3rd CONNOR Annual Conference
"Critical Turns in Conspiracy Theory Studies"

University of Tartu, Estonia
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DAY 1 – May 21, 2026

Keynote 1 (Jakobi 2-226) *Chair: Anastasiya Astapova (University of Tartu, Estonia)*

Annastiina Kallius (University of Helsinki, Finland)
"Nothing New Under the Algorithm: AI-Generated Propaganda Videos and the Politics of Fantasy"

The rapid growth of AI tools that can generate short video format has led to discussions on the changing parameters of public discourse. In this talk, I focus on the use of AI-generated conspiratorial propaganda in political campaigns, with a particular focus on mid-2020s Hungary under Viktor Orbán. Drawing on long-term ethnographic research in Hungary and analysis of recent campaign materials of the Fidesz regime, I argue that AI-generated conspiratorial videos do not represent novelty in political communication. Departing from the much-feared genre of political deepfakes, I identify another emerging genre: AI videos that make no claim to documentary truth, but instead sell conspiratorial political nightmares or utopian visions. Situating these videos alongside comparable materials in both historical and contemporary contexts, and drawing on anthropological scholarship on knowledge production and political transformation, I argue that the form of knowledge itself carries no inherent normative value. What is new lies not in conspiratorial video propaganda itself, but the pace at which it can now be produced.

Dr. **Annastiina Kallius** is a social anthropologist and a Core Fellow at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies. Her research combines anthropology and intellectual history to explore the crisis of liberalism in a European context, with a broader research interest in law, migration, authoritarianism and knowledge production. Ethnographically, her work is anchored in the context of Hungary, where she has conducted research for more than a decade. She is also the Principal Investigator on a Kone Foundation-funded project on the legacy of the Counter-Enlightenment in European political thought, and the responsible researcher for Finland in NORDREN, the Nordic Disinformation Resilience Network.

1.1. Political Conspiracism and Authoritarianism (Jakobi 2-107)
Chair: Asbjørn Dyrendal (Norwegian University of Science and Technology)

Erol Sağlam (University College London, UK; Istanbul Medeniyet University, Türkiye)

"Conspiracism as (Anti-)Politics: Socio-economic Inequalities, Radical Right Movements, and Subjectivities in Contemporary Europe"

The circulation of conspiracy theories is increasingly tied to wider support for authoritarian politics, eruptions of societal violence, and a growing distrust in democratic processes and public institutions. While most scholarship and public discussions focus on the 'losers' of globalisation and multiculturalism, that is, 'male, young, dropouts without work skills' who 'resented' migrants and elites as the cause of their predicament, this talk explores how more privileged groups, namely upper-middle class men, working as physicians, lawyers, and financial brokers in three western-democracies (Germany, Sweden, and the UK) circulate conspiracy theories – all despite their educational attainments and relatively well-off socioeconomic positions. Challenging prevailing assumptions that conspiracy theories are simply epistemological problems and belong solely to the 'left-behind' working classes with limited economic-cultural capital and political organisation, the project asks a seemingly basic and yet structurally-significant question, "What happens when privileged, educated individuals circulate conspiracy theories?", to explore the destabilisations that democratic norms and processes face across a relatively prosperous region in the 21st century. Main research questions are: (i) How do these seemingly mundane practice of circulating conspiracy theories affect the bottom-up making, legitimisation, and maintenance of ethnonationalist-authoritarian neoliberalism? (ii) What are the sociocultural and economic parameters of this collusion of upper-middle classes and authoritarian neoliberalism? (iii) And, how do upper-middle class, professional men forge their political subjectivity in contemporary Europe? Drawing on interviews with physicians, lawyers, and managers across the UK, Germany, and Sweden, the project addresses the radical shift in public culture across Europe, moves the analytic focus to often under-studied demographic of professional upper-middle classes, and underlines how the circulation of conspiracy theories exert a great degree of influence on politics through its enframings of moral boundaries of politics and society. The talk directly tackles two main biases in scholarship: an epistemological bias focusing exclusively on the falsity of conspiracy theories without necessarily accounting for their appeal or the capacity of their circulation to produce concrete sociopolitical effects; and, secondly, a methodological-analytic bias, presuming that only working-class individuals circulate these narratives because of a lack of knowledge or socioeconomic resources to cope with a fast-changing world.

Erol Sağlam is Associate Professor of social anthropology working on the reconfigurations of statecraft and masculinities at the intersections of conspiracy theories, collective memory, societal violence, and street-level bureaucracies. Following his doctoral studies at Birkbeck, University of London, Sağlam worked as a postdoctoral fellow at Stockholm University and Free University of Berlin, was a member of international panel on violence at Columbia University's Columbia Global Centers, and was a visiting scholar at the University of Cambridge. Sağlam also works as associate professor at Istanbul Medeniyet University's Department of Sociology and as research fellow at UCL Institute for Global Prosperity. Saglam's publications dealt with conspiracy theories and their socio-political effects, everyday dynamics that forge and maintain masculinities, vigilantism, bureaucracies, and ethnographic methods.

Marco Solinas (Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies, Italy)
"Hitler's Political Conspiracism and the Boomerang Effect of Debunking"

The paper aims to analyze the specificity of National Socialist political conspiracism against in light of current discussions on conspiracy theories. Hitler's use of antisemitic narratives – along with that of Goebbels and the main ideologues of the Nazi Party – shows that political conspiracism operates through mechanisms that differ from those of non-political conspiracy theories widely circulating in the public sphere. This difference concerns, above all, the primary epistemic and existential functions assumed by fear and anxiety. Rather than being soothed, anxieties are deliberately intensified, and instead of leading to states of powerlessness and apathy, they are employed as instruments for the mobilization of the masses. The implementation of the persecutory political agenda also reveals that antisemitic conspiracism was not merely instrumental for the National Socialists – thus not reducible to a purely functionalist logic – but embodied a deeper obsession. The use of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion likewise sheds light on the modes of radical self-sealing of an evidently fabricated source and helps clarify some of the risks that efforts to expose this falsity may generate within public opinion – namely, the amplification of the very arguments under scrutiny and criticism. In short, it illuminates the boomerang effect of debunking.

Marco Solinas is an Associate Professor of Political Philosophy and Project Manager of Jean Monnet Module GOLDSTEIN: "Debunking Political Uses of Denialisms and Conspiracy Theories in EU". The focus of his on critical theory of society, populism and conspiracy theories. He completed his undergraduate and doctoral studies at the University of Florence, studying also at University of Nottingham and at Humboldt University of Berlin. He carried out research at at the Institute of Philosophy at the Goethe University Frankfurt, at the EHESS in Paris, at Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, and at the University of Milan. Solinas edited *Conspiracy Theories: Genealogies and Political Uses*, a special issue of *Genealogy* (2024–2025, open access). Together with Hans-Jörg Trenz and Manuela Caiani, he co-edited *Conspiracism and Political Conflicts* (London: Palgrave, 2026). Solinas is the author of several monographs, including *Conspiracy Theories and Politics* (*Teorie cospirative e politica*, Roma: Castelvecchi, 2025, open access).

Alevtina Solovyeva (University of Tartu, Estonia)
"Between Empires and Imaginaries: Russia's and China's Presence, Migration and Geopolitical Conspiracy Narratives in Mongolia and Kazakhstan"

Mongolia and Kazakhstan – two post-socialist states positioned between China and Russia – have become fertile grounds for conspiracy narratives that intersect with regional migrations, resource politics, and shifting global power dynamics. While scholarship on conspiracy theories has largely focused on Euro-American contexts, this paper contends that Inner and Central Asia offers a crucial vantage point for understanding emergent 'critical turns' in the field. Drawing on media discourse, digital ethnography, policy documentation and folkloristic fieldwork, the study examines how China's Belt and Road Initiative, Russian information strategies, and demographic anxieties around cross-border mobility foster conspiracy-laden interpretations of sovereignty, identity, and geopolitical intent. These narratives mobilise historical memories of empire, fears of invasion and assimilation, securitised imaginaries of infrastructural dependency, shaping public opinion and influencing state counter-disinformation responses.

Recent global events have intensified these dynamics. The COVID-19 pandemic amplified suspicion toward Chinese medical diplomacy and cross-border mobility; Russia's

full-scale invasion of Ukraine destabilised regional security assumptions and created new moral geographies of threat and allegiance; and changing balances in global politics – including sanctions regimes, energy dependencies, and realignments toward Asian power centres – have heightened uncertainty in both Inner and Central Asia. In this context, conspiracy theories act not merely as fringe explanations, but as interpretative tools through which publics negotiate shifting hierarchies of power and vulnerability.

In engaging with Mongolia and Kazakhstan, this paper highlights regional and linguistic specificities that challenge universalist assumptions embedded in current conspiracy theory research. It argues that counter-disinformation practices in these contexts risk replicating power asymmetries – aligning with what critics frame as 'Big Disinfo' – while themselves becoming targets of conspiratorial suspicion. By foregrounding local actors, contested knowledge practices, and the entanglement of migration politics with global rivalries, the paper not only contributes to a geographically expanded understanding of conspiracy theory studies but also interrogates how the field may reorient itself beyond Western epistemic centres. In doing so, it advances a model for studying conspiracy theories as co-produced phenomena situated at the nexus of regional geopolitics, historical memory, and global transformations.

Alevtina Solovyeva (PhD) is a researcher in Asian and Folklore Studies and head of the Centre for Oriental Studies at the University of Tartu. Her research interests include comparative Asian studies, historical anthropology, beliefs, narratives and practices of peoples in Inner and Central Asia.

1.2. Conspiracy Theories and Humour I (Jakobi 2-130) *Chair: Carlos Diaz Ruiz (Hanken School of Economics, Finland)*

Carmen Maíz-Arévalo (Complutense University of Madrid, Spain)

"Flat Out Laughing: Humour and Impoliteness on Flat Earth Theory in Spanish YouTube"

For some decades, terraplanism or Flat-Earth Theory (FET henceforth) has increasingly gained followers thanks to social media, where videos and comments for and against the theory are posted and shared. This study explores the intersection of terraplanism (flat earth belief) and humour within the context of Spanish digital culture. Focusing on social media discourse (more specifically on YouTube), the research analyses how Spanish internet users employ humour (especially mock politeness and sarcasm) both to address, ridicule, and negotiate pseudoscientific beliefs and to respond to face-threatening attacks in the case of 'believers'. Drawing on prior research on online humour in YouTube comments (e.g., Bernad-Mechó and Girón-García 2023; Chovanec and Tsakona 2023) and Culpeper's (2011) impoliteness theory within the field of pragmatics, the study follows a mixed-methods approach with the aim to answer the following research questions: (i) what humour styles do believers and non-believers use? And (ii) what impoliteness strategies do believers and anti-believers resort to in order to attack the outgroup? To this end, a corpus of over 55,000 YouTube comments on a pseudo-scientific video on FET was analysed and coded with the aid of the software Atlas.ti. Preliminary results show that believers tend to user less humour and favour positive impoliteness (to exclude the other), negative impoliteness (to impose their beliefs on others) and defensive sarcasm. In contrast, non-believers tend to use more humour to ridicule the others in the form of mock politeness, sarcasm and superiority humour (often by means of rhetorical questions). Non-believers also employ more explicit, bald on

record impoliteness, often by means of multimodality (e.g., through the use of emoji and typographic alteration like the use of capitalization to intensify mockery).

Carmen Maíz-Arévalo obtained her PhD in Linguistics in 2001. She is associate professor at the Complutense University of Madrid. Her research focuses on Pragmatics, Intercultural Pragmatics, Digital Communication, and Humour Studies. She has published widely in journals such as *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, *Journal of Politeness Research*, *Journal of Pragmatics*, *Discourse Studies*, and *Intercultural Pragmatics*.

Saša Babič (Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts)
Anastasiya Fiadotava (Estonian Literary Museum)
"Chemtrails Conspiracy Theories in Memes"

Contemporary conspiracy theories – understood as narratives claiming that an event or situation is the outcome of a secret plan devised by powerful individuals or entities – have been present throughout the whole recorded history of humanity. Folklorists often study how these narratives circulate through interpersonal communication, exist in multiple variants, engage with questions of belief, and articulate pressing societal anxieties. The chemtrail conspiracy theory posits that the long-lasting condensation trails left behind by high-altitude aircrafts are in fact 'chemtrails', composed of chemical or biological agents dispersed for covert and malicious purposes. These alleged purposes commonly include solar radiation management, weather modification, psychological manipulation, population control, chemical or biological warfare, or testing of hazardous agents on an unaware population. Proponents further claim that these trails cause respiratory illnesses and various other health problems.

These narratives are saturated with fear, yet this fear is often counterbalanced – and undermined – through humour. As a contemporary genre, that offers rapid commentary on social phenomena, internet memes also engage with chemtrail conspiracy theories. The paper will examine which narrative elements of the conspiracy theory are brought to the forefront in these memes and identify the recurrent visual and textual motifs they employ, as well as the humour mechanisms through which the conspiracy theory is satirised. The paper will also try to draw the line between ridiculing the conspiracy and making fun of conspiracists by taking a closer look at the targets of humorous internet memes.

Saša Babič is a folklore researcher at and head of the Institute of Ethnology, Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (ZRC SAZU). Her main interest are short folklore forms, i.e. greetings, swearing, proverbs, riddles, incantations, prayers, etc., their text usage and cultural meanings, and their integration in folklore events and communication. Her research includes folkloristic, ethnolinguistic and semiotic approaches, with the main goal of searching in the deeper layers of culture. She is also an assistant professor at the Postgraduate School ZRC SAZU (Ljubljana, Slovenia) and at the University of Ljubljana (Faculty of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology) and one of the editors-in-chief of the scientific journal *Studiy Mythologica Slavica*.

Anastasiya Fiadotava (PhD) is a Senior Research Fellow at the Department of Folkloristics of the Estonian Literary Museum, Tartu. Her fields of interest include the use of humour in family communication, the spread of jokes and memes in social and mainstream media, and the reflections of current political and social issues in humour.

Rikke Louise Alberg Peters (UCL University College Lillebaelt, Denmark) "Humour, Hate and Dog Whistles: Youth Exposure to Conspiratorial Tropes and Memes Online"

On platforms such as Instagram, AI-generated videos depicting Western cities in 2050 as ominously 'taken over' by Muslims circulate widely, reproducing and mainstreaming old narratives of great replacement conspiracy theories. On TikTok, hashtags and memes signal red pill tropes that feed into conspiratorial worldviews in which Jewish, female, transgender, Black, and brown bodies are framed as both a sexual and existential threat to the white Christian male – particularly within extreme-right and misogynistic groups that depict liberal values, women's rights, Jews, and racialized 'foreigners' as dangers to societal stability. This form of online communication has become increasingly prevalent in contemporary youth cultures, amplifying existing challenges related to misinformation, conspiracy theories, and AI-generated fake content.

This paper investigates how post-truth communicative strategies – such as the use of tropes, dog-whistling, and humorous hate speech – operate as manipulative mechanisms that obscure misogynistic, conspiratorial, and dehumanizing content in digital environments frequented by young people. Drawing on analytical examples from mainstream platforms including TikTok, Instagram, Discord, and YouTube, the article examines the individual and collective risks posed by algorithmic amplification of conspiracy theories and meme-driven communication cultures. It concludes by proposing a pedagogical framework for fostering critical digital literacy: an approach that equips young people to interpret, question, and ethically respond to conspiracy theories and hateful content. Building on dynamic and relational conceptions of *Bildung*, the paper argues for reimagining critical digital literacy as an emotional as well as an interpersonal practice.

Rikke Alberg Peters holds a PhD in the history of ideas from Aarhus University, with a dissertation on far-right movements. She is currently employed as associate professor at HistorieLab and at the teacher education program at UCL University College. Her research focuses on children's and young people's online lives, misogynist and supremacist/far-right conspiracy theories and misinformation in the post-truth era, vaccine scepticism, and the broader challenges to traditional knowledge authorities. She also works on the prevention of online radicalization, particularly among youth.

Maëlle Boucheron (Europa University Viadrina, Germany) "Performing Conspiracism: Affective Regimes and Strategic Irony in French Nationalist YouTube"

Contemporary conspiracy theories can no longer be defined by cognitive or informational biases. Indeed, a significant proportion of Population Replacement Conspiracy Theories are disseminated through formats that are not based on argumentation, information or the search for conviction, but rather on emotional, aesthetic and performative regimes at the heart of digital communities and their representation of politics. This paper analyses several French nationalist and masculinist YouTubers, each with communities of hundreds of thousands of subscribers (La Menace, Papacito, Baptiste Marchais, Le Raptor), not as producers of explicit ideology and beliefs, but as performers of a visual and auditory culture structured around irony and serving to spread Population Replacement Conspiracy Theories. Drawing on affect theory, the analysis shows that their videos construct an emotional climate structured by anxiety about decline, resentment, resistance and civilisational nostalgia. These affects, presented as experiential and therefore non-negotiable, lend plausibility to narratives such as that of the 'Great Replacement', not as coherent doctrines, but as shared emotional

experiences. Moreover, this affective regime is consolidated by specific discursive forms, foremost among which is strategic irony, also known as irony poisoning. This discursive technology allows for a double movement: permanent disempowerment – "it's just for fun" – and the gradual dissemination of a radical interpretative framework. Combined with the codes of soft propaganda such as editing, rhythm, visuals, memes, and algorithmic recommendations, these practices naturalise a violent political imaginary that is clear to its viewers and rather harmless to the uninitiated due to their humorous form of infotainment, which allows them to defend themselves against potential accusations of discrimination. To conclude, by proposing to shift the focus from fact-checking to practices, affects and performances, this paper highlights the cultural drivers that make this content attractive, desirable and effective. In conjunction with this, this approach naturally invites us to question the limits of counter-disinformation policies in the face of emotion, derision and style, particularly in a French context strongly attached to freedom of expression.

Maëlle Boucheron is a research associate at Europa University Viadrina working on the project "ConspiRacism". She writes her PhD on population replacement conspiracy theories among French nationalist YouTubers. Her academic background includes political science and gender studies, with a focus on masculinist and nationalist digital discourse.

1.3. Media, Disinformation, and Digital Infrastructures (Jakobi 2-113) *Chair: Andreas Ventsel (University of Tartu)*

Caroline Reinhammar (University of Gothenburg, Sweden)
"Mapping Conspiratory Content in in Discourses of Climate Change Denial"

Over the past few years, references to 'common sense' have increasingly appeared in discussions surrounding the climate crisis. These expressions are often invoked in contexts where climate research – and often the very reality of the crisis itself – is dismissed or denied. The overarching research question of my PhD project is therefore: How does the struggle over common sense take shape in discourses on climate change?

Understanding common sense as a form of everyday rationality, I trace these discourses across digital media. After more than a year of data collection and fieldwork on social media, it has become evident how frequently conspiratorial content circulates within the digital folklore of climate change denial. The digital practices that have become integral to our everyday lives – through social media platforms, online forums, and various digital channels – enable new modalities of storytelling. A single post may take the form of a small story, while also incorporating a meme, a hyperlink, or a video from YouTube. These multimodal tools expand the scope of the small story, allowing it to move beyond the textual content produced by the author and into wider networks of meaning.

In this presentation, I will outline my mapping of what has emerged as a frame of climate change conspiracy theory. Following Kitta (2018; 2025), I approach conspiratorial content as a narrative form. In addition, I draw on Fredric Jameson's concept of narrative as a socially symbolic act; an attempt to resolve or make sense of contradictions observed within contemporary culture and political reality.

Caroline Reinhammar is a PhD student in Ethnology at the Department of Cultural Sciences, University of Gothenburg. In her PhD project, she looks at formations of common sense in various understandings of the climate crisis. She is affiliated with the interdisciplinary national research school FUDEM – Future of Democracy: Cultural Analyses of Illiberal Populism in Times of Crises. In her recent publication, "Unpacking 'Common

Sense': A Critical Folkloristic Approach to Narratives of Climate Change Denial", she continued the discussion on the development of critical folklore studies, employing Jameson's model for allegorical analysis on digital content that rejects climate change.

Árni Reynir Hassell Guðmundsson (University of Iceland)
"Gamified Conspiracies: Insights from Iceland"

Insights into the Icelandic conspiracy movement *Þvert á flokka* based mostly on Justin Bortnick's identification of gamified conspiracy movements. *Þvert á flokka* is a social media based political movement centered on anti-immigration conspiracies, their rhetoric is decidedly nativist and adherents have been accused of neo-Nazi symbolism. Their spread through social media aligns well with Justin Borntick's idea of misinformation games, in the span of a year the movement went from a social media group to a political party campaigning exclusively on transphobia and anti-immigration. They have rallied a handful of times in front of the Icelandic parliament, causing both unease and backlash. The crux of their conspiracy is aligned with great replacement theories. The movement has tried to distance itself from its originally more openly neo-Nazi element, but the belief in a government conspiracy that needs to be thwarted by direct popular action remains. That makes it an interesting case for comparison with Bortnick's research on 'The January 6th insurrection', in both cases organized around a decentralized spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories in online spaces. Still a while away from Justin's final stage of misinformation game, the movement's existence speaks to the validity of Justin's research as well as the changing landscape of conspiracies and political power.

With a decided focus on ludology **Árni Reynir Hassell Guðmundsson** finished his BA thesis on alternate reality games ARGs and other forms of avant-garde internet narratives, comparing forms of avant-garde internet narratives to historic avant-garde movements. He has been a somewhat prominent member of Iceland's roleplaying community, both teaching and organizing role-play events for a number of years. His master's thesis will focus on the sociological and literary games driving the spread of hate symbols in Icelandic online spaces. He has written and sold a video game manuscript to an Icelandic indie game company Aska Studios, release pending.

Jessica Mason (Sheffield Hallam University, UK)
"Paying Attention to Conspiracy: The Cognitive Stylistics of Gateway 'Documentaries'"

Conspiracy theorists are often dismissed as mad, bad, or stupid, but conspiracy studies has largely overlooked close linguistic examination of the materials most notorious for persuading people of their veracity. This paper will argue that cognitive stylistics – a discipline that combines insights from linguistics and psychology – offers highly productive tools for examining the mechanisms by which conspiracy-promoting content can be highly convincing.

The paper will focus on two prominent 'documentaries' frequently identified as key gateway viewing for believers of their respective conspiracies: chemtrails and QAnon. "What in the World Are They Spraying?" (commonly known as WITWATS) promotes chemtrails theory: it has been viewed over 2.5 million times on YouTube alone. "The Plan to Save the World" has been removed from many mainstream platforms, but is commonly credited with popularising QAnon theory (Cook 2024; Sommer 2024). The analysis will apply two symbiotic cognitive stylistic frameworks: figure-ground (Stockwell 2009) and burying (Emmott and Alexander 2014), both of which examine attention. The paper will demonstrate

that both ‘documentaries’ create impressions of large and convincing piles of evidence. In fact, what they do is bury counter-evidence, contradiction and inhibit critical thinking. The paper will posit that, when examined through this stylistic lens, it becomes clear why many people may be taken in by such films and come to believe the conspiracies they put forward.

Jessica Mason is Senior Lecturer in English Language at Sheffield Hallam University, UK. She specialises in applied cognitive stylistics and her research explores the intersections between language and thought. Her two key areas of expertise are conspiracy theory discourse and education, and she has published widely in both areas. Most recently, her forthcoming book – *The Language of Conspiracy Theories* – investigates how individuals can be taken in by conspiracy beliefs including anti-vaccination, chemtrails and Flat Earth.

2.1. Geopolitics, War, and State-Linked Conspiracy Narratives (Jakobi 2-107) *Chair: Eirikur Bergmann (Bifröst University, Iceland)*

Andrey Makarychev (University of Tartu, Estonia)
“From Conspiracies to Biopolitical Normalization: Pro-Russian Narratives After the Invasion of Ukraine”

The focal point of this presentation is the nexus of conspiracy studies and biopolitical research. The author argues that conspiratorial ‘belief systems’ serve as a precondition for the unfolding of numerous Russia-friendly (and often Kremlin-controlled) narratives aimed at normalizing war through diverting attention to – and placing a major emphasis on – what may be called everyday / vernacular biopolitics with meaningful depoliticizing and desecuritizing effects.

Andrey Makarychev is Professor of Regional Political Studies at the University of Tartu. His areas of expertise include biopolitics, visual analysis of international relations and the Russo–Ukraine war.

Andrii Anisimov (Tallinn University, Estonia)
“Counteracting Kremlin’s Apocalyptic Conspiracy Narratives as Part of Ukraine’s Information War Strategy Against Russia”

Since the full-scale invasion, it benefited the Ukrainian side to generalize the absence of active support of Ukraine as a (potentially) pro-Russian conspiracy. The article examines how the ‘if not with us, then against us’ information war staple is weaponized in Ukraine’s effort to secure American co-operation. The pivotal Zelensky–Vance–Trump trialogue in the Oval office is chosen as a case in point. Employing post-foundational discourse analysis, the article studies how Zelensky uses discursive constructs like the Trump–Putin ‘conspiracy against Ukraine’ to dissuade the American side from further co-operation with Russia. Nodal points of the construct (history of ‘deals’ between Trump and Putin; connecting Russian war crimes in Ukraine to US’ lack of action) are identified to explore gaps of meaning between the signified (Trump’s policy on Ukraine–Russia war) and its signifiers (Trump being “misled by Putin’s propaganda”; “misinformed by his advisors”; “seeking compromise with a killer”) as presented by the Ukrainian president during the altercation in the White House. Chronologically, the Ukrainian ‘us vs them’ floating signifier changed from Ukraine and America standing united against the common adversary in the Kremlin – to exposing malevolent Russian influence on the US foreign policy, and attempting to delegitimize Trump’s peacemaking strategy. Ultimately, the results of the ‘conspiracy’-based narrative

were short-lived, as apparent from Zelensky switching to peace-making narratives in late 2025.

Andrii Anisimov is a Junior Research Fellow and PhD candidate at Tallinn University. His work focuses on multimodal storytelling in propaganda in the Russia–Ukraine war and on history-driven narratives in digital information warfare.

Niki Sopanen (University of Helsinki, Finland)
"Rotten with Rejuvenation: Toward the Purification of Conspiracy: A Burkean Inquiry into China–US Relations with Conspiratorial Characteristics"

Representing an ongoing dissertation, this paper examines the rhetoric of conspiratorial style and its role in Sino–US relations. Empirically, it presents a case study comparing Chinese and American accounts over 12 years (2012–2024), including speeches, texts, images, media reports, editorials, scholarly commentary and social media posts. The study investigates the use, causes and consequences of conspiratorial rhetoric through dramatism, a framework inspired by Kenneth Burke, a New Rhetoric scholar. He emphasizes humans as symbol-using and (misusing) animals whose motives and actions unfold dramatically through language. Per Burke, rhetoric permeates all language use: it induces cooperation via 'stylistic identifications', connecting audiences through unity and division, with the audience actively interpreting them and shaping outcomes.

The study situates conspiratorial rhetoric within the theoretical lens of New Constructionism, a social constructivist perspective that treats conspiracies as socially and rhetorically constructed phenomena. Conspiratorial style emerges, evolves, and declines within broader contexts of norms, practices, identities, institutions, and established belief systems. These social structures and the rhetoric of conspiracies are mutually constitutive, jointly shaping and reshaping perceptions of Sino–US rivalry. The study terms this totality 'the culture of conspiratorialness', encompassing the interactions, structures, and relations through which conspiratorial rhetoric operates.

Overall, the paper demonstrates how foreign-political rhetoric in Sino–US relations – and the respective cultural contexts in which it circulates – can be read through a Burkean lens of perfectibility, guilt, and redemption – and, by extension, conspiracies.

Niki Sopanen (MSocSC) is a doctoral candidate in International Relations at the University of Helsinki. He is currently working on a monographic dissertation that cross-compares the use, causes and impacts of conspiratorial rhetoric in Sino–US relations. In the past few years, he has acted as a part-time teacher at the Open University of the University Helsinki, teaching political science, conspiracy theory studies and China studies.

2.2. Conspiracy Theories and Humor II (Jakobi 2-130)
Chair: Annika Rabo (University of Stockholm, Sweden)

Michel Bouchard (University of Northern British Columbia, Canada)
"Laughing at the Empire: Meme Warfare Against Putin's Fabricated History"

A few days before ordering the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin delivered an address in which he offered his own highly selective reading of history. In it, he claimed that Lenin and the Bolsheviks created Ukraine – allegedly carving it out of the 'Russian Land' – and argued that the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 resulted from the strategic failures of the Communist Party. Putin went on to accuse contemporary

Ukrainian leaders of 'distorting' the historical memory of millions of people. In doing so, he collapses the distinct histories of Muscovy (later Russia) and Ukraine, appropriating the legacy of Kyivan Rus even though Moscow did not yet exist at the height of Kyivan political and cultural power. Under ordinary circumstances, such debates over medieval and early modern history would remain primarily within academic circles. In July 2021, Putin disseminated on the Kremlin website his jaundiced 'historical' essay "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians". Today, however, Russia's weaponization of the past – its imperial project grounded in the co-opting and rewriting of history by a revanchist ruler – demands a broader public response. In the brutal reality of war, one of the most effective tools for contesting these narratives has emerged from everyday popular culture: humour, especially in the form of online memes. Memes enable Ukrainians and their allies to ridicule Russian imperial claims while reaffirming a historical narrative free from colonial distortion. By drawing on shared memories, symbols, and episodes from Ukrainian history, these memetic practices undermine Russia's genocidal intentions and challenge the ideological foundations used to legitimize aggression. The following discussion examines several popular meme themes that mobilize Ukrainian historical memory to counter Russian assertions and expose the contradictions of Putin's narrative.

Michel Bouchard (PhD, University of Alberta) is a Professor of Anthropology at the University of Northern British Columbia in Prince George, Canada. His research examines the construction of collective identities across a range of historical and contemporary contexts, including French-speaking and Métis communities in North America and the development of Russian nationalism and imperial ideologies. He also investigates how digital culture – particularly memes – shapes national narratives and mobilizes online communities. In addition to his academic work, Bouchard has served as President of the Canadian Anthropology Society (CAS-SCA) and as Secretary of both the World Council of Anthropological Associations (WCAA) and the World Anthropological Union (WAU). His scholarship brings together historical analysis and ethnographic insight to illuminate how narratives of the past are produced, contested, and weaponized in the present.

Anton Liagusha (Kyiv School of Economics, Ukraine)
"From Memes to Resistance: Humour and Resilience in Ukraine's Information War Against Russian Propaganda"

This paper examines how memes, humour, and digital resistance shape Ukraine's information war against Russian propaganda. In response to Russia's full-scale invasion, memes have emerged as a potent weapon, empowering Ukrainians to express their perspectives on the conflict and directly counteract the manipulations of the aggressor. Beyond alleviating the psychological strain of war, humour and memes foster a sense of collective identity and solidarity, cultivating spaces for resistance even amid adversity.

Drawing on case studies that trace the evolution of meme culture in Ukraine, this research demonstrates how memes have become central to resisting Russia's efforts to manipulate information and demoralize the Ukrainian public. Memes now serve not only as tools, but also as vital forms of communication, mobilizing society for collective resistance through shared symbols, irony, and satire. This content strengthens psychological resilience and broadens the scope of information warfare, providing agile responses to unfolding events and hostile actions.

The paper also emphasizes the significance of humour as a form of cultural resistance, providing psychological resilience at both the individual and collective levels during the information war.

Anton Liagusha is a PhD in History and Academic Director of the Master's Program Memory Studies and Public History at the Kyiv School of Economics. He has been affiliated with George Mason University and the New University Consortium. His research focuses on memorialization during the Russia–Ukraine war, war memory, and collaborations with cultural and educational organizations.

Corneliu Pintilescu (Romanian Academy)
"For a *Long Durée* Approach to Antisemitic Conspiracy Theories: The Romanian Case"

The paper starts from the hypothesis that it is impossible nowadays to understand and, in some cases, even to identify the antisemitic component of some influential conspiracy theories and their imagery without a long-term approach. Such a perspective would provide us the necessary background to analyze how contemporary antisemitic conspiracy theories, such as those related to the global finance and some of its institutions and key figures, are built on various forms of old antisemitic myths and narrative tropes. Drawing on the Romanian case, the paper illustrates how the antisemitic conspiracy theories related to Jews and finance developed new forms in different epochs by recycling old myths and imagery symbols from late nineteenth century up to the present. These components took different shapes according to particular historic contexts. Despite the diversity of contexts and forms, the true nature and effectiveness of the main antisemitic conspiracy theories can be fully grasped only by identifying the long-term myths and symbols. In the case of antisemitic imagery, humor acted both as an effective vehicle for both disseminating and debunking antisemitic conspiracy theories. When dealing with the role of caricatures, the similitudes of antisemitic imagery between interwar and post-communist Romania are striking. The paper argues that – as in the case of the main components of its political ideology – the contemporary Romanian far-right recycled and disseminated some key antisemitic tropes and visual symbols that were intensively used during the interwar period. The main explanation resides in the effectiveness of using such symbols imbedded in the deep layers of the local popular culture.

Corneliu Pintilescu is Senior Researcher at George Barițiu Institute of History. He holds a PhD in History from Babeș-Bolyai University. He has authored two books and more than 40 peer-reviewed articles on topics including state coercion in socialist Romania, emergency powers, conspiracy theories, populism, and national minorities.

Lukas Mozdeika (Independent)
"Humour vs. Epistemology: Delegated Belief in Conspiracy Theories, Online Context Collapse, and Potential Response Strategies"

Satire, irony, absurdity and other kinds of humour that often accompany conspiracy theories may appear trivial, diverting attention from a serious view of conspiracies as an urgent threat in the misinformation-replete media landscape. I suggest, however, that the parallels between emerging styles of humour online and the rise of conspiracies should be studied in tandem, as a broader cultural phenomenon, which cannot be adequately understood from an individualised, strictly epistemological view of the matter. Taking humour seriously can lend new insights, which remain obscured by epistemic focus on conspiracies as a kind of misinformation to be countered by fact-checking and debunking strategies. Doing so, moreover, invites us to appreciate the distinctive contribution humanities disciplines can make in this direction (Foley 2018), not discounting more speculative theories and traditions, e.g., psychoanalytical Lacanian one that I draw from in my analysis.

Lukas Mozdeika is an independent scholar of media, culture, and society. He holds a PhD in Media and Journalism from Oslo Metropolitan University and a Master's degree in Culture, Communication and Globalisation from Aalborg University. His doctoral research project, drawing on Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and media anthropology, explored the underlying dynamics of political polarisation on social media platforms among Norwegian youth. Lukas is also a reader of continental philosophy, which informs his analyses of contemporary cultural texts, including literature and film.

2.3. Contemporary Religious Map in the Baltic Region: Religious Practices, Spiritual Markets, and Conspirituality in Latvia (Jakobi 2-113) *Chair: Jūlija Tereščenko (University of Latvia)*

Solveiga Krūmiņa-Koņkova (University of Latvia)
"From Alternative Spirituality to Conspirituality: Historical Lineages and Contemporary Transformations in Latvia"

This paper examines how spirituality in Latvia has shifted from alternative religious practices to conspirituality – a blend of conspiratorial thinking with esoteric beliefs. Rather than viewing this as just a modern digital phenomenon, the paper argues it stems from longstanding historical currents in Latvian religious and intellectual life, where spiritual and esoteric worldviews have often merged with ideas of hidden powers and cultural crisis.

Latvia's post-Soviet environment – marked by religious diversity, institutional distrust, and individual meaning-making – has enabled the rise of these hybrid beliefs. This trend also echoes patterns from the interwar period, when spiritualist and esoteric groups merged with conspiracy thinking amid social upheaval. Thus, today's conspirituality is both a new cultural form and a revival of an older tendency to interpret society through spiritual narratives of hidden forces.

The paper explores how alternative spiritual groups and digital subcultures in Latvia adopt global conspiracy ideas, blurring lines between religion and ideology. It shows that conspirituality serves as both a cultural critique and a coping strategy amid social uncertainty. This fusion of spiritual searching with conspiratorial logic has deep roots in Latvia's history and often resurfaces in times of crisis.

Solveiga Krūmiņa-Koņkova, PhD, is a leading researcher at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology within the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Latvia and the Editor-in-Chief of the periodical *Reliģiski-filozofiski raksti*. Her research interests encompass the philosophy of religion and the history of religious-philosophical ideas. She is implementing a project titled "Theoretical Aspects of Researching the Religious Landscape of Modern Latvia", which is part of the "Internal and External Consolidation of the University of Latvia" initiative. She also leads the "Genealogy of Conspirituality in 20th Century Latvia" project of the Latvian Council of Science and is an expert for the European Commission.

Nadežda Pazuhina (University of Latvia)
"Genealogy of Conspiritual Narratives in Latvia: Periodicals and Book Publishing of the Spiritual and Esoteric Organizations (1920–1940)"

The proposed paper will explore the genealogy of conspirituality in Latvia during the first half of the 20th century, focusing on the role of media and publications of the spiritual and esoteric organizations in the interwar period to the dissemination of conspiritual narratives. A

rapidly modernizing society faced scepticism toward traditional institutions and norms rooted in earlier cultural and social experiences. In this context, many groups within Latvian society, including intellectuals, showed a heightened interest in occultism, paranormal phenomena, and esoteric knowledge.

The Riga Society for Psychical Research, established in 1922, along with its representative Karl Blacher, and the Society of Parapsychology in Riga, founded in 1925 with representative Emma Apare (Balodis), showcased a growing interest in spiritualism and parapsychology. The Latvian Roerich Society, founded in 1930, drew inspiration from the teachings of Nikolay and Helena Roerich, specifically Agni Yoga, or Living Ethics, which was influenced by theosophical concepts from Helena Blavatsky, integrating elements of Neoplatonism and Indian religions.

The Latvian Roerich Society published around 50 books through the publishing house Uguns. These included works by Nicholas and Helena Roerich, *Living Ethics* (Agni Yoga), Helena Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine*, and original contributions by Rihards Rudzītis, which promoted Eastern philosophy and ideas of cultural peace. The publications facilitated the dissemination of esoteric teachings and provided a forum for discussions on the intersections of religion, science, and politics, particularly through the advocacy of the Roerich Peace Pact.

The interwar editions were republished after the restoration of Latvian independence in the 1990s, which generated interest in the concept of theosophy within a new cultural framework. They contributed to the narrative of conspirituality, engaging with a different political context and highlighting the diverse spiritual inquiries present in Latvian society.

Nadežda Pazuhina (Dr. Art.), scholar of religious studies and cultural history, leading researcher at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Faculty of Humanities, University of Latvia. Her research interests include issues of the history and sociology of religion, cultural history and theory, as well as problems of the preservation and transformation of cultural practices. The most significant research is related to the culture of the Old Believer community in Latvia and the Baltic States, the history of the Russian minority in Latvia, and the cultural memory of religious communities. Actively participates in international conferences, research projects, publishes articles in internationally peer-reviewed journals.

Māra Kiope (University of Latvia)

"Hidden Truths and Sacred Power: Conspirituality in Post-Soviet and 21st Century Latvia"

The collapse of the Soviet Union transformed Latvia's socio-political and cultural landscape, creating conditions of uncertainty, rapid neoliberalization, and identity renegotiation. Within this transitional context, conspirituality – a hybrid phenomenon combining spiritual discourses with conspiracy narratives – has gained traction as a response to perceived crises of authority and meaning. This paper examines how conspiratorial movements in Latvia articulate resistance to institutionalised power while constructing alternative epistemologies that blend esoteric spirituality with anti-establishment rhetoric. Drawing on epistemological analysis, it analyses how these narratives challenge dominant truth regimes and respond to the historical legacies of enforced Soviet atheism. The discussion situates conspirituality in the global context, emphasising how insecurity and geopolitical anxieties – such as fears of globalism, and renewed Russian aggression – fuel the appeal of these movements. Latvia's conspirituality often manifests through discourses of 'awakening' and 'hidden truths', framing spiritual autonomy as a form of political resistance and positioning spirituality as a counter-hegemonic force.

1. How do conspiritual narratives in Latvia negotiate the tension between spiritual autonomy and political authority?
2. In what ways do historical legacies of Soviet secularism and contemporary geopolitical anxieties shape conspiritual imaginaries?
3. What are the implications of conspirituality for democratic legitimacy and social cohesion in Latvia's post-Soviet society?
By situating Latvia within broader regional patterns, this paper interrogates conspirituality as both a critique of power and a producer of alternative spiritual-political identities, offering insights into the interplay between spirituality, conspiracy, and governance in transitional contexts.

Māra Kiope, Dr. Phil. (University of Latvia), Mag.sc.rel. (Riga Higher Institute of Religious Science, affiliated with the Pontifical Lateran University, Rome), is a leading researcher in the field of religious studies and a member of the religious philosophy research group at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Faculty of Humanities, University of Latvia. She is also a full Professor of Philosophy at the Riga Higher Institute of Religious Science. She has experience in political, environmental, and Christian journalistic. Her research interests include philosophy of religion, hermeneutics, cognitive phenomenology, spiritual life, and existential Thomism. She is leading researcher in projects funded by the Latvian Science Council and Latvian State Research Programme.

Diāna Popova (University of Latvia)
"The Soviet Construction of 'Pseudoscience' and Its Post-Soviet Afterlife in Latvia"

This paper analyses how the category of 'pseudoscience' was constructed and ideologically weaponised in Latvian-language press discourses under Soviet rule between 1940 and 1991. Drawing on qualitative content analysis of newspapers and journals, the study shows how the Soviet Latvian press operated as a key instrument of epistemic boundary-making, distinguishing legitimate Marxist-Leninist science from its alleged dialectical opposite, 'bourgeois pseudoscience'. This label was highly elastic, applied to a broad array of disfavoured domains – from Western historiography, linguistics, and theology to genetics, cybernetics, and even parapsychology, the latter pursued simultaneously in classified Soviet research. During the early occupation period, the press was mobilised to delegitimise intellectual traditions inherited from the interwar Latvian state and Western academic scholarship, to suppress dissenting or nonconforming research, and to solidify the authority of Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy. Across the Stalinist, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, and Gorbachev periods, representations of pseudoscience shifted: early totalising denunciations gradually gave way to partial rehabilitations of genetics or cybernetics, while critiques of Western science increasingly adopted conspiratorial tones, framing capitalist societies as seduced by occultism, irrational beliefs, and ideological sabotage. By the late 1980s, as press freedoms expanded, these constructed binaries themselves became objects of critique, exposing the internal contradictions of Soviet 'scientific' authority. The paper argues that the Soviet politicisation of science, the cultivated suspicion toward Western knowledge, and the inconsistent application of the term pseudoscience have contributed to a long-standing ambivalence toward scientific authority in Latvia. These epistemic legacies – hyperpoliticisation, distrust, and blurred boundaries between what is perceived as science and pseudoscience – help explain why post-Soviet Latvia became fertile ground for alternative spiritualities, conspiratorial reasoning, and the hybrid forms of conspirituality explored in this panel.

Diāna Popova, PhD, is a research assistant at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Faculty of Humanities, University of Latvia. She holds a PhD in Cultural Theory from the Latvian Academy of Culture. With a wider academic background in cultural and social anthropology, Baltic Sea region studies, and communication science, she brings a multidisciplinary perspective to the study of complex cultural phenomena. Her current research centers on the construction of pseudoscience in Soviet Latvian media discourse.

Jūlija Tereščenko (University of Latvia)
"Before the Stereotypes: Freemasonry in the Baltic Provinces as an Elite Male Subculture (18th–19th Century)"

This paper proposes an anthropological re-examination of Freemasonry in the Baltic provinces of the Russian Empire, focusing on the 18th and 19th centuries. Rather than reproducing later conspiracy-driven representations of Masonry, the research aims to separate stereotypes from historical practices by reconstructing the lived social reality of Baltic Masonic communities.

Using archival materials, prosopography, and cultural anthropology, the paper outlines a social portrait of Baltic Freemasons: German-Baltic noblemen, military officers, urban professionals, intellectuals, and bureaucrats who participated in transimperial Enlightenment networks. Their lodges operated as elite male clubs, producing distinct forms of sociability, ethical self-cultivation, and symbolic belonging. Masonic rituals are analysed not as mysterious plots but as structured initiatory 'quests' – performative practices transmitting moral narratives, emotional discipline, and internal cohesion.

By examining Masonry as a subculture with its own norms, hierarchies, and embodied practices, the paper demonstrates how its semi-closed character and ritualised communication generated both fascination and misunderstanding among wider society. This anthropological reconstruction provides an alternative to the anti-Masonic stereotypes that later shaped 19th–20th-century conspiracy narratives.

Jūlija Tereščenko is a PhD student at Daugavpils University and an invited expert at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, University of Latvia. Her research examines the perception of Freemasonry in Latvia, focusing on its cultural interpretation in press, literature, and archival sources, as well as the earlier social landscape of Baltic Freemasonry in the 18th–19th centuries. Her broader interests include the genealogy of conspirituality, the history of esotericism in Eastern Europe, and mechanisms of symbolic imagination in modern societies. She has also worked on Holocaust history, particularly on personal narratives and memory.

3.1. Conspiracy Theories and Anti-Science in Non-standard WEIRD Country: Japan (Jakobi 2-107) *Chair: Kamila Szczepanska (University of Turku, Finland)*

Maho Ishibashi (The University of Tokyo, Japan)
Mikihito Tanaka (Waseda University, Japan)
"Deconstructing Conspiracy Theories and Scientific Scepticism in Japan"

The growing scepticism of citizens toward science has become a global issue. In Japan, there have been instances where sceptical claims about climate change and vaccination have been disseminated by outspoken politicians and institute leaders, and such claims have been used

to mobilize citizens' political activities. Although supporting conspiracy theories and overt science scepticism is not a mainstream tendency in Japan, the presence of these phenomena indicates that we cannot remain bystanders or dismiss science scepticism as merely a marginal or minority issue in the country. We conducted an online survey with a large sample to examine science scepticism and trust among Japanese citizens. The first wave (n=1,000) was performed for cross-country comparison, and the second wave (n=12,000) was conducted for domestic analysis. The questionnaires included items measuring scepticism and lack of trust across a wide range of science-related issues, from climate change and vaccination to artificial earthquakes. Our findings show that more than 10% of respondents exhibited strong scepticism. Why do these citizens support science scepticism and conspiracy theories, or deny scientific claims? How do they access information, and how do they construct their identities? Considering the connection with the perspective of partisanship described in previous studies and the uniqueness of Japan's party support structure, we discuss potential psychometric mechanisms and the challenges surrounding public trust in science.

Maho Ishibashi, PhD, is a Project Assistant Professor at the Center for Integrated Disaster Information Research, Interfaculty Initiative in Information Studies, The University of Tokyo. Her research focuses on risk communication, media communication, and disaster studies from the perspective of social psychology. Her work examines (1) the relationship between media use and risk perception, (2) the structure of risk perception and trust, and (3) how to mitigate conflicts among citizens arising from risk. Ishibashi obtained her PhD in Socioinformatics from the University of Tokyo in 2024. In 2024, she received the Outstanding Researcher Award and the Graduate School Dissertation Award from the Society of Socio-Informatics in Japan.

Mikihito Tanaka is Professor of Science and Media Studies in the Journalism Course at the Graduate School of Political Science, Waseda University, Japan. As a social science researcher with a background in life sciences, Mikihito has had years of experience in inter-disciplinal research of science communication and its implementation into society. In 2011, his work with the SMCJ team was highly acclaimed for their service to the public in providing evidence-based scientific information during the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear accident. Since February 2020, he has been involved in the science advisory expert in science/risk communication matters about COVID-19 in the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, and the Tokyo Metropolitan Government. Currently, he carries out research related to issues between science and society, social media, and web journalism. He is a founding member and research manager of the Science Media Centre of Japan (SMCJ).

Yoko Demelius (University of Turku, Finland)
"Domestication of QAnon in Japan: The Rise, Radicalization, and Fall of *YamatoQ-kai*"

This paper explores the activism of *YamatoQ-kai*, a Japanese group informed by US-born QAnon ideology, to elucidate the intertwining of conspiracy theories, spiritual claims, and anti-vaccination attitudes during the COVID-19 pandemic in Japan. Methodologically, the paper draws on conceptual tools from social movement theory to investigate the potential of these notions to contribute to analyses of conspiracy theory-informed activism. The paper shows that access to cultural, human, and material resources; such as 'capable' institutional leaders in the form of popular and internet-savvy conspiracy-theory entrepreneurs, as well as financial means via membership fees and substantial donations; played a crucial role in establishing *YamatoQ* as a viable organisation in the offline world and building its support

base. Moreover, *YamatoQ* managed to successfully domesticate QAnon's conspiratorial claims through by underlining the unique qualities of the Japanese people and endowing them with an elevated role in a larger 'awakening' mission; and to mobilise support for action in the name of protecting children. The paper demonstrates that, ultimately, *YamatoQ*'s radicalisation – as represented by direct forms of intervention in the work of vaccination venues – led to a state crack down on the group. Nevertheless, the paper indicates that despite its diminished state, the group exists until today and is still involved in conspiratorial activism.

Yoko Demelius is a Docent and University Lecturer at the Centre for East Asian Studies, University of Turku, Finland. She has conducted fieldwork and interviews in politically sensitive communities and has published on civil society, social media production and consumption, conspiracy theories, minorities, gender, and transgression. She is currently working on the KONE Foundation project "Conspiracy Theories, Anti-Science, and Disinformation in East Asia: Perspectives from Japan" (2025–2027).

Kamila Szczepanska (University of Turku, Finland)
"*Kōfuku-no-Kagaku* and the Conspiritual Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic (2020–2024)"

This paper illuminates the use of conspiracy theories and mis/disinformation in the communications of a prominent 'new religion' in Japan *Kōfuku-no-Kagaku* ('Happy Science') during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on conspirituality approach and scholarship on religion and conspiracy theories, the paper explores *Kōfuku-no-Kagaku*'s conspiratorial explanations of the origins of pandemic, and its anti-vaccination stance. While mixing conspiritual claims with 'expert' opinions on the pages of its two magazines, *The Liberty* and *Are You Happy?*, *Kōfuku-no-Kagaku* offered an alternative way to make sense of the crisis to both its followers and the broader public that exploited legitimate concerns circulating in Japanese society. Significantly, *Kōfuku-no-Kagaku* – through its conspiritual response – offered a comparatively more 'sophisticated' narrative than some of the other groups. As such, the organisation was an active player in a diverse ecosystem of actors whose activities contributed to the challenging of epistemic authorities in Japan during the pandemic. Finally, the paper explains how insecurity featured in the embracing of specific conspiracy theories by *Kōfuku-no-Kagaku*, especially in relation to its long-term concern about China's rise, and what the latter means for Japan's position in the world. The paper also ponders the value of deploying conspiracy theories for the purpose of a greater mainstreaming of the organisation's socio-political narratives.

Kamila Szczepanska works as University Lecturer at the Centre for East Asian Studies at the University of Turku in Finland. She holds a joint PhD degree from the School of East Asian Studies, University of Sheffield, UK and the School of Law, Tohoku University, Japan. In 2022 she received the title of Docent from the University of Turku. Szczepanska is a PI on the Kone Foundation project (2025–2027) titled "Conspiracy Theories, Anti-Science, and Disinformation in East Asia: Perspectives from Japan". Additionally, she investigates the changing relationship between Japan, Ukraine and Central European countries, including their shared challenges in terms of being subjected to disinformation campaigns and cognitive warfare.

3.2. "Countering Conspiracy, Contesting Truth: Civic Responses and Knowledge Politics in Contemporary Europe" (Jakobi 2-130)

Chair: Shaban Darakchi (Bulgarian Academy of Sciences; Slovak Academy of Sciences)

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Elżbieta Drążkiewicz (Lund University, Sweden)

"Who, How and Why Counters Disinformation? Civic Responses to the Problem of Disinformation and Conspiracy Theories in Poland"

Increasingly scholars and policymakers identify disinformation and conspiracy theories as one of the major threats to social cohesion. Researchers are frequently voicing concern that phenomena linked to disinformation are putting at risk democratic order and peaceful coexistence of societies. These observations led to the proliferation of research on conspiracy theories and actors propagating them. As a result, at present, transnational, state and civic stakeholders in the partnerships with academics are designing solutions to address the problem to disinformation. Yet while the sector studying and countering disinformation is growing, we know little about actors that shape and populate the 'Disinfo Industry': fact checkers, educators, security experts etc. Though there is a lot of research focusing on people who produce and endorse disinformation, we know very little about people and organizations who work against them. Who are the main stakeholders at the national, local and civic level who are involved in preventing and countering disinformation? What kind of interventions do they design and for whom, and why? This paper, by analysing civic responses to the crisis of disinformation in Poland aims to start a conversation about this understudied, yet growing sector. However, this paper is not simply asking what works. Instead, it aims to understand why and how certain strategies to address the problem of disinformation and conspiracy theories are selected. Building on the series of interviews with the representatives of the Disinfo Sector in Poland, and by applying anthropological perspective, this paper asks: who – in the social terms – are actors involved in the sector, and how do they position themselves within Polish society: among other civic organisations and vis-à-vis state elites? How is knowledge about threats (co)produced across the civil society in Poland? What do such choices reveal about the ways in which citizens and their organisations conceptualise the threat posed by disinformation? How do stakeholders responsible for creating the contemporary anti-disinformation initiatives use and reflect upon their own understandings of democracy and their own state. The choice of Poland as a case study is not accidental. Studies show that divided societies where there are intense power games at stake are more prone to conspiratorial thinking. Poland experiences particularly strong political polarisation. As such it can be an informative case study for societies experiencing similar divisions. Moreover, like in many countries of the Global East and South, also in Poland the government is often responsible for spreading disinformation and fostering conspiracy cultures. For these reasons, in Poland the response to disinformation and conspiracy theories is mostly NGO-led with some support coming from academic circles. The active, diverse and innovative response of the Polish civil society to the problem of conspiracy theories counters analytical discourses about the weakness of the civil society sector in Eastern Europe. It also disturbs dominant discourses normalising conspiracy theories in the region. This paper shows that contrary to the dominant perception of the Central and Eastern Europe, conspiracy theories and disinformation are neither normalised nor accepted discourses in the public sphere, and are frequently problematised, questioned and resisted – yet unlike in the Western societies, this resistance is usually a bottom – up rather than top-down movement.

Elżbieta Drążkiewicz is Associate Professor in the Division of Ethnology at Lund University. Her research spans conspiracy theories, political trust and the moral economy of foreign aid. She is the author of Institutionalised Dreams: The Art of Managing Foreign Aid (Berghahn, 2020) and has published on conspiracy theories and civic engagement in journals including *Nature* and *Journal for Cultural Research*. She leads the ERC project CONSPIRATIONS, which analyses, across six European countries, why some people endorse conspiracy theories, why others fear their consequences, and how initiatives can be designed to push back against the 'post-truth' era.

Shaban Darakchi (Bulgarian Academy of Sciences; Slovak Academy of Sciences)

"Motivation, Positionality, and Recommendations in the Accounts of Truth-Defenders in Bulgaria"

In recent years, conspiracy theories have gained unprecedented visibility and popularity on a global level circulating on social media platforms and eroding trust in public institutions, expertise and democracy. While there is a solid body of scholarship that has investigated the development and the role of conspiracy beliefs and narratives, less attention has been paid to those social actors that counteract such narratives – the so-called truth defenders. This paper aims to contribute to this expanding body of scholarship by investigating how Bulgarian truth defenders articulate their motivation to counteract conspiracy theories, position themselves in the contested field of information and conceptualize recommendations in response to conspiracy theories. Based on in-depth interviews the study identifies four main interrelated dimensions. First, the analysis pays attention to the socio-demographic profile of the truth defenders within the Bulgarian context. Second, it examines the motivations outlining personal, civic, and moral reasons that lead truth defenders to counteract conspiracy narratives. Third, it investigates how truth defenders negotiate their authority and credibility within a contested information environment. Fourth, it explores the recommendations truth defenders suggest to counteract conspiracy narratives ranging from educational reforms and public policies to media literacy and civic dialogue. By situating these perspectives within the global contestation over truth and authority, the study illuminates the lived experiences and negotiations of truth defenders as crucial and yet underexplored aspects of the counteractions against conspiracy narratives and campaigns.

Shaban Darakchi holds a PhD in sociology and researches gender, sexuality and anti-gender movements. He has published extensively and works on conspiracies related to 'gender ideology', child legislation and COVID-19 in Bulgaria.

Denys Gorbach (Lund University, Sweden)

"Cordoned Off in a Small Country: The Politics of Doubt and Civic Education in Belgium"

The generic distinction between 'truthers' and 'truth defenders' works well in countries deeply polarised around conspiracy theories, but in other contexts it might not be easy to classify actors according to this binary scheme. Such is the case of (Francophone) Belgium, a country where conspiracy theories and disinformation are not perceived as a serious problem, and yet where there is a strong tradition of critique and suspicion towards all authoritative discourses. This tradition of methodological doubt took root in the Belgian progressive milieux in the Cold War context. At the end of last century, it found institutional expression in the industry of 'permanent education' – a network of publicly funded NGOs pursuing various activities in the sphere of culture, media, and education. All these activities aim to

cultivate CRACS – 'responsible, active, critical, solidary citizens.' The commitment to the ideal of 'critical thinking', shared across the civil society, marginalises stereotypical 'truth defenders' with liberal technocratic pedigree; at the same time, it blurs the frontier separating these activists from 'truthers', making the distinction quantitative rather than qualitative. In my contribution, I will study actors engaged in the fight for 'critical thinking', both within and outside of permanent education, and look at the factors that ensure their social reproduction: the institution of political and mediatic sanitary cordon as well as the self-perception as an insignificant, hence isolated from all geopolitical struggles, nation.

Denys Gorbach is a political ethnographer specialising in class formation, social movements, labour and migration. His monograph on the Ukrainian working class appeared after his PhD at Sciences Po Paris. In CONSPIRATIONS he studies suspicion and political cleavages in Francophone Belgium.

3.3. Gender, Nation, and Conspiratorial Narratives (Jakobi 2-113)

Chair: Hulda Thorisdottir (University of Iceland)

Dóra Busi (Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary)
"From 'Stop Soros' to Brussels' Puppets: Protective Masculinity in Hungarian Conspiratorial Political Discourse"

The intersection of conspiracy theory and gender studies offers new ways to approach conspiratorial political discourse. Combining the research frameworks of these two disciplines may provide a deeper understanding of the explicit and implicit ways in which gender relations shape how conspiracy theories operate. To highlight the gendered aspects of conspiratorial thinking, my presentation focuses on contemporary Hungarian political conspiracy theories propagated by the Fidesz government. Examining the so-called National Consultations and notable billboard campaigns between 2015 and 2025, I aim to show how the paternalistic, protective masculinity of the Prime Minister of Hungary and of the ruling party was highlighted in these campaigns against constructed frontiers of threat.

The scope of my research focuses on two highly interconnected topics: the issue of (illegal) immigration (and its association with terrorism), and 'Brussels' (as a synonym for the European Union) politics and its detrimental effects on Hungarian sovereignty. As both these mediums (the consultations and the billboards) are well-suited to reach wider audiences, including undecided voters and those in the opposition, I argue that they are key in articulating and succinctly presenting the government's political identity, in which the masculine protection of the 'people' is a central theme.

Dóra Busi is a third-year PhD student and part-time lecturer at the Department of American Studies at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary. Her research focuses on conspiracy theories in American fiction, particularly in contemporary crime television and film. Her primary interest lies in examining the narrative potential of conspiracies and conspiracy theories, especially when it comes to identity construction and social criticism.

Liudmyla Harmash (University of Tours, France; H.S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University, Ukraine)

"Conspiracy, Secrecy, and Resistance: Reconfiguring Power Narratives in Contemporary Ukrainian Literature"

In contemporary Ukrainian literature, conspiracy and secrecy emerge not as mere tropes of paranoia, but as postcolonial mechanisms for exposing hidden power structures and reclaiming narrative sovereignty. This paper explores how Ukrainian writers reinterpret the logic of conspiracy within the contexts of historical trauma, post-Soviet disinformation, and Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine. Rather than reproducing Western notions of 'conspiracy theories' centered on irrational belief or cognitive bias, these texts articulate a distinctly Eastern European form of epistemological resistance – one born from centuries of colonial silencing, manipulation, and surveillance.

The analysis focuses on works by Oksana Zabuzhko, Yurii Andrukhovych, Serhiy Zhadan, Olexandr Irvanets, and Max Kidruk, tracing how each author employs secrecy and suspicion as instruments of cultural demystification. In Zabuzhko's *The Museum of Abandoned Secrets* (2009), the buried archives of the KGB function as both literal and metaphorical repositories of forbidden truth, turning the post-Soviet novel into a site of counter-conspiracy – an effort to narrate what was meant to remain unsaid. Andrukhovych's *Moscoviada* (1993) transforms the collapsing Soviet empire into a grotesque theatre of manipulation, anticipating post-truth politics and hybrid information warfare. In the postindustrial landscapes of Zhadan's *Voroshylovhrad* (2010), hidden forces of economic and criminal power produce a 'localized conspiracy' that mirrors broader geopolitical struggles. Meanwhile, Irvanets's dystopian *Kharkiv 1938* (2017) parodies the very construction of ideological 'truth' through an alternative fascist Ukraine, exposing how historical falsification itself becomes a conspiratorial act. Finally, Kidruk's *New Dark Ages* (2023) projects contemporary concerns into a near-future of algorithmic control, where technology replaces ideology as the apparatus of manipulation.

By juxtaposing these literary cases, the paper argues that Ukrainian literature transforms the conspiracy motif from a pathology of mistrust into a mode of critical inquiry – a means of reclaiming agency in a landscape saturated with propaganda, secrecy, and war. The current phase of Russian aggression has intensified this dynamic: artists, poets, and musicians now engage in de-conspiratorial poetics, exposing the fabrications of '*Russkiy mir*' ideology and reframing conspiracy as an aesthetic of resistance.

Through this lens, Ukrainian literature offers a vital contribution to global conspiracy theory studies: it demonstrates that suspicion, when rooted in collective historical trauma, may operate not as delusion but as epistemological survival.

Liudmyla Harmash (https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8638-3860) is a Visiting Research Fellow at LE STUDIUM / University of Tours (ICD, France) and a Professor at H.S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University, Ukraine. Her research focuses on contemporary Ukrainian wartime literature, trauma studies, memory, and cultural identity in postcolonial and transnational contexts. She is currently working on a monograph about Ukrainian music and literature of resistance, analyzing how cultural production during the Russia–Ukraine war shapes national identity and collective memory. Harmash has published and presented internationally on topics including war narratives, propaganda, postcolonialism, and affect in Eastern European literature.

Yifan Zhang (University of Tartu, Estonia)
"Conspiratorial Framings without Conspiracy Theories: Anti-Feminist Discourse and Historical Obscuration in the Chinese Digital Sphere"

Anti-feminist discourse has drawn attention in conspiracy theory studies in recent years, yet existing scholarship concentrates primarily on Western contexts in which feminism is embedded in partisan politics. This paper examines how fragmented conspiratorial framings participate in the delegitimization of feminist claims within China's highly censored digital sphere, even in the absence of fully developed conspiracy narratives.

Focusing on Chinese online discussions of 6B4T (a Korean radical feminist practice including the rejection of marriage, childbirth, and heterosexual relationships), this study draws on online ethnographic observation and analysis. The findings reveal two recurring conspiratorial explanatory patterns: attributing feminist activism to foreign forces destabilizing Chinese society, and dismissing it as women's strategy for personal financial gain (such as securing high bride prices). Despite their internal inconsistencies and misrepresentations of the stated positions of the 6B4T community, these framings contribute to the marginalization of feminist demands in discourse and obscure historical continuities within China's feminist movements, particularly in a digital environment shaped by state censorship and deeply rooted patriarchal structures.

I argue that conspiratorial framings do not require narrative coherence to function politically in constrained communicative environments. By resonating with state security discourses and circulating under conditions of limited contestation, these fragmentary framings acquire discursive authority through repetition and alignment rather than logical consistency. Such limited contestation results from both feminist actors' strategic disengagement and structural restrictions on their visibility. The case demonstrates how fragmented conspiratorial framings can operate as effective mechanisms of depoliticization in authoritarian settings without consolidating into fully articulated conspiracy theories.

Yifan Zhang is a master's student in Folkloristics and Applied Heritage Studies at the University of Tartu, with academic background in psychology and archival management. Her research interests lie in the Chinese women's movement and digital radical feminist communities. She is particularly interested in examining these communities through a folkloristic lens, exploring both online discourse and the impact of movements such as 6B4T on everyday life practices.

DAY 2 – May 22, 2026

Keynote 2 (Jakobi 2-226) *Chair: Mari-Liis Madisson (University of Tartu, Estonia)*

Michael Butter (University of Tübingen, Germany)
"*Berlin Station* and the Pasts and Futures of Conspiracy Theory Research"

Berlin Station is an American TV show whose three seasons were aired by the cable channel Epix between 2016 and 2019. The show's title refers to the CIA station in the US embassy in Berlin where much of the action takes place. Season 1 revolves around the threat of Islamist terrorism and American intelligence's often questionable methods of fighting it; season 2 addresses the threat of the far right to western democracies, as the rise of a populist party called Perspective for Germany is secretly supported by White House; and season 3 imagines

a Russian invasion of Estonia that follows the playbook of the take-over of Crimea – and is largely ignored by the populist American government. Obviously, conspiracies figure rather prominently in the narrative, but, as I will show, especially the first season also offers an interesting reflection on conspiracy theory. More importantly, however, I will argue that the show's shift in topics can be read as mirroring developments in conspiracy theory research. I will therefore use the show to reflect on how the field of conspiracy theory studies has developed, where it is currently headed, and what it should maybe focus on instead.

Michael Butter is Professor of American Literary and Cultural History at the University of Tübingen and a member of the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities. He has published widely on conspiracy theories and led several grant projects on the topic. *Populism and Conspiracy Theory* is forthcoming with Routledge this summer, and so is *Conspiracy Theories in the European Information Environment*, a book co-written, among others, with Elżbieta Drążkiewicz, Mari-Liis Madisson, and Tatjana Menise. With Peter Knight he is currently preparing a revised version of the *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, and with Holly Rogers and Tobias Pontara, he is editing the volume *Conspiracy Theory and Audiovisual Media: Visual and Sonic Perspectives*.

4.1. Populism (Jakobi 2-107) *Chair: Kasper Grotle Rasmussen (University of Southern Denmark)*

Eirikur Bergmann (Bifrost University, Island)
"Closing the Gap: How Anti-Immigrant Conspiracy Theories Reshaped Immigration Politics in Denmark and Sweden"

For two decades, Denmark and Sweden represented opposite poles of Nordic immigration governance. Denmark normalised nativist populism early, embedding restrictive measures into policy from the 1980s onward, while Sweden became Europe's emblem of liberal asylum politics, grounded in humanitarian exceptionalism and the universalist ethos of *Folkhemmet*. Yet recent developments reveal a rapid convergence. In both countries, anti-immigrant conspiracy theories – particularly the Eurabia and Great Replacement narratives – have travelled from counter-jihad margins into mainstream debate, reshaping discourse, electoral competition, and policy.

This paper applies my three-step rhetorical model of conspiratorial populism – (1) constructing an external threat, (2) alleging internal betrayal, and (3) presenting the populist as the nation's protector – to analyse how these narratives have circulated and taken root in Denmark and Sweden. In Denmark, the Danish People's Party (DF) long framed Muslim immigration as a civilisational danger and accused multicultural elites of surrendering Danish identity. Over time, rhetoric once condemned as extremist became politically ordinary. Today, the Social Democrats – now leading government – have fully absorbed DF's template, implementing measures such as offshoring asylum processing, imposing 'ghetto' legislation, capping 'non-Western' residents, and prioritising repatriation. What began at the populist fringe has become the Danish governing centre.

Sweden's shift has been slower but increasingly pronounced. Long quarantined behind a cordon sanitaire, the Sweden Democrats (SD) have seen their once-taboo vocabulary – such as *folkutbyte* ('population exchange') – enter mainstream debate, especially amid anxiety over crime, segregation, and the legacy of the 2015 refugee crisis. The 2022 Tidö Agreement, granting SD formal policy influence, marked the collapse of

Sweden's liberal exceptionalism. Sweden is now adopting measures that echo Denmark's restrictive trajectory.

The paper argues that this convergence reflects not merely structural pressures but the transformative power of conspiratorial narratives to redraw symbolic boundaries of political possibility. As Eurabian rhetoric increasingly informs governance, the Nordic region is shifting from humanitarian universalism toward a protectionist paradigm structured by fear, demography, and civilisational anxiety.

Eirikur Bergmann is a Professor of Politics at Bifröst University in Iceland. His research examines the international intersections of nationalism, populism, and conspiracy theories, including *Weaponizing Conspiracy Theories*, published by Routledge in 2024. He also writes on European integration, Icelandic politics, and forms of democratic participation. He has published 12 scholarly books and numerous peer-reviewed articles. Bergmann has contributed to public discourse through long-standing political analysis and commentary engagement. In addition to his academic writing, he is the author of four novels published in Icelandic.

Amanda de Lannoy (Radboud University, Netherlands)
"A Crisis of Legitimacy: (Illiberal) Populism and Conspiracy Theories"

The following paper synthesizes two strands of scholarship – one on the crisis of liberal representative democracy and one on the political salience of conspiracy theories – to propose a single analytic framework for understanding the current state of affairs. It proceeds from the insight that crisis is not an episodic deviation but constitutive of democracy's historical development. Within this historical perspective, it argues that (a) the post-1980s transformation of party democracy and the accompanying depoliticization of policymaking eroded institutional trust; (b) populism emerged as a mode of repoliticization that both responds to and intensifies that erosion; and (c) conspiracy theories, while not necessary to populism, have become part of populists discourse in such a way that they are used by populists to delegitimize opponents – including democratic institutions themselves.

Read together, these two strands of scholarship illuminate how current anti-institutional conspiracism converts ordinary democratic contestation into a crisis of legitimacy. Indeed, contemporary disenchantment with liberal representative democracy is clearly visible from the way in which democratic institutions are delegitimized by means of conspiracy theories. For believing in conspiracy theories is a characteristic shared by all who have become disillusioned with mainstream politics. In this sense, conspiracy theories can be understood as the symptom rather than the cause of disenchantment with liberal representative democracy. It is the lack of trust in democratic institutions that creates the perfect breeding ground for conspiracy theories. And although I will showcase that democracy's history is marked with instability and conflict, the current crisis of liberal representative democracy should be understood to be an important one to study. It is an important crisis to study because it is characterized by an intense disenchantment with the very foundation of liberal representative democracy: its democratic institutions are under threat.

Amanda de Lannoy is a PhD candidate at the Department of Modern Languages and Cultures and the Radboud Institute for Culture and History (RICH). She is currently working on her PhD project *Delegitimizing Democratic Institutions: Conspiracy Theories in the Netherlands*. Her broader research interests include parliamentary history, neoliberalism, and qualitative and digital methods for historical research. Amanda holds a Research MA in History, obtained at Utrecht University. She previously studied American Studies at Radboud

University and the University of North Carolina Wilmington. After completing her Research MA, she worked as a lecturer at both the University of Amsterdam and Utrecht University.

Massimiliano Demata (University of Catania, Italy)
"'Please Vote for Trump, So Haitian Immigrants Don't Eat Us': Epistemic Legitimation and Discursive and Communicative Strategies in the Pet-Eating Conspiracy Theory"

This paper discusses one of the key topics of the 2024 US presidential campaign, i.e. the conspiracy theory whereby Haitian immigrants abducted, killed and ate pets. While this piece of disinformation was repeatedly debunked, it was used very effectively by then-presidential candidate Donald Trump and his campaign to reinforce his anti-immigration message. Adopting a discourse approach to conspiracy theories (Demata, Zorzi and Zottola 2022), the paper will address the way this conspiracy was constructed through specific discursive and communicative strategies which tended to legitimise its epistemic value. The paper seeks to expand the concept of presidential conspiracism (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019) and the link between conspiracy theories and populism (Bergmann 2018) on the basis of what has been called epistemic masquerade (Demata 2025a; 2025b).

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Massimiliano Demata is Full Professor of English Linguistics at the University of Catania. He has published widely on political and media discourse in the UK and the USA, conspiracy theories, the language of populism and discourses on borders, nationalism and immigration. He has co-edited *Conspiracy Theory Discourses* (2022) and the *Routledge Handbook of Discourse and Disinformation* (2023). His latest single-authored monograph is *Discourses of Nation and the Borders in the USA* (2022).

4.2. Conspiracy Theory Between Critique and Panic (Jakobi 2-130) *Chair: Corneliu Pintilescu (Romanian Academy)*

Max Kramer (Leibniz Institut Zentrum Moderner Orient, Germany)
"What Is the Difference Between Critical Theory and Conspiracy Theory?"

It has been argued that critical theory and conspiracy theories share some common features. Be it Marx's 'false consciousness', Adorno's caustic perspective of consumer-mass media

culture as a *Verblendungszusammenhang*, or more contemporary critical concerns that claim certain epistemologies and ontologies lurk behind everyday forms of critique, delegitimizing their critical purchase as 'Western' or part of some 'hegemonic' formation. In other words, critical theory can slide into areas that are suspiciously cogent to conspiratorial thought. We know of various conceptual schematisms that are 'applied' to unsuitable contexts and often hyper-politicized or moralized in the wake. The common assumption between conspiracy theory and critical theories is that some hidden forces (e.g., power dynamics) are always behind the empirical data social scientists are investigating. However, there are crucial differences that this presentation tries to systematically tease out.

It is commonplace that the problem with conspiracies lies in the practice of inference. In this presentation, I will explore the logics of critical inference as a way to distinguish critique from conspiratorial theories. I will draw on the work of Luc Boltanski and a variety of pragmatist thinkers to identify the precise location where we can differentiate between conspiratorial theory and critical theory by the movement from critical to meta-critical discourse and the openness to objections within this process. An 'objection' is an inferential moment of investigation that a critical theorist cannot ignore; it is not a positivistic approach to 'objectivity' nor a simple iteration of the 'falsification' of theoretical models, but rather is to be approached through procedural features of coming to grips with normative problems that are immanent to a field of emancipatory practice.

Max Kramer is currently the Co-Principal Investigator of the project "When Anonymity Is No Longer Enough: 'Fictionalization' as a New Way of Writing Ethnography in the Age of Digital Surveillance". His primary research focus is on media practices in India, particularly among religious minorities. Kramer also translates Hindi literature and literary theory, while addressing questions about the role and history of concepts and theories in the social sciences. He is the author of two research monographs: *Political Agency Online* (Routledge, 2025), which explores the online politics of Indian Muslims, and *Mobilität und Zeugenschaft* (*Mobility and Testimony*; Transcript, 2019), which examines independent documentary film practices related to the Valley of Kashmir.

Toni Saarinen (University of Helsinki, Finland)
"Myths of Conspiracism and Their Relationship with Conspiracy Theories"

This theoretical paper deals with the implications of approaching conspiracism from the viewpoint of myth studies. It is based on and showcases my dissertation that has hopefully been published by the time this presentation takes place.

For me, myth stands for a shared model that does not omit the unknown and esoteric side of our reality from its ontological and epistemological conceptions. In the dissertation, I argue that there is analytical value in concentrating on the construction and appropriation of various mythic discourses in conspiracism. These discourses include not only established conspiracist mythemes, like the New World Order, but all kinds of material from older and remote world mythologies and vernacular traditions. They then comprise mythic knowledge that is often but not always communicated in narrative form.

However, when understanding conspiracism as a worldview greatly influenced by mythic ideas, it is important to discuss 'conspiracy theories'. As various philosophers such as Kurtis Hagen have claimed, it is questionable to deem every conspiracy theory a priori faulty, in addition to which not every conspiracy theory constitutes a worldview. I argue that myths contain more profound presuppositions about the nature and mechanics of reality: they necessarily exist in a shared, symbolic, and explanatory framework here points beyond any single conspiracist event, narrative, or 'theory'. I will discuss the matter of dismissing 'conspiracy theory' in my dissertation, while I nevertheless understand the term has value.

Toni Saarinen is a PhD student who is currently finishing his dissertation at the University of Helsinki. His main research subjects are modern – especially late modern – forms of mythic thinking, most of all conspiracism and apocalypticism. For nearly a decade, he has incorporated theories of classic and contemporary myth research into his analysis of conspiracist discourses and narratives. Saarinen has also researched climate change denialism, vernacular and countercultural discourses and counterknowledge, alternative belief-systems, Internet culture, and representations and reimagining of myths in fiction. Additionally, he is interested in posthuman conceptions of climate change's relationship with contemporary apocalyptic views. Saarinen has written adjacent articles on eschatological populism, creepypasta, and depictions of climate apocalypse in film. He is also a speculative fiction author.

Kinga Polynczuk-Alenius (University of Helsinki, Finland)
"Journalistic 'Moral Panic' About Conspiracy Theories as Epistemic Injustice"

The rise of conspiracy theories (CTs) is widely construed as a major threat to contemporary democracies. Although mainstream journalism positions itself as a counterforce to CTs, it also inadvertently intensifies public anxieties about them. In so doing, it contributes to a 'moral panic' discourse that defines CTs as a threat to societal values and interests. From the mid-2010s, journalism has been weaving CTs into the broader 'informational moral panic' that perceives mis/disinformation as eroding public communication generally and undermining journalistic legitimacy particularly. This entanglement of CTs with declining journalistic legitimacy underpins journalism's tendency to dismiss and pathologise all CTs as irrational, conflictive, and dangerous. In this conceptual paper, I develop an argument that the blanket dismissal of CTs by journalism constitutes democratically harmful epistemic injustice. In particular, it overlooks that some CTs illuminate the lived realities of minoritised groups, otherwise obscured by established 'truths' that journalism trades in. Best-known instances of this dismissive pattern come from Black communities in the US: the (later substantiated) allegations implicating the CIA in drug trafficking by Nicaraguan Contra groups that contributed to the 1980s crack cocaine problem, and CTs about HIV's origins from the government laboratories that reflected actual cases of health-related abuse by the government, such as the Tuskegee syphilis experiment. I ground my argument in the particularist view that each CT should be evaluated on its own merits. I further combine this perspective with insights from epistemic democracy and feminist standpoint theory. While epistemic democracy prioritises epistemic inclusion, pluralism, and diversity, standpoint theory illuminates why they are necessary: the dominant 'rationality' – on the basis of which CTs are dismissed – is a historically contingent construct that excludes minoritised groups, even when they offer a unique insight into social reality, inaccessible to dominant groups.

Kinga Polynczuk-Alenius is a media researcher at the University of Helsinki, where she leads a project on journalism and conspiracy theories funded by the Kone Foundation (2026–2028). Before (re)joining the University of Helsinki, she was a MSCA Fellow at the Polish Academy of Sciences and Core Fellow at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies. Kinga's work has been published in major journals across disciplines such as M*edia, Culture & Society*, *Journalism, Nations and Nationalism*, *and History & Memory*.

Rikard Friberg von Sydow (Södertörn University, Sweden)
"The Skåne QAnon: A Regional Adaption of an American Conspiracy Theory"

The QAnon conspiracy theory is centered around and directed toward the political landscape of the United States of America, although this has not hindered regional adaptations outside

the USA. One more famous example is Her Majesty Queen Romano Didulo, a Canadian of Filipino descent who uses part of the QAnon mythos to claim she is the Queen of Canada.

Skåne, in the southern part of Sweden, was, until 1658 and the Peace of Roskilde, a part of Denmark. Although the majority of the residents today seem to be satisfied with belonging to Sweden, there has always been some type of resistance to the Swedish state in parts of the population. From the 1970s and onwards various movements connected to right-wing extremism have used this regional resentment in their political agenda – among others *Skånepartiet* ('The Skåne Party').

Since the early 2020s there has been a small but persistent presence on the internet of Skåne nationalists that connect their political agenda to the QAnon conspiracy theory. How do they interpret typical concepts of the QAnon mythos, such as 'The Deep State', 'The Adrenochrome Blood-Libel', and 'White Hats', in their regional nationalism? In my paper I will do my best to try to explain this.

Dr **Rikard Friberg von Sydow** is Senior Lecturer in Archival Science and Head of the department of Archival Science and Library and Information Science at Södertörn University, Stockholm. His research focuses, among other things, on the history of information management and on studies of internet culture, especially in its more extreme forms.

4.3. Book presentations (Jakobi 2-113) *Chair: Annika Rabo (Stockholm University, Sweden)*

Carlos Diaz Ruiz (Hanken School of Economics, Finland)
Market-Oriented Disinformation Research: Digital Advertising, Disinformation and Fake News on Social Media. Routledge, 2025

Market-Oriented Disinformation Research explores the spread of false or misleading information online through the lens of marketing theory and consumer research. It examines how the business models of digital platforms and advertising technology firms (AdTech) generate digital markets that incentivize the circulation of harmful content for profit. Rather than viewing disinformation and misinformation as accidental byproducts, the book proposes that they thrive in the current markets designed for digital advertising and influencer marketing.

Readers will learn how the amplification of disinformation can be linked to social media's business model. Examples include how social media algorithms promote addictive content, how fake news sites use ad fraud to lure in advertising revenue, and how some content creators rely on clickbait, ragebait, bots, and conspiracy theories to boost their engagement metrics.

The book is a must-read for scholars in journalism, media studies, and political communication, as well as policymakers interested in the democratic governance of social media platforms. In addition, it calls for digital marketing, advertising, and brand management professionals to take responsibility for their ad spending by advocating for greater oversight over AdTech intermediaries to prevent unethical actors from monetizing the harmful content that polarizes society and undermines democratic institutions.

Carlos Diaz Ruiz (carlos.diazruiz@hanken.fi), PhD, is a business academic specializing in marketing strategy, consumer insights, and disinformation research. Dr. Diaz Ruiz is an Associate Professor (tenure track) at Hanken School of Economics in Finland and has been a faculty member at Kedge Business School in France and the University of Auckland in New Zealand. His research has been published in leading scientific journals, including the *Journal*

of Business Research, *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, and *New Media & Society*. His current work on disinformation explores how advertising technology firms (AdTech) bankroll fake news and harmful content online.

Elżbieta Drążkiewicz (Lund University, Sweden)
Mari-Liis Madisson (University of Tartu, Estonia)
Conspiracy Theories in the European Digital Sphere. Clare Birchall, Nebojša Blanuša, Michael Butter, Elżbieta Drążkiewicz, Peter Knight and Mari-Liis Madisson. Routledge, 2026

Europe has a conspiracy theory problem. Or does it? And if so, whose problem is it exactly, and should we blame the internet?

Conspiracy Theories in the European Digital Sphere presents the findings of the three-year REDACT project, a large-scale comparative study spanning four European regions, from the UK and German-speaking countries to the Baltics, Central Europe and the Balkans. Drawing on nearly six million social media posts and extensive qualitative and quantitative analysis, the book challenges some of the most widely held assumptions about online conspiracism: that social media created it, that foreign actors drive it, and that better fact-checking can fix it.

Conspiracy theories emerge as deeply local phenomena, shaped by national histories, political cultures and specific experiences of power and distrust. One size does not fit all, and models developed to explain American conspiracism travel poorly. The book also shows that people who seek out conspiracy theories online are often already distrustful before they encounter any particular content, and that this distrust has roots that predate any social media platform. Understanding the grievances and experiences that drive people to seek out conspiracy theories matters far more than moderating what they find. This book talk is designed as a conversation. We will be in dialogue with each other and with the audience, and questions and challenges from the floor are part of the plan.

Elżbieta Drążkiewicz is Associate Professor in the Division of Ethnology at Lund University. Her research spans conspiracy theories, political trust and the moral economy of foreign aid. She is the author of *Institutionalised Dreams: The Art of Managing Foreign Aid* (Berghahn, 2020) and has published on conspiracy theories and civic engagement in journals including *Nature* and *Journal for Cultural Research*. She leads the ERC project CONSPIRATIONS, which analyses, across six European countries, why some people endorse conspiracy theories, why others fear their consequences, and how initiatives can be designed to push back against the 'post-truth' era.

Mari-Liis Madisson is Associate Professor of Semiotics at the University of Tartu. She has previously worked at the Estonian Military Academy and as a postdoctoral researcher at Queen's University Belfast. Her research combines cultural semiotics with the study of conspiracy theories and information influence operations. She is the co-author of *Strategic Conspiracy Narratives: A Semiotic Approach* (Routledge, 2020, with Andreas Ventsel) and co-editor of *Through the Lens of Dread* (Tallinn University Press, 2025). She is currently collaborating with the Estonian Defence Forces on the project "The Strategic Partnership between Russia and China and the Use of Artificial Intelligence in Information Influence Operations".

5.1. Media, Aesthetics, and Persuasion in Conspiracy Discourse (Jakobi 2-107) *Chair: Annastiina Kallius (University of Helsinki, Finland)*

Tobias Pontara (University of Gothenburg, Sweden)
"The Aesthetics of Distrust: Researching the Role of Creative Practices in Conspiracy Theoretical Discourse"

Distrust towards political authorities, scientific expertise and public institutions constitute a mounting challenge for contemporary democracies. Circulating across mainstream, alternative and social media, such sentiments are not only articulated verbally but are increasingly shaped and amplified through aesthetic means – ranging from still and moving images, memes, musical compositions and song lyrics to the visual, sonic and narrative registers of documentaries, political campaign films and DIY videos. Yet, despite its growing significance, this aesthetic dimension remains underexplored in scholarship on conspiracy theories.

This paper develops two interconnected lines of argument. First, it advances the claim that more research is needed on how creative and aesthetic practices generate, reinforce, and circulate conspiratorially driven forms of political, epistemic, and intergroup distrust in diverse online environments. Drawing on insights from populism studies, I outline some potential ways forward here for conspiracy theory scholarship.

Second, the paper addresses a central issue arising in connection with the study of aesthetically mediated conspiratorial discourse: how to assess the epistemic status of conspiracy theories. I propose a methodological distinction – adapted from debates in the philosophy of conspiracy theory – between what I term particularist agnosticism and generalist scepticism. I argue that this distinction is foundational for a media-oriented approach focussing on the form, rather than the content, of conspiracy theories. Scholars investigating how aesthetic and creative practices participate in the construction and dissemination of conspiratorial worldviews are not necessarily well equipped to determine the truth-value or plausibility of the specific conspiracy theories they study. However, the overall rationale behind this kind of research might justifiably be an assumption that conspiracy theories, taken as a whole, are 'epistemically risky' (Douglas & Sutton 2023).

Tobias Pontara is a professor of Musicology at the University of Gothenburg. His research lies at the intersection of audiovisual studies, media studies, and the cultural study of music. Among the leading international journals in which he has published are *Philosophical Studies*; *19th-Century Music*; *Music, Sound and the Moving Image*; *Popular Music and Society*; *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* (*IRASM*); and *Music and the Moving Image*. Pontara is the author of *Andrei Tarkovsky's Sounding Cinema: Music and Meaning from Solaris to The Sacrifice* (Routledge, 2020). His most current research project, titled "Conspiracy Soundtracks", examines the role of music and sound in audiovisually mediated conspiracy theoretical discourse, funded by the Swedish Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (2023–2026).

Jesper Aagaard Petersen (Norwegian University of Science and Technology) "Listeners, Hearers and Hummers: Modern Folklore on Low Frequency Noise"

The Hum denotes a persistent low-frequency sound reported in scattered global hotspots. While some treat it as an annoyance, others experience severe distress. Scientific explanations typically involve tinnitus or inner-ear activity, but listener communities attribute the phenomenon to external causes – from industrial machinery to occult or extraterrestrial technologies.

This paper analyses how testimonies, media narratives and community interactions construct boundaries between believers and sceptics, and how suffering encourages deeper engagement and resistance to biomedical explanations. Marginalisation, disbelief, and the search for relief form feedback loops that entrench conviction and opposition to mainstream science, situating the Hum within wider patterns of modern vernacular religion and contested knowledge.

Jesper Aagaard Petersen, Associate Professor of Religious Education at Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), researches modern Satanism, contemporary esotericism, conspiracy theories, alternative sciences, and didactic narratives.

Kasper Grotle Rasmussen (University of Southern Denmark) "Using Kennedy: JFK as Meaning, Promise, and Weapon in Contemporary Conspiracy Theories"

Whether in social media montages and memes or podcasts and political speeches, contemporary right-wing populist conspiracy theories have a place for former president John F. Kennedy (JFK). He appears in grand conspiracy narratives proposing that a 'Deep State cabal' killed JFK in 1963 because he opposed the war in Vietnam and the Deep State's takeover of American society. His death, the argument goes, resulted in more than 50 years of wars, financial crises, global pandemics, and the erosion of cultural values (Berg 2023). To promote his global significance, conspiracy narratives argue that his death was part of the 'New World Order' plan, because JFK was the only bulwark against the 'elites'' dreams of global domination and enslavement of the people (Barkun 2013). Since Donald Trump was elected president in 2016 (re-elected in 2024), American populist movements on the Right (QAnon, Make America Great Again – MAGA, and Robert F. Kennedy, jr.'s Make America Healthy Again – MAHA) have promoted these narratives through text, image, and video. The supposed mystery behind JFK's assassination has recently become the subject of new congressional hearings, the culpability of the CIA and other agencies is rekindled by RFK jr. (JFK's nephew, current Secretary of Health and Human Services), and loose JFK quotes are used to promote right-wing policies and disparage those on the left and the center.

This paper examines the use of JFK in contemporary American conspiracy theories on the right and argues that the motivation lies in an effort to create meaning, promise, and weaponization. In narratives of decline, the populist Right uses JFK to explain the evil of the Deep State in destroying this Golden Age and replacing it with the current dystopia of uncertain and shifting values. In defense of Donald Trump, QAnon and MAGA have created conspiracy theories equating the Deep State's murder of JFK with attempts to obstruct Trump's presidency (Russia investigation, COVID-19 pandemic, 'stealing' the 2020 elections, and 'inciting' the January 6 Capitol attack), as well as impeachment and post-presidential indictments. In a similar narrative of decline, RFK, jr. and his followers have crafted conspiracy theories about Big Pharma creating COVID-19 to sell vaccines, which JFK would never have allowed (although he was actually pro-vaccines), and about the

military-industrial-complex creating a war in Ukraine that JFK would have stopped, as he did in Cuba (1962) and tried to do in Vietnam.

In narratives of progress, the Right hopes for a restoration of order if a new JFK is returned as leader – such as Trump, RFK, jr., or in QAnon lore, JFK's son, JFK, jr., whom some believe is still alive despite his death in a plane crash in 1999 (Gilbert 2021). Some QAnon and RFK, jr. supporters use the popular image of a healthy JFK (in reality he was very sick and relied on opioids and amphetamines) to seek spiritual and wellness improvements from a future leader (Beres et al. 2023).

In narratives of weaponization, JFK is used as way of attacking opponents on the left and center by claiming JFK and his achievements for right-wing causes. Any detraction from and opposition to QAnon, MAGA, and MAHA is thus seen as a negation of JFK's legacy and of complicity with the forces that led to his demise in 1963 and the narratives of decline have ultimately led to the country's demise at the hands of the Deep State and the New World Order.

Kasper Grotle Rasmussen is Associate professor of American History at the University of Southern Denmark in Odense. He focuses on the intellectual history of America in the World in the 20th and 21st centuries, especially conspiracy theories in the US and the Nordic countries, and US foreign policy.

Daria Antsybor (State Scientific Center for Protection of Cultural Heritage, Ukraine)

"Borsch as Bioweapon: Ukrainian Wartime Memes Battling Russian Propaganda"

Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Russia in Ukraine, Ukrainian memes have become not only a coping mechanism to endure the reality but also a powerful tool that helps counter Russian propaganda. Memes have become a new form of sharing narratives that highlight Ukrainians' resilience and sense of agency and expose Russian disinformation. When a false narrative emerges – whether about military events, political decisions, or historical or cultural speculations – memes often respond within hours, debunking unfounded claims far more quickly and more creatively than traditional media can.

The powerful symbolism embedded in the Snake Island "Go f*ck yourself, Russian warship," the call for Russian soldiers to carry sunflower seeds to grow out of their graves, or the tractor-towing-tank memes not only counter Russian narratives but broadcast Ukraine's perspective into the global digital culture arena. Ukrainian memes address head on Russian historical revisionism and colonialism, refuting the idea that Ukraine has no distant history, and is merely 'part of Russia', along with the claims that the Ukrainian language is not a real language. These memes highlight the chronological absurdity of Russia claiming Kyivan Rus as 'Russian', often by contrasting medieval Kyiv with images of the forested area where Moscow did not yet exist. Another central theme is mockery of cultural appropriation – from borscht to vyshyvankas to Cossacks – showing how Russia repeatedly tries to claim Ukrainian symbols as its own.

Collectively, these memes assert historical truth and showcase the ridiculousness of Russian propaganda. They transform frustration into laughter, strengthen national identity, and present Ukraine's version of history in a way that is accessible to global audiences. In the information war, humour becomes both a shield and a megaphone – protecting Ukrainian historical memory while spreading it far beyond the reach of traditional media.

Daria Antsybor is a research fellow at the State Scientific Center of Cultural Heritage Protection from Technogenic Catastrophes in Kyiv, Ukraine. She studied folklore at the

Institute of Philology in Kyiv National University of Taras Shevchenko. Her dissertation was dedicated to the genres of the oneiric folklore. She specializes in wartime folklore, vernacular medicine, crisis humour and anthropology of dreams. She is a member of the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore. She is also a science communicator who is hosting the anthropological podcast "Porobleno". She is the author of two non-fiction books, *Under the Pillow or Under the Tree* (Kyiv: Laboratoria, 2023) and *Dreadlocks, Battles and Steels: Two Centuries of Subcultures in Ukraine* (Kyiv: Laboratoria, 2024). Currently she is examining the nature of crisis humor in Ukraine and vernacular healing practices in Polissia.

5.2. Knowledge, Belief, and Alternative Epistemologies (Jakobi 2-130) *Chair: Elżbieta Drążkiewicz (Lund University, Sweden)*

Mikael Eriksson (University of Borås, Sweden)
"Refused, Rejected, Stigmatized, and Weird Knowledge"

Esoteric religious groups are often described as being in some kind of epistemically oppositional relationship to mainstream society. Wouter J. Hanegraaff (2013), for example, characterizes esotericism by its status as 'rejected knowledge', being at odds with the 'normative concepts of religion, rationality and science'. Similarly, Julia Falk (2024), in her PhD dissertation on the spiritist movement in Sweden in the late 19th century, and Christoffer Tidelius (2024), in his PhD dissertation on paranormal beliefs and practices, both place terms like rejected, refused and stigmatized knowledge centrally in their theoretical frameworks.

In my PhD project, I have interviewed Swedish practitioners of mediumship, healing, tarot, and other spiritual practices. Building on these interviews, I will make a theoretical reading of the interview material against terms such as rejected knowledge, refused knowledge, stigmatized knowledge, and so forth, to see if and how these terms resonate with how the participants reflect on their own knowledge and their relationship to institutional and scientific authorities. The goal of the reading will less be to give a general characterization of participants' relationship to mainstream institutions, but more to explore and develop concepts around this relationality theoretically. In doing this, I will draw from sociological work on deviance (e.g. Becker 1963; Goffman 1963; Simmel 2008), refused/stigmatized knowledge (e.g. Barkun 2013; Crabu et al. 2024; Hammer 2003; Hanegraaff 2013; Webb 1974), and Mark Fisher's (2016) concept of 'weirdness'.

Mikael Eriksson is a doctoral student at the Swedish School of Library and Information Science, University of Borås. He is interested in how social structures and technologies shape how we value credibility, and in his PhD project he is researching how credibility is assessed among healers, tarot readers, mediums and other mind-body-spirit professionals in Sweden. Mikael started his PhD-studies in the autumn of 2023. He has a BA-degree in Sociology, Politics and Philosophy from Utrecht University College and an MA-degree in Psychosocial studies from Birkbeck College, University of London.

Radvilė Racėnaitė (Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore)
"Conspiracy Theories Between Folklore and Spirituality in Lithuania"

Conspiracy theories can be viewed as a modern form of folklore and as a modern form of spirituality. Conspiracies share characteristics with traditional beliefs and belief legends functioning as a narrative genre that explains events and serves psychological and social needs in a similar way to traditional folklore. They also overlap with contemporary rumours

and hoaxes in the realm of urban folklore. Conspiracy theories are also an important part of alternative religiosity and spirituality. This has prompted some researchers to coin the term 'conspirituality' to describe this new phenomenon. In both cases, conspiracy theories confirm the assumption that folklore and mythological beliefs serve an ideological purpose by illustrating the prevailing worldview in a given culture and grounding humanity's greatest fears through stories circulating in society. In this paper, these considerations will be illustrated with examples of conspiracy theories from recent years, revealing their function as modern folklore and their influence on new spiritual and religious practices in Lithuania.

Radvilė Racėnaitė, PhD, is Senior Researcher and Head of the Department of Folk Narrative at the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore. She is the author of the monograph *Notion of Human Fate and Death in Lithuanian Folklore* (2011) and co-author of two collective monographs (2012, 2020). She has published over 30 articles in Lithuanian and English. Her main research interests include Lithuanian folk narrative, pre-Christian Baltic religions, folk piety, New Age spirituality and its influence on folklore.

Asbjørn Dyrendal (Norwegian University of Science and Technology) "Counterfact and Counterexpertise: Alternative Histories and Conspiracy Theories Connecting the Far Right and Esotericism"

In the final months of World War II, Heinrich Himmler ordered his staff to look into the development of a giant, electrical weapon that would end the capabilities of the allied armies. The idea was born of his belief that the Edda contained hidden knowledge of the ancient Aryans; the weapon would be a revived hammer of the god Thor.

The appetite for esoteric ideas varies strongly in in far right circles. The appetite for far right ideas in esotericism vary as much. However, nostalgic, romantic narratives about a hidden, forgotten or suppressed past thrive in both. We often find both fascism and esotericism deeply involved in counterknowledge, creating alternative narratives about science, past, and the future. Conspiracy theories and other alternative histories are a central part of this discourse and are used from both sides.

The overlap between fascism and esotericism has received scant attention. When it has, the approach has leaned heavily on Colin Campbell's model of the cultic milieu, a subterranean underground of marginalized beliefs. Both the current situation and historical forebears show that we need to go beyond such models to integrate episodes where the connection emanates from the centers of power and influence. This paper discusses how and why alternative narratives of the past and the conspiracy theories they embrace bridge the discourses of esotericism and the far right.

Asbjørn Dyrendal is a professor of Religious Studies at Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim. He is the author and editor of several books about conspiracy theories and/or new religious movements, often centering on contemporary esotericism.

Hulda Thorisdottir (University of Iceland) "Conspiracy Mentality as a Non-Ideological Driver of EU Attitudes in Iceland"

As the current centre-left government in Iceland moves toward a national referendum on resuming EU accession negotiations, public attitudes remain sharply polarized, with right-leaning voters consistently more Eurosceptic. The prospect of intensified disinformation campaigns in the run-up to the referendum, including efforts by actors inside and outside Iceland, further raises the political stakes. In this context, it becomes theoretically and practically important to examine whether conspiracy mentality, defined as a general

propensity to attribute hidden motives and manipulative intent to authorities, constitutes a non-ideological reservoir of Euroscepticism independent of the familiar left-right divide.

Using survey data from an Icelandic convenience sample (N = 463), I examine how support for continued accession negotiations and perceived benefits of EU membership relate to three forms of conspiratorial thinking: general conspiracy mentality (CMQ), belief in a specific domestic political conspiracy concerning the former Prime Minister, and attitudes toward people who believe in conspiracy theories.

Results indicate two independent and unrelated pathways to EU scepticism. First, an ideological pathway: individuals positioning themselves further to the right express more negative attitudes toward EU membership (r approx .30 to .40). Second, a conspiratorial pathway: CMQ strongly predicts Euroscepticism (r approx .40) despite being unrelated to left-right ideology (r approx .00). Belief in the conspiracy concerning the former Prime Minister also correlates with EU opposition (r approx .30), suggesting spillover from domestic elite-focused mistrust to international political preferences. Moreover, perceiving conspiracy believers as "seeking truth in a society where trust is lacking" independently predicts stronger Euroscepticism (r approx .25), underscoring the role of broader mistrust-based orientations in shaping views on European integration.

Together, these findings demonstrate that public opinion on EU accession is shaped not only by ideological commitments but also by distrust-based orientations, implying heightened public susceptibility to strategic disinformation during the referendum campaign.

Hulda Thorisdottir is a Professor of Political Science at the University of Iceland, specializing in political psychology. She earned her PhD in Social Psychology from New York University in 2007. Her research examines political ideology, the emotional foundations of attitudes, and the role of fear and distrust in shaping political orientations and conspiracy beliefs. She has contributed to large-scale comparative surveys, highlighting links between conspiracy mentality and political extremes, and co-authored *Conspiracy Theories and the Nordic Countries*. She also co-leads the Icelandic National Election Studies.

5.3. Race and Nationalism (Jakobi 2-113) *Chair: Michael Butter (University of Tübingen, Germany)*

Luis Manuel Hernandez Aguilar (Europa University Viadrina, Germany) "Conspiring a Conspiracy Theory: From *Umvolkung* to Remigration and the Alternative for Germany's Political Mobilization of Population Replacement Conspiracy Theories"

This article examines how the far-right political party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) mobilizes population replacement conspiracy theories, particularly the concept of *Umvolkung*, as a mode of political propaganda. While the genealogy of *Umvolkung* harks back to the Weimar Republic and the interwar period, and it is also inextricably tied to racial and demographic engineering of the Nazi era, it has re-emerged in contemporary far-right discourse as a conspiracy theory of national decline, demographic anxiety, and replacement fear. In this article, I argue that the AfD's deployment of population replacement conspiracy theories operates as biopolitical technologies seeking to legitimize exclusionary policy proposals such as the so-called Remigration program. Ultimately, I contend, population replacement conspiracy theories express and promote a biopolitical vision of protecting the national racially characterized social body from the existential threat of replacement through tightening border regimes, reconceptualizing concepts of citizenship and naturalization, and

the political death of those racially characterized as non-Gerrmans by means of exclusion-remigration imaginaries.

Luis M. H. Aguilar is an Associate Researcher at the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder). His research examines racism, Islamophobia, antisemitism, conspiracy theories, as well as feminist and postcolonial theory. He is Principal Investigator of the DFG-funded project "ConspiRacism: Untangling the Knot between Population Replacement Conspiracy Theories, Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Class". The project traces the history, intellectual origins, political mobilization, and digital dissemination of 'Great Replacement' conspiracy theories, focusing on Germany and France. It develops a theoretical framework to analyze how racism, gender, sexuality, and class intersect in the construction of population replacement conspiracy theories. Among his publications are *The Politics of Replacement: Demographic Fears, Conspiracy Theories, and Race Wars* with S. Bracke (London: Routledge, 2024) and "Memeing a Conspiracy Theory: On the Biopolitical Compression of the Great Replacement Conspiracy Theories" (in *Ethnography* 25(1); 76–97; 2023).

Niels Reeh (University of Southern Denmark)
Joakim Kaaberbøl (University of Southern Denmark)

"Antisemitic Conspiracy Thinking as the Result of a 'Normal' Pattern of Human Communication?"

On the most fundamental level, groups of other human beings pose a serious threat to any human group or individual, especially if such groups are organized in secrecy. It is therefore a reasonable assumption that the ability to imagine conspiracies have provided an evolutionary advantage. Therefore, this paper departs from the proposition that conspiracy thinking is the result of normal human thinking and can be described as emotionally driven patterns of autonomous selection and de-selection of information. The paper goes on to use Gregory Bateson's concept of (psychological) metacommunicative frames (Leeds-Hurwitz 2022; Bateson 1972; Goffman 1974) to analyze examples of conspiracy thinking found in organized Antisemitism. In the second part, the paper goes on to ask what kind of didactics could further communication and dialogue across groups that rely on mutually exclusive patterns of selection of (dis)information. Here, the paper suggests that attempts to overcome boundaries established by conspiracy thinking could learn from successful attempts at overcoming religious boundaries.

Niels Reeh is an Associate Professor at University of Southern Denmark, section of Religious Studies. He received hisy PhD in sociology of religion from University of Copenhagen in 2007 on a case study of the political decision-making process with regard to teaching of religion in Danish schools from 1720 to 2006. The thesis was published as a monograph with Springer Verlag and is a standing contribution to the study of teaching of religion in Danish schools. It showed that sociological studies had overwhelmingly described secularization as a result of internal societal modernization process and neglected the state's regulation of religion in the analysis. This work has led to a theory of dynamic relations between religious (and other) groups (i.e. that religious groups relate, react, and adapt to each other), which hitherto had not been sufficiently incorporated into the theoretical description of religious groups. This relational approach to the study of religion is to be defended as a doctoral dissertation (Dr. phil) in February 2026.

Joachim Kaaberbøl is an MA candidate in the Psychology of Language at the University of Copenhagen, specializing in radicalisation and digital extremism. His research focuses on online extremist spaces, with particular expertise in corpus linguistics and the analysis of self-curated large-scale social media datasets. He holds a BA in Philosophy from Aarhus

University, including an exchange stay at the University of Sheffield. Alongside his studies, Joachim has worked as a research intern at the Department of Nordic Studies and Linguistics (University of Copenhagen), contributing to projects involving social media data collection, coding frameworks, and targeted literature reviews.

Lars M. Andersson (Uppsala University, Sweden)
"Making Sense of the Post-War World Through Conspiracist Thinking"

This presentation addresses the continued adaptation of fascist conspiracism in Sweden after the military defeat of the fascist powers and the disappearance of most of its followers in 1945 and until the late 1960s through a study of one of the 'true believers', Carl Magnus "Manne" and his journals Fri Press and Krets Nytt. Berg joined the so called Lindholm movement, the largest and most influential of the Swedish national socialist parties in the early 1930s, was a local party official in Malmö and a prominent editor and propagandist in the leading fascist daily, *Den svenske*, and the draughtsman of Swedish fascism. After the defeat of fascism, he was involved in attempts to reignite and invigorate Danish and Swedish fascism; he persevered until his death. His work for some 25 years after the end of the war offers insights into the gradual adaptation and transformations of his message to changing political circumstances and contexts, and particularly the role of conspiracist thinking in this process.

Lars M. Andersson is Senior Lecturer at the Department of History, Uppsala University. Andersson has mainly studied Swedish antisemitism and refugee policy, but has also published on contemporary history, counterfactual history, the image as a historical source, liability issues and moral debate in historical accounts on national socialism, migration and Jewish history. He is an editorial board member of *Historisk tidskrift* and *Nordisk Judaistik/ Scandinavian Jewish Studies*, co-editor of the *New Forum for Jewish Studies* series, *Uppsala Jewish Studies*, and since May 2022 editor in chief of *Personhistorisk tidskrift*. Andersson is member of the NORFAS steering committee and participating in the research project "Inception: The Birth of Nordic Fascism", based at Uppsala University.

Nicola Karcher (Østfold University College, Norway)
Oula Silvennoinen (University of Helsinki, Finland)
The Nordic Race and Its Enemies: Biographical Approaches to Conspiracist History

The idea that the so-called Nordic race is threatened by less worthy, lower or counter-races (*Gegenrassen*) has a long pedigree in the world of conspiracy-informed theorising. From the late 19th century onwards, such ideas enjoyed their heyday during the 1920s and 1930s. Race researchers, racist authors and academics like Rolf Nordenstreng, Kaarlo Hildén, Jon Alfred Mjøen, or the German trailblazer of the field Hans F. K. Günther, stressed in their writings the theme of the Nordic race being under constant, unrelenting pressure even in their home region. A transnational biographical approach to this type of conspiracist thinking is still lacking. This paper will investigate several of the leading conspiracist race theorists and their views of the Nordic race and their supposed antagonists in the interwar years and demonstrates how these views are still influential among the modern Nordic far right. We are looking for new methodological approaches to better understand the interplay between historizing narrative-building in weaving conspiracist theory.

Nicola Karcher is a historian and Associate Professor in Social Science at the Østfold University College, Norway and affiliate researcher at the History Department at Uppsala University. She has published articles and books in Norwegian, German, and English on the history of fascism, occupation history, antisemitism, and racism, particularly with respect to the Nordic countries. Karcher is co-head of the NORFAS steering committee and editor of the NORFAS-anthology *Nordic Fascism: Fragments of an Entangled History* together with Markus Lundström (Routledge, 2022). She is researcher in the research project "Inception: The Birth of Nordic Fascism", based at Uppsala University, which she developed together with Oula Silvennoinen.

Oula Silvennoinen is a historian, Research Fellow of the Academy of Finland, University of Helsinki, and affiliated researcher at the History Department at Uppsala University. His research interests include the history of policing and police institutions, the Holocaust, fascism, and the Waffen-SS in Finland, as well as the post-war politics of memory, on which he has published in Finnish, Swedish, German, English, Estonian, Ukrainian and Romanian. Silvennoinen is a frequent expert commentator on contemporary fascism and Finland's wartime history. Silvennoinen is co-head of the NORFAS steering committee and researcher in the research project "Inception: The Birth of Nordic Fascism", based at Uppsala University, which he developed together with Nicola Karcher.

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