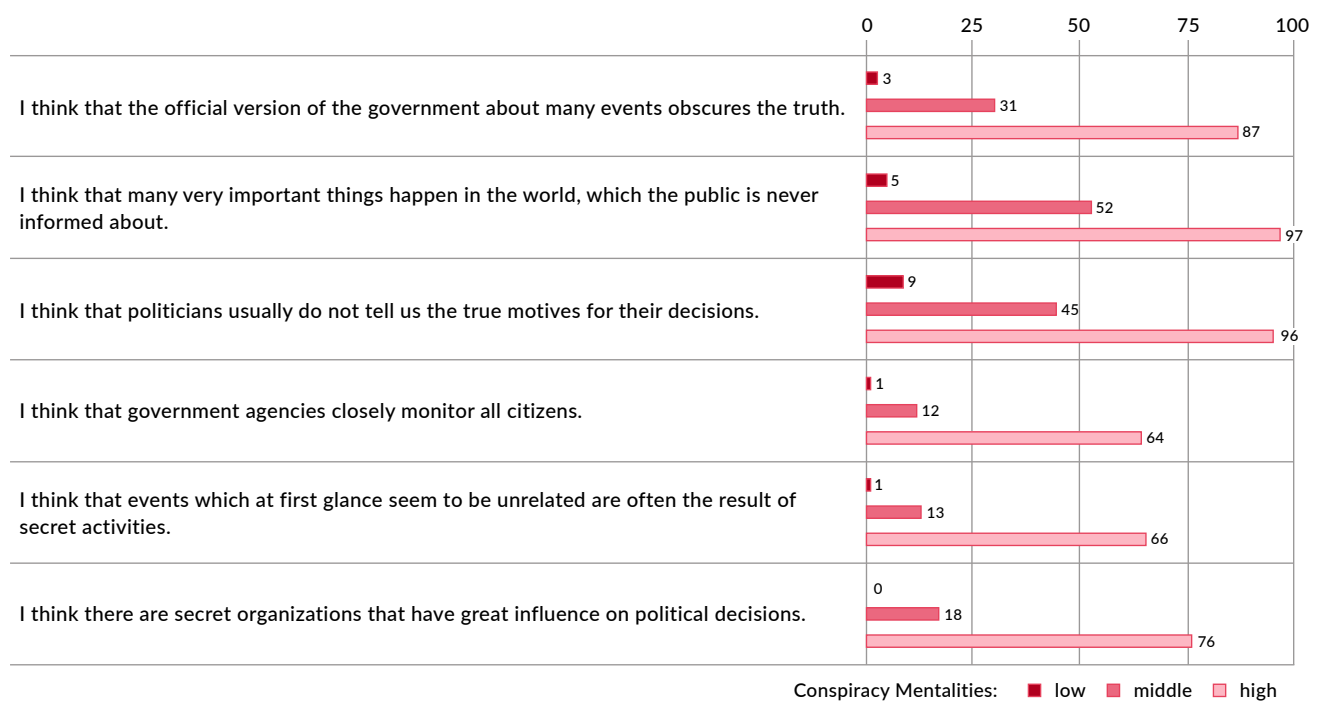
Below we investigate how the inclination to conspiracy narratives is related to socio-demographic factors and attitudes toward the Corona pandemic. In order to explore these questions, we divided the overall sample of respondents into three groups based on their responses to the *Conspiracy Mentality*

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Questionnaire⁵: 19 percent of the respondents form a group with a strong conspiracy mentality, 50 percent exhibit a moderate one, and for 31 percent the inclination to conspiracy narratives turns out to be low. The extent of the differences becomes clear when we look at the agreement with the six statements differentiated according to the three groups (see Figure 2). The group with a low inclination consistently shows very low values for all six statements. Only the statement that politicians do not offer information about their true motives gets a notable 9 percent agreement. In the group of moderate conspiracy mentality, the agreement with five of the six statements is below 50 percent. Only the perception of not being informed about many important things is shared by more than half of this group. In contrast, the agreement with all statements in the group of high conspiracy mentality is consistently well above 50 percent. In fact, almost all respondents in this group agree with two statements (important things about which the public is never informed, as well as no information about the true motives behind political decisions).

Figure 2: Inclination to Conspiracy Narratives by Extent of Conspiracy Mentality



” In addition, an optimistic worldview noticeably dampens the affinity for conspiracy narratives.

We then examined which characteristics or traits of the respondents have an impact on their membership in the three groups. For this purpose, we created four categories of characteristics and included

⁵ Here, we used the so-called “latent class analysis” as a method of classification.

them one by one in the analysis.⁶ We started with socio-demographic factors such as age, biological sex, education level, and migration background. The next step involved variables on subjective well-being, such as health status and life satisfaction. We then included two variables on political orientations: self-assessment on the left-right spectrum and satisfaction with democracy. In a fourth and final step, we added variables the individual affectedness by and experience of the COVID pandemic.

Based on the results, it can be concluded that all factors included in the analyses can explain approximately 18 percent of the differences in the affinity for conspiracy narratives. In particular, the socio-demographic variables account for 3.4 percent, the well-being variables 4 percent, the two variables on political orientations 8 percent, and the variables related to Corona 2.8 percent.

The results show that the highly educated (holding a high-school certificate or university degree) and those not in the labor force have a lower than average affinity for conspiracy narratives. In addition, an optimistic worldview noticeably dampens the affinity for conspiracy narratives. A higher affinity for conspiracy narratives have the elderly (65 years and above), people with a migration background and the lower educated (holding at most lower secondary education certificate). The initially observed significant effect of income disappears once the variables on subjective well-being are included in the analysis. In other words: It's not low income as such that increases the inclination to conspiracy narratives but, supposedly, the concerns and insecurities about the future associated with it.

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Also, people who have been subjectively (but not necessarily objectively) strongly affected by Corona are inclined to conspiracy narratives. These are individuals who consider the economic consequences of Corona as threatening and have experienced a high degree of psycho-emotional stress from Corona. Among these individuals are also those who report having suffered under the measures taken to contain Corona; those who believe that their needs have not been considered during the Corona crisis, and those who are generally of the opinion that politics has not done enough for them during the Corona crisis. The difficulties experienced in dealing with Corona appear to act as catalysts for orienting towards conspiracy narratives but are probably not the primary source.

The two variables on political views emerge clearly as the most important. They alone explain 8 percent of the variance in conspiracy thinking. People with a pronounced conspiracy mentality are, first and foremost, politically right-wing oriented and highly dissatisfied with the way democracy functions in the country.

Other studies confirm these findings. For example, Lamberty and Rees (2021) found that conspiracy believers are more likely to live in East Germany, have lower levels of educational attainment, are poli-

⁶ This was done by applying an ordered logistic regression model.

tically right-wing orientated, and, in addition, tend to vote for the AfD or not at all. Hövermann (2021) arrived at similar results and also confirmed the correlation between lower or decreasing income and worries about the future as well as the inclination to conspiracy narratives. Moreover, according to his analyses, there is a link between belief in conspiracies and non-compliance with AHA (German acronym for keep-your-distance, observe hygiene and wear everyday masks) rules, support for anti-Corona protests, and vaccine refusal.

— Affinity for Conspiracy Narratives and Social Cohesion

In the Social Cohesion Radar, we employ a multidimensional model for measuring social cohesion in a society (see Table 1). It consists of altogether nine dimensions, which are captured by 36 individual indicators. These indicators make the constituent elements of social cohesion empirically tangible: It is characterized by stable, trusting and diverse social relationships; a positive emotional connectedness with the community and its perceived as fair basic order; and finally, the willingness to commit to the common good and to demonstrate solidarity with the weaker.

Table 1: Domains and Dimensions of Social Cohesion

Social cohesion	Social relations	Social networks
		Trust in others
		Acceptance of diversity
	Connectedness with the entity	Identification with the entity
		Trust in institutions
		Perception of fairness
	Focus on the common good	Solidarity and helpfulness
		Respect for social rules
		Civic participation

Source: Dragolov et al. 2016

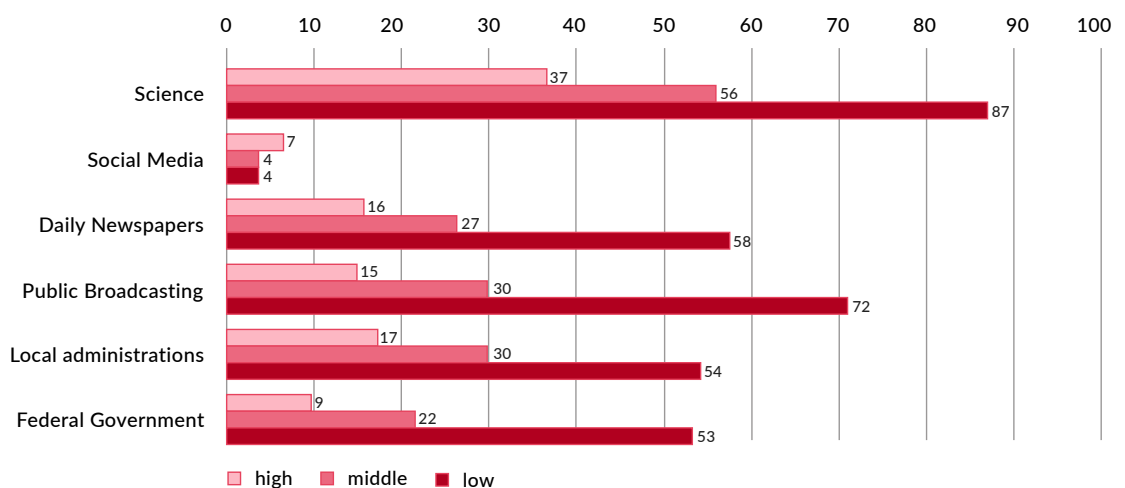
For the research question of relevance here, we examined in a next step how belonging to one of the three conspiracy mentality groups relates to the overall degree of social cohesion and its nine dimensions.⁷ The results clearly show that there is such a relationship. Belonging to the group with a high, medium, or low conspiracy mentality explains about 16 percent of the degree of social cohesion. In other words, those who experience higher social cohesion agree with conspiracy narratives to a lower-than-average extent. There are good reasons for this: High cohesion provides stability and reduces thereby insecurities and the need for “alternative narratives.” Moreover, mechanisms for social control are more effective in more cohesive societies. Conversely, if they become widespread, conspiracy narratives can weaken cohesion, as they undermine trust and fuel conflicts.

⁷ This was done in a multivariate multiple linear regression analysis.

” Those who experience higher social cohesion agree with conspiracy narratives to a lower than average extent.

A closer look at the nine dimensions shows that the conspiracy mentality is associated above all with the two dimensions of the Radar “Trust in people” and “Trust in institutions.” Apparently, the trust-destroying force of conspiracy narratives comes into play here: People with a pronounced conspiracy mentality trust neither their “close others” nor the institutions of the entity, such as governments, political parties, administrative agencies, science and media (see Figure 3). Conspiracy narratives thus have the potential to pose a lasting threat to social cohesion.

Figure 3: Level of Trust in Selected Institutions by Conspiracy Mentality



— Crumbling Social Cohesion and the Belief in Conspiracies

From 2019 to 2022, social cohesion in Baden-Württemberg deteriorated significantly. Therefore, in a final step, we address the question whether a pronounced conspiracy mentality is related to changes in social togetherness. In order to find this out, we determined the overall cohesion score and the dimension scores for the years 2019 (cf. Dragolov et al., 2019) and 2022 (Boehnke et al., 2022) for each of the 44 districts in Baden-Württemberg, and then calculated the difference in the scores between the two years. Since the scores for 2022 are consistently lower than those for 2019, the difference for each district is in the negative. In a next step, the percentages of the three groups of low, medium and high conspiracy mentality were calculated for each district. This makes it possible to determine whether a district that is home to many people with a high affinity for conspiracy narratives is more affected by crumbling social cohesion. No such relationship emerges, though – at least not for the overall cohesion index. Only institutional trust declined more strongly in districts with a comparatively high share of people with pronounced conspiracy mentality.

Surprisingly, a sharper picture emerges for the middle group exhibiting a rather average affinity for conspiracy narratives: Social cohesion has significantly declined in districts, in which this group is

represented in very large numbers. A look at the dimensions is quite telling in this regard: Acceptance of diversity has notably declined in such districts. On the one hand, one could speculate that in times of insecurity, those who are at least to some extent open to conspiracy narratives project their worries onto strangers, for example newcomers, but also onto people with very different, non-conformist lifestyles. On the other hand, it is also quite possible that both the inclination to conspiracy theories and the rejection of diversity are part of a shared worldview.

” Cohesion along its respective dimensions has declined significantly in the districts that are home to relatively few people ‘immune’ to conspiracy narratives.

Cohesion has declined notably in those districts where few people with low affinity for conspiracy narratives live. The finding also emerges for the dimensions ‘acceptance of diversity,’ ‘trust in institutions,’ ‘perception of fairness,’ and ‘respect for social rules.’ Cohesion along its respective dimensions has declined significantly in the districts that are home to relatively few people ‘immune’ to conspiracy narratives.

At this point, we can hypothesize that committed conspiracy believers tend rather not to pose a threat to cohesion – they stay anyway out. More problematic is a constellation of a small stabilizing group that is resistant to conspiracies and a rather large group that is not averse to conspiracy narratives. Then there is the danger that the social fabric gets out of balance and cohesion harmed. Obviously, it is important to maintain a critical mass that stabilizes the social discourse and, at the same time, prevents uncertainty and distrust from spreading too deep into the middle of society.

— Summary and Outlook

The analysis of cohesion indicators and conspiracy mentalities in Baden-Württemberg has yielded a number of results, which we summarize below.

First, the affinity for conspiracy narratives can be predicted only to a limited extent based on socio-structural and contextual factors. Even the corona pandemic did not give rise to these mentalities; they were widespread already beforehand, as previous studies show. However, there are some risk factors that should be mentioned. These include a high subjective burden by Corona in combination with the feeling of having been left alone by the state and society, as well as migration background and advanced age. Given that the pandemic has not only made social differences more visible but has also exacerbated them, it has apparently given rise to a turn towards alternative narratives that counterbalance the loss of control and increase one’s self-worth.

” People with a pronounced conspiracy mentality are politically on the right and are dissatisfied with the way democracy functions in Germany.

The biggest risk factor is of a political nature, though: People with a pronounced conspiracy mentality are politically on the right and are dissatisfied with the way democracy functions in Germany. This finding suggests that they need to be addressed primarily in the political arena. This is necessary also because people with a strong conspiracy mentality are not a marginal phenomenon. Our analyses indicate that at least 12 percent of the sample examined here may be convinced conspiracy “theorists.”⁸ Conversely, we can also point out what helps against conspiracy narratives. Education does its part, as does an optimistic outlook on the future and a positive attitude toward democracy.

The stronger the conspiracy mentality, the weaker the experienced degree of social cohesion. Of particular interest in this regard is the finding that low scores on the two trust dimensions of the cohesion model (trust in people and trust in institutions) correlate highly with a pronounced conspiracy mentality. Obviously, it is primarily people with little trust in “everything and everyone” who turn to conspiracy narratives.

In light of the relationship between declining social cohesion and the spread of conspiracy mentalities, it becomes yet again clear that for the sake of social cohesion, it is important not to discount the affinity for conspiracy theories as crazy ideas, but instead to address them decisively in the political sphere. Apparently, what plays a role here is not a (too) large number of people with a strong affinity for conspiracy narratives, but rather the (too) low number of those immune to them. In simple terms, this finding suggests that the – political – approach to conspiracy narratives should focus less so on weakening the ones who have an affinity for them, but more so on strengthening those who are already equipped with a basic level of skepticism toward such narratives. Next to public education and convincing counterarguments, it is above all measures facilitating a commitment to coexistence in solidarity that play an important role to this end. The goal is to prevent too many people from falling by the wayside and losing social support, and thereby corrective mechanisms. This includes also recognizing and addressing loneliness as a self-exacerbating social problem, as the Competence Network Loneliness, funded by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ)⁹, intends to do.

8 Changing the number of groups identified by the latent class analysis, we can identify a “hard core” of those who embrace conspiracy narratives.

9 More information: <https://kompetenznetz-einsamkeit.de>

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It would be worth examining in more detail what is the role played by right-wing critics of democracy as well as actors within their circles who exploit the inclination to conspiracy narratives for their political, but also profit-making goals. Their seed is likely to sprout quite easily where cohesion is crumbling. They further benefit from the changing nature of the media landscape. It has led to the emergence of various “counter publics” in which conspiracy narratives can spread, even across the mainstream.¹⁰ In-depth analyses of conspiracy narratives must thus also take into account these media changes.

¹⁰ This dynamic can prove quite successful, as seen, for example, in the case of the Swiss historian Daniele Ganser (Butter 2019).

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Bertelsmann Stiftung

Carl-Bertelsmann Straße 256

33311 Gütersloh

www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de

Upgrade Democracy

www.upgradedemocracy.de

Authors

Georgi Dragolov

Klaus Boehnke

Kai Unzicker

Responsible for content

Kai Unzicker

Design

nach morgen

Editing

Gesine Bonnet

Translation

The authors and Barbara Serfozo