

The Weaponization of Conspiracy Theories

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Abstract

Via widespread disinformation campaigns, populist politicians have weaponised various conspiracy theories for their own gain in recent years, disrupting contemporary politics. Few examples: In the US Donald Trump promoted the Deep State conspiracy theory for appealing to his supporters to act in his defence. In Russia, Vladimir Putin applied anti-Western conspiracy theories as a pretext for the invasion of Ukraine. In several Western European countries, the Eurabia conspiracy theory has been activated for stoking actions against those that are deemed being dangerous others. Studies have found conspiracy theories to be a catalyst for extremism.

The rapid rise of right-wing populist political parties coincided with the increased spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories. Populism has as now well-gone mainstream. It can thus be argued that we have entered the era of the populist – the conspiratorial populist. Both conspiracy theories and populism are now deeply integrated into contemporary democratic politics. Studies have shown that exposure to conspiracy theories decreases trust in government institutions. Thus, the increased spread of CTs can undermine democracy and social trust. It is therefore timely to explore how populists can weaponise contemporary conspiracy theories for their own political gain.

Keywords

Conspiracy theories, Eurabia, Deep State, Anti-Western, Europe, United States, Russia

Bio

Eirikur Bergmann is a Professor of Politics at Bifrost University in Iceland. Author of twelve academic books and numerous journal articles he writes mainly on Nationalism, Populism and Conspiracy Theories, and on Participatory Democracy. In 2020 Palgrave Macmillan published his book titled *Neo-Nationalism: The Rise of Nativist Populism*. Bergmann is also the author of three novels published in Icelandic.

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