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STUDY PROTOCOL

A comparative framework for explorative cross-country analysis of factors promoting and inhibiting conspiracy theories

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Abstract

Conspiracism challenges the foundation of democratic identity building. Conspiracism does not merely represent a specific political ideology but rather a distinct form of identity that promotes a simplistic good-evil dichotomy, undermining a pluralistic view of identities. Our theoretical considerations underpin the major role of political identity in political polarization. Empirical data also prove the major role of (political) identity in polarization. Furthermore, disinformation through conspiracist narratives, particularly prevalent in identity-driven controversies, can be identified as a major factor for mistrust towards democratic institutions. While polarization is not per se incompatible to democracy, conspiracist polarization poses a threat to democratic systems and discourse by a) abusing democracies epistemic indeterminacy and "social anomie", b) fostering prejudices and authoritarian solutions, and c) limiting the scope for action of democratic systems. We, therefore, identified three main fields of action that look promising when used combined: a) fostering debunking strategies, b) developing democratic resilience, c) facilitating democratic self-efficacy of citizens. We deem those essential in creating a positive, democratic identity. Building on our former theoretical insights, we are developing a comparative framework to observe the role of conspiracy thinking across different European countries. We aim to develop a methodology that not only compares the state of conspiracism across the case countries but also explores the role of the aforementioned, pre-existing,

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factors–information distribution, systemic factors of democratic resilience, and democratic self-efficacy/political-efficacy–in combatting conspiracy thinking. This framework is a standalone conceptual stance to research the connections between conspiracism and democracy.

Keywords
conspiracism, conspiracy theories, democracy, resilience, self-efficacy, democratic identity, democratic resilience, democratic efficacy



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1. Conspiracism and democracy

The relationship between democracy and conspiracism—here understood as an ideology which views politics and history primarily as determined by a web of secret conspiracies[1]—is obviously ambivalent: On the one hand, democracy itself creates favourable conditions for conspiracy narratives; on the other hand, there is an immense threat that conspiracy theories pose to democracy. We, however, identify a certain desideratum in the current state of research on conspiracism regarding its specific connection to democracy (cf. Hidalgo, 2022, p. 151). The comprehensive Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories, for example, contains a chapter about conspiracism in authoritarian regimes (Giry & Gürpinar, 2021) but none about conspiracism in democratic systems.

In this context, the fact that democracies facilitate the spread of conspiracy theories through their principles of freedom (e.g. freedom of speech, freedom of the press, etc.) and the extensive absence of censorship measures is only a superficial phenomenon. Taking a look at the general phenomenology of conspiracy theories, we rather can observe characteristics of conspiracy theories that suggest themselves as non-democratic or even anti-democratic—like friend-foe dichotomies, rejection of pluralism, or the spread of prejudices and discriminatory ideologies (Christoph, 2025 (forthcoming)). Precisely, democracies are mainly vulnerable to conspiracy myths in at least three interwoven areas, which they themselves conjure up to some extent.

1. First of all, as classical authors from Plato, Alexis de Tocqueville, John Dewey or Hannah Arendt to contemporary scholars like Chantal Mouffe, Judith Butler, Jacques Rancière or Bonnie Honig have stated in diverse manners, there is a fundamental tension between **democratic contingency, plurality**, or the need for political alternatives and, on the other hand, (metaphysical) claims of truth. Therefore, at least to a certain extent, modern mass democracies are at war with knowledge and expertise, so that their own epistemic dimension always remains vague and open. Conspiracy theories excessively exploit this democratic lack of universal intellectual orientation and thus tend to make necessary political discourses impossible, for example by rejecting factual knowledge or factuality as such (Christoph, 2022). Among the most evident vices and pathologies conspiracy ideologies imply for democracy, are e.g. misinformation (Bergmann, 2018; Bronner, 2013; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009), disorientation (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2020) and political radicalisation (Lee, 2020). Moreover, conspiracy theories primarily evoke their own power of persuasion by functioning similarly to a religious belief or maybe better: an agency of religious identity formation (Dyrendal *et al.*, 2019; Hidalgo, 2022). At the same time, as a "substitute religion" and resource for shaping a solid group identity, conspiracy theories are usually not accessible to fact-based debunking strategies but conversely show themselves to be capable of integrating fact checks into their own narratives.[2] One could also, according to Runciman, argue the inescapable gap between the democratic promise of equality and popular sovereignty and the powerful elites and informal connections that nevertheless exist in political practice which fuels the suspicions of conspiracy theorists. While in autocracies, at most the respective rulers develop a certain paranoia that conspiratorial forces want to get them, in democracies there is always a by no means marginal group that does not have the share of power and prosperity that it claims for itself. It is obvious that this group of subjectively or relatively disadvantaged citizens then accuses the supposedly unscrupulous conspiratorial minorities of having stolen this share from them (Runciman, 2018, 61 f.).

2. Second, democracies are **inherently uncertain** and therefore often provoke a desire for clarity and an authoritative truth because of their own epistemic and political ambiguity (Hidalgo, 2019). Thus, they may seem as such inadequate to answer pressing issues to problems of our shared so-called VUCA world (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous) (Mack *et al.*, 2016). Conspiracy theories counter this uncertainty with authoritarian solutions, which, however, contradict a modern understanding of democracy. Resilience to this uncertainty seems to be a promising and also very necessary solution to avoid the particular formation of individual and collective identities through conspiracy theories since the latter almost inevitably lead to a friend-foe dichotomy in the sense of Carl Schmitt. In this respect, conspiracism is obviously unable to create (democratic) compromises, an overlapping consensus or only a modus vivendi between its "believers" and "non-believers" and thus serve as an evident cause for an extremely destructive political polarisation (Klein, 2020). Paradoxically, the increase in conspiracy theories in this context corresponds to the empirical decline of genuine conspiracies prepared in secret, which would be for instance an indispensable prerequisite for a successful coup d'état based on surprise. Since the prospect of a successful coup d'état is smaller in established democracies due to the

[1] In this respect, it is necessary to distinguish between conspiracism/conspiracy ideology and secret agreements, cartels and empirical conspiracies. As already Karl Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies* pointed out (Popper, 2012, Chapter 14), conspiracy theories/ideologies generally underestimate the complexity of modern societies by claiming that social phenomena and events are entirely the intended result of mutually coordinated action. Hence, tackling conspiracism or conspiracy ideologies in favour of democracy is definitely not blind to the dangers posed to democracy by actual conspiracies.

[2] Compared to religions, however, the need for uniqueness—the claim to know things that others do not—is apparently higher among conspiracy theorists than among religious believers (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2017; Lantian *et al.*, 2017).

large number of power centres prevailing there, and since there are consequently hardly any coup attempts, the alleged conspirators never have to reveal their cards, and speculation about their existence is rife.

3. Last, but not least, conspiracy theories **narrow the corridors for (participatory) action** and decision-making-processes of political systems by losing sight of goal-oriented projects or by injecting non-goal-oriented resolutions into the system, thus threatening them from within (Christoph, 2022). In this respect, one response is apparently to enable citizens developing democratic self-efficacy, to enhance their trust in democratic institutions, to extend their political participation opportunities, and, finally, to lose their subjective feeling of political powerlessness. However, since many overly one-sided and under-complex understandings of democracy itself are widespread, which either overestimate the affinity of democracy to populism[3] or to a technocratic post-democracy[4], democratic self-efficacy is definitely not a self-perpetuating factor in tackling conspiracy myths. Instead, a precise distinction must be made between a self-efficacy that, on the one hand, keeps the constitutive self-contradictions of democracy in balance (Hidalgo, 2014) and supports a particular tolerance of ambiguity, and, one the other hand, a self-efficacy that rather unleashes democracy's well-known tendency towards self-destruction and autoimmunity (Derrida, 2005).

Proceeding from these three areas, it is apparently no coincidence that contemporary diagnoses of democratic backsliding (Daly, 2019; Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Kneuer, 2021; Knutsen *et al.*, 2024; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Mounk, 2018; Przeworski, 2019; Schäfer & Zürn, 2022) correspond with the widespread mistrust in democratic institutions, governments' communication, political authorities, or public media as well as with the increasing belief in conspiracy myths. In this respect, David Runciman Runciman (2018, 60 ff.) even sees a direct affinity between the empirically growing popularity of conspiracy myths (Olmsted, 2011; Uscinski & Parent, 2014; Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018)[5] and the long-established process of the creeping erosion of popular sovereignty. In Runciman's view, the more abstruse the resulting search for scapegoats for the myriads of unresolved social problems becomes, the more obvious it is that the rampant conspiracy narratives are a symptom of widespread uncertainty about where the 'real' enemy of democracy actually sits.

In sum, it can be stated that the ambivalent relation between democracy and conspiracism can be highlighted by the self-contradictions, paradoxes and aporias of democracy itself. In this regard, democracies tend to produce the intellectual and spiritual vacuum in which conspiracy theories can nestle. Once again similar to religions, conspiracy ideologies are able to function as spiritual authorities which promise the often politically atomised individuals not only intellectual orientation and meaning but also a collective identity and a way out of (subjectively perceived) powerlessness. Moreover, conspiracy myths and narratives are predestined to provide the "impossible knowledge" (Hristov, 2019) that many democratic citizens desire whenever they are tired of the moral and normative uncertainty and ambiguity the democratic system cultivates.

In this respect, democracies are without any doubt a favourable place for conspiracy ideologies to flourish. However, it should not be overlooked that democracy, at least against the backdrop of its own complexity, provides important forces to strengthen its resilience to conspiracism and thus its own resilience by fostering tolerance of ambiguity, complexity understanding, dealing and decision-making with uncertainty, or orientation in volatile situation. In contrast to this, underestimating these self-healing powers of democracy and combating conspiracism by authoritarian means would only benefit anti-democratic attitudes and general reliance on authoritarian solutions. Consequently, our diagnosis, which emphasises the high affinities between democracy and conspiracy theories, should not lead to the conclusion that conspiracy myths and narratives are best tackled with rather undemocratic measures as bans, censorship, and political pressure. Instead, the experience of democratic self-efficacy and participation is supposed to prepare citizens to improve their judgement, actively exercise their rights of co-determination and to resist the superficial explanatory power of conspiracy ideologies.

2. Why conspiracy ideologies pose a serious threat to democracies and should be tackled

At first glance, it might seem reasonable to assume that the content of conspiracy theories, like their unhindered dissemination, is protected by constitutional rights to freedom of belief, freedom of expression and freedom of the press. In this respect, it must indeed be emphasised that belief in conspiracy ideologies and conspiracy myths does not constitute an offence that would normally be punishable under criminal law, nor does the dissemination and/or public expression of such narratives. Measures such as those taken in Hungary during the Corona pandemic, when Act No. XII/2020 on protection against the coronavirus, which included long prison sentences for spreading false information about the pandemic, therefore run a high risk of overstepping the boundaries of the democratic

[3] In this respect, we have to be aware of some typical structural analogies between populism and conspiracy theories (cf. Bartlett & Miller, 2010; Bergmann, 2018; Bergmann & Butter, 2020; Van Prooijen *et al.*, 2015), e.g. the fundamental distinction between good and evil, i.e. a manipulated people and a corrupt elite (cf. Biddlestone *et al.*, 2020; van Eck Duymaer van Twist & Newcombe, 2018), anti-pluralism (Müller, 2016) or also a deep mistrust in legal institutions and the rule of law as necessary boundaries of popular sovereignty and majority rule (Hidalgo, 2022)

[4] Paradoxically, conspiracy theories apart from populism also seem to have a preference for expertocracy or post-democracy. There is at least evidence in empirical research for this. A common ground, therefore, seems to be the rejection of representative democracy (Küppers, 2024).

[5] Other studies speak rather about a consistently high level of conspiracy theories over time (Uscinski *et al.*, 2022).

rule of law and being instrumentalised to generally ban critical and oppositional opinions (Cseresnyés, 2020). Accordingly, methods for effectively combating conspiracy ideologies must fundamentally respect the individual and collective right to freedom of belief, expression and the press.

This is another reason why self-regulation by providers, online platforms and public communication channels with regard to restricting the presentation and dissemination of conspiracy ideologies is highly advisable, but censorship measures in the narrower sense should be avoided as far as possible. As already mentioned, this is because, on the one hand, censorship contradicts the self-logic and self-healing powers of democracy and performatively expresses mistrust in democratic processes and procedures; on the other hand, conspiracy theorists would mostly see censorship as confirmation of their views and beliefs, i.e. as an obvious attempt by the conspirators to sweep the 'truth' under the carpet. In addition, many conspiracy narratives circulating in society fall into the realm of private fantasies and subjective idiosyncrasies, whereas they are actually relatively harmless from a political point of view.[6] Tackling conspiracy theories on the policy level is therefore only really appropriate and effective once they reach a certain scale, namely when they have become politically influential and relevant as conspiracy *ideologies* in the sense of Karl Popper,[7] or at least show the potential for such political relevance.

However, once they reach a certain scale, conspiracy theories and ideologies definitely become harmful to democracy, as they almost inevitably prevent the conditions necessary for democratic debate in the form of constructive exchange or competition between arguments and interests. Conspiracy myths that not only claim to expose alleged conspiratorial agreements between secret circles and corrupt elites, but also implicitly involve larger groups and political parties or even entire governments, societies and peoples in a conspiracy,[8] necessarily aim to discredit democratic institutions and procedures as such. After all, such a conspiracy could never take place if democratic decision-making procedures and control mechanisms were still intact. On the other hand, those who consider a conspiracy to be possible on the scale outlined above, i. e. the involvement of entire population groups and institutions, are at the same time expressing their deep mistrust of democracy and, at least to some extent, their willingness to resort to undemocratic, authoritarian means to combat the conspiracy, since, according to the premises of the conspiracy, democracy has already proven to be defenceless. Its *political* dimension is also what makes the spread of a conspiracy *mentality* (Imhoff, 2024; Imhoff *et al.*, 2022) a massive problem for democracy. Admittedly, a general endorsement of a conspiratorial worldview that lurks behind the conspiracy mentality can, in principle, do without any specific ideological connotations and not even raise the difficult question of 'true' or 'false' beliefs. However, the general prejudices against politically powerful groups, which are mainly associated with a conspiracy mentality and a belief in the power of secret forces (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014), threaten to provoke a fatal immunisation effect against any kind of empirical evidence. Even if specific conspiracy narratives have already been refuted in individual cases, the relatively stable political opposition stance of conspiracy believers remains completely unaffected. Since, from the latter's point of view, those in power are ultimately capable of any 'misdeed', it is no longer important for the confirmation of their own perception of conspiracies whether an accusation turns out to be true or false. Instead, the conspiracy mentality simply generates the next narrative to accuse the allegedly conspiratorial elites, without any need for evidence. The central, constitutive idea of popular sovereignty, that in a democracy, appropriately authorised groups can legitimately make collectively binding decisions, is thus clearly counteracted, and the political struggle between those in power and the opposition tends to be shifted out of democratic institutions.

Apart from that, conspiracy ideologies stand in sharp contrast to democratic principles for another reason: While conspiracy theorists usually demand freedom of opinion and belief for themselves (even though, based on their own premises, they should not be surprised if the 'conspirators' deny them this freedom), they generally question the legitimacy of the political positions of anyone who does not believe in a conspiracy as they do. This means that conspiracy theorists/ideologists are mostly opposed to the democratic principles of plurality and tolerance and, in a dogmatic manner, only allow their own beliefs to exist.

In order to clarify both the necessity and legitimacy of democratic countermeasures to conspiracy ideologies at the end of this section, it is appropriate to return to the structural similarities and differences between conspiracy myths and religious beliefs. Here, in addition to the parallels already mentioned in Section 1 (e.g. identity formation,[9] intellectual orientation, overcoming feelings of powerlessness[10] and dealing with uncertainty), it should also be emphasised that conspiracy ideologies and religions are, in principle, both beyond empirical verification, i.e. their (political) effectiveness does not depend on the empirical verifiability (or falsifiability) of their assumptions. The comparison with religions, however, sheds light on why tolerance towards conspiracy ideologies must be limited in democracies.

In this context, it should be stressed that conspiracy ideologies can essentially be reduced to a *negative, potentially destructive*

[6] Like i.e. conspiracy theories about concerning Elvis Presley to be alive, respectively Paul McCartney being dead; conspiracy theories about the real authorship behind William Shakespeare; or—even though implying a big-scale cover up—the flat earth theory.

[7] See FN 1.

[8] Examples include conspiracy ideologies such as the great replacement (Camus, 2024), Jewish world domination, the great reset (cf. Jones, 2022; Schwab & Malleret, 2020), or also the deep state in the United States, which, according to QAnon, must be vehemently opposed (cf. Miller, 2023).

[9] See Biddlestone *et al.* Biddlestone *et al.* (2021).

[10] See Blanuša and Hristov (2020, 72–73).

form of religious belief. They are negative because, firstly, conspiracy myths normally do not offer any positive message of salvation or redemption and simply promise that all problems will resolve themselves if only the conspiracy is uncovered and rendered harmless. They reduce complex societal interdependencies down to simple solutions, which makes them emotionally and cognitively compatible, especially in situations of crisis. Secondly, because, unlike religions, conspiracy ideologies inevitably lead to a destructive friend-foe dichotomy instead of providing positive resources for balance, compromise and solidarity between conflicting political camps;[11] this contradicts democracy's need for tolerance of ambiguity and does—in turn—promote polarization. One could additionally mention the psycho-dynamic mechanism of projectivity here via which inner conflicts are turned into external warding-off mechanisms. Through this, more clear but also more reprehensible images of the enemy are constructed. Thirdly they show negative tendencies, because conspiracy ideologies separate and isolate their believers from other faith communities instead of (also) opening up a constructive space for encounter and interreligious dialogue and thus for plurality and diversity of belief (Hidalgo, 2022).

As a purely negative belief, it is virtually impossible for conspiracy ideologies to function as a kind of positive complementary counterweight to democracy, as political theory often attributes to religions. Instead, there is a striking proximity between conspiracy narratives and structural anti-Semitism, whereby anti-Semitism, following Horkheimer and Adorno (2022), must also be understood as an extremely negative form of belief.

As an enormously negative, highly polarising and destructive form of religious belief, which is characterised by an inherent, blanket mistrust of democratic institutions and political elites and appears to make solution-oriented debates and discussions impossible, conspiracy ideologies as seen in democracy must be tackled at different levels. The specific measures to be taken to defuse and, at best, neutralise conspiracy ideologies depend, on the one hand, on the scope available under the democratic rule of law and, on the other hand, on the conspiracy theories themselves: the more authoritarian, dogmatic, uncompromising and, overall, extremist the latter are, the more democracy must, of course, defend itself against them. The countermeasures must be equally grounded in democratic theory and suitable for practical democratic application, and only resort to criminal law in appropriate (exceptional) cases. The most important goal is therefore to promote resilience to conspiracy ideologies and, ideally, to create an inclusive democratic *counter-identity* that stands out positively from the destructively polarising conspiracy mentality.

However, respect for the rule of law and proportionality are not the only important factors in promoting democratic resilience against conspiracy ideologies. At the end of this section, attention should also be paid to a particular paradox of democracy itself. As already seen in Section 1, democracy, due to its contradictory principles that need to be balanced (Hidalgo, 2019), is particularly vulnerable to conspiracy ideologies mobilising the self-destructive mechanisms of popular sovereignty. This makes the temptation to launch all countermeasures using non-democratic means all the greater. In contrast, the rest of this article will stick with the idea of democracy's *self-efficacy*. In principle, though, this self-efficacy also includes the autoimmune forces of democracy we mentioned earlier. In other words, we will carefully distinguish between democracy's self-healing powers and the resources it has that only threaten to push it deeper into the vortex of conspiracy ideologies. It is important to remain sensitive to this fundamental ambivalence of democracy in the following sections.

3 Preface and methodological approach inside the project TaCT-FoRSED

TaCT-FoRSED is an EU-funded research project on the interrelations between democratic identities and conspiracy theories, researching in how far the latter are destructive to democracy and how they can be combated. The overarching aim of this research project is to identify factors that correlate negatively with the prevalence of conspiracy theories. Thereby we mean, as will be further conceptualised in the next chapter, the interrelations between individual conspiracy beliefs and systemic influence of them via meso-level transmissions (narratives, actors). Our analytical focus thereby lies on the analysis of macro level outputs. As we recognise conspiracy theories to be negative resources to democratic societies, factors inhibiting them could be used to extract democratic resources and to find ways to strengthen them as measures for tackling conspiracy theories. Our focus will thereby lie on the political system as we expect the most promising outcomes there. We will substantiate that assumption later on. We will focus on factors that positively correlate with democratic identity, especially with a democratic kind of resilience and a democratic kind of self-efficacy, in order to inhibit belief in conspiracy theories. The goal is to establish a framework that can exploratively identify those factors and give indication of their influence on the prevalence of conspiracy theories. We, however, will include factors from other subsystems, e. g. civil society, economy etc. that also deem promising in our analysis.

In reverse, we expect the research conducted via this framework to also produce *positive* factors that in fact do promote the prevalence of conspiracy theories—e. g. by conspiracy theories' known one-sidedness in questions of democratic trade-offs or their lack of tolerance of ambiguity—in a given society. The aim is to understand differences and similarities in conspiracism across the different countries, taking into consideration social, cultural and political differences. Those findings might also be used to dismantle those factors that encourage conspiracy theories which we which we identify as structures that erode a positive democratic identity-building process.

As the first part in doing so and by using this first version of our comparative framework, we will take a look at the systemic

[11] On the political ambivalence of religions in this regard, see, for example, Maoz and Henderson (2020) and Haynes (2024).

level of European societies under the threat of conspiracism; a study with eight case countries included will be conducted. In studies we evaluated we find a certain gap in combining systemic and individual levels of explained variables as well as explanatory variables. Most studies we could analyse focus mainly on the systemic or the individual level. We, therefore, will not only take into account factors on the macro level, but also data on the micro level. We will also try to close a gap between the two, taking into account the meso level which we will model in this framework, as a potential measure to explain relationships between the systemic (macro) and individual (micro) level. We will call the framework, therefore, macro-centred but it will not restrain solely to an analysis of only political (societal, cultural, economic...) systems. While we will take into account the interrelation between the three layers; mostly with modelling our explained variable, we find the analysis of this interrelation to be quite useful. We will furthermore try to take into account data on all three layers—but are somehow dependent on existing data sets and limits of experimental work in social research.

For an operationalisation of this framework, we will first model our explained variable, the prevalence of conspiracy theories in a given society on the different levels (macro, meso, micro). We will go on by defining the core concepts that lay behind the three focus areas of our explanatory variables: democratic identity, democratic resilience, and democratic (self-)efficacy. After this basic clarification of terms, this paper will assess variables and items that may prove useful for explaining the prevalence of conspiracy theories—either from a pre-existing data or a secondary analysis thereof or deduced from our democratic theoretical assumptions. For this operationalisation, we will take into account existing studies in quantitative and qualitative research with a focus on conspiracy theories and neighbouring topics. A final test for the applicability of the framework will, of course, be the conduction of our comparative case study that may possibly lead to changes in the framework in a second version.

The framework will rely on the one hand on the use of data still to be collected from Open-Source Intelligence (OSI) information, as on hermeneutically and qualitatively analysable data on conspiracy theories and concrete conspiracist narratives in the case countries, on the other hand on quantitative data collected by *Project Name to be Inserted* and on the secondary analysis of other pre-existing data. This framework therefore uses a qualitatively driven mixed-methods approach on this topic. The framework will mostly be suitable for medium-N case studies in which a balanced approach between variable- and case-comparison might be most feasible for a trade-off of deep-dive into cases, thereby generating hypotheses, and an always limited amount of time and resources for testing these.

We, in spite of the study later conducted focusing on European societies, try to deliver a comparative approach that can be used on a broad, cross-cultural level and may of course be altered and developed in the process of its application. We will use this framework to do a country case study of eight case countries in Western, Central, and Eastern Europe. Specifically, we will look at the distinct types of democracies in the case countries by analysing their respective political communities, regimes and authorities. These macro level conditions will be related to developments on the individual level by investigating the different ways democratic identities, resilience and self-efficacy manifest in the case countries. At the same time we will consider the prevalence of conspiracy mentality and belief in each country. On the meso level we will look at conspiracy narratives as well as groups and organizations influencing their dissemination. Bringing the analysis back to the macro level, the political outcomes of these phenomena in the form of election results and policy decisions will be interpreted in the context of the researched country specific macro level conditions and individual level developments. A more detailed breakdown of measurements and units of analysis can be found in the following chapter. This analytic strategy will result in a descriptive comparison of different configurations that democracies and conspiracy theories can have (Table 1).

The framework presented here shall be designed as a robust methodology that may be used in different comparative case-studies, using a Most Similar Systems Design as well as a Most Different Systems Design. It, however, might well be that the framework should need to be extended or altered for a broader opening of cases as it will be applied on quite similar case countries in Europe. In this we will test our assumptions on the identity-related basis of conspiracism, consider established concepts in conspiracy research, and deduce hypotheses for further research inside and outside the EU project *Project Name to be Inserted*. We think our findings will particularly be of interest for further empirical research as well as for policy briefings looking for answers on a systemic level. We will also use insights gathered in this country case study for interviews to be conducted with former conspiracy believers as a second study directly after this case study.

4 Modelling the prevalence of conspiracy theories

As we have found, conspiracy theories prove to have a negative influence on modern democracies. Democratic identities are profoundly prone to erosion by conspiracy theories; on the other hand, our hypothesis is, that strong democratic binds, amongst others, can prevent conspiracy theories to spread. We, however, have to find instruments to measure the prevalence, or pervasiveness, of conspiracy theories in a given society. By the term prevalence we understand the strength, distribution, effectiveness, expression of those conspiracy theories, in a nutshell:

Table 1. Analytic Strategy Overview of the Interrelation Between Democracy and Conspiracism.

Modus of democracy	Election results and policies
prevalence / types of D-IRE	prevalence of CMQ and B

what political impact do conspiracy theories have? There are at least two conflicting approaches to measuring conspiracism by statistical means (Figure 1):

First, we have the aforementioned approach of conspiracy mentality. The concept of conspiracy mentality is not meant to measure the amount of people believing in actual conspiracy theories. It is more an approach towards the general thought structure and psychological dispositions that lead to conspiracy theories being spread and believed. The concept, originally invented from Moscovici (1987) (cf. Imhoff & Decker, 2013) in the 1980s, however had a renaissance in empirical science in the last few years. This is no coincidence, as it provides a measurement that can—compared to other methods—be used relatively context-independent from cultural and political preconceptions. It is, thus, a good method to measure a general disposition for conspiracism with a certain level of cross-cultural sensibility. However, the concept of conspiracy mentality as a generalised political attitude must be sharply divided from an overall scepticism which is not necessarily deviant in a democratic society (Stojanov & Halberstadt, 2019, 217–218).

Second, there is the methodological concept of measuring conspiracy belief. Other than conspiracy mentality, it tries to measure a manifest belief in one or more conspiracy theories. While this has some downsides compared to the first approach—mostly the fact that this is highly dependent on the political and societal environment in which it takes place, saying that a certain conspiracist narrative in one country may be relatively unknown in another—it also has some advantages for our research design: these manifest tendencies seem far more reliable than the delicate concept of a predisposition for conspiracism. It seems far easier to analyse the effect of manifest conspiracy beliefs on public policy than it would be for conspiracy mentality. Also, being non-independent, we find it to be highly interesting to also explore narrative differences, in terms of content, between conspiracy theories in the target countries as the prevalence of different conspiracy theories might also have an effect on conspiracy theories' impact on the political system.

The first concept, the one of conspiracy mentality, has reached a certain degree of standardization over the last few years, resulting in the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (CMQ) (Bruder *et al.*, 2013) and the Conspiracy Mentality Scale (CMS) (Stojanov & Halberstadt, 2019). While the former, measuring only five items, is quite easy to handle, the latter tries to close the methodological gap between generalised conspiracy mentality and specific conspiracy beliefs, resulting in a questionnaire with more abstract versions of conspiracy theories.

The concept of measuring conspiracy beliefs on the other hand seems less standardised. There can be reached some level of standardisation inside a series of studies (e.g. the *Mitte-Studien* in Germany) to run longitudinal studies. Also, Brotherton *et al.* (2013) proposed a Generic Conspiracist Beliefs scale (GCB) that is somehow a standardisation and generalisation of the concepts. The measure of this can, however, by its very nature of measuring specific conspiracy beliefs not that easy be conducted cross-culturally. The questionnaire of Stojanov & Halberstadt seems to have this problem of being culture-related as well, but in a smaller amount.

This dichotomy is, however, a simplification of the concepts, inventories, and scales used in quantitative analysis. There are over a dozen of questionnaires proposed to measure conspiracy theories in the last few years (and this is as of 2019). Apart from the different underlying concepts (mostly conspiracy mentality vs. conspiracy belief, but other concepts are used as well), they can be divided whether they measure generic forms of beliefs or rather specific ones. The line in between, however, is blurred.

Despite the problems and limitations of both conceptions, they seem to be useful to indicate the prevalence of conspiracy theories in a society. We evaluate it to be quite useful to not decide

Questionnaire	Acronym	Original study	Generic form of beliefs?	Used in studies[a]
Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale	GCBS	Brotherton et al., 2013	Yes	33
Belief in Conspiracy Theories Inventory	BCTI	Swami et al., 2010	No	27
Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire	CMQ	Bruder et al., 2013	Yes	22
Conspiracy Theory Belief Scale	CTBS	Douglas and Sutton, 2011	No	8
Generalized Conspiracy Belief Scale	–	Rose, 2017	Yes	6
Specific Conspiracy Belief Scale	–	Rose, 2017	No	6
Conspiracy Theory Questionnaire	CTQ	Darwin et al., 2011	Yes	5
One-Item Conspiracy Measure	OICM	Lantian et al., 2016	Yes	5
Flexible Inventory of Conspiracy Suspicions	FICS	Wood, 2017	No	3
General Measure of Conspiracism	GMC	Drinkwater et al., 2012	Yes	3
Conspiracy Beliefs Scale[b]	CBS	Kumareswaran, 2014	No	2
Endorsement of Specific Conspiracy Theories	ESCT	Irwin et al., 2015	No	1
Belief in Commercial Conspiracy Theories Inventory	–	Furnham, 2013	No	1

[a] *Including multi-study papers.*
[b] *Currently unpublished.*

Figure 1. Overview of inventories used in conspiracism research as of 2019 (Goreis & Voracek, 2019, p. 5).

between one or the other conception on measuring conspiracy theories but taking into account both conceptions and measurements to model our explained variable on the micro-level, meaning the distribution of conspiracy theories in individuals. There can actually be advantages of conceptualising conspiracy belief in slightly different ways and combining them—as Dagnall *et al.* (2023) did when taking into account the aforementioned Conspiracy Mentality Scale (CMS), the Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories scale (BCT) and the Single-Item Conspiracy Belief Scale (SCBS). It might as well be interesting to evaluate differences between the two conceptions in the case studies—of course given the very limited comparability of the collected data.

Apart from the fact that the use of a generic vs. a specific measure may or may not be clearly defined, there are also concepts that intentionally try to resolve this dichotomy. Schlipphak *et al.* (Schlipphak *et al.*, 2021) proposed a study design where they were able to survey conspiracy beliefs that were not too abstract to be understood by the respondents but still get a level of abstraction. They clustered the specific conspiracy theories they were enquiring by the type of conspirator that plays the role of a villain in those conspiracy theories. Therefore, they surveyed Israel-related, Russia-related, and US-related conspiracy theories. Such a form of clustering—not only by the possible actors, but by other characteristics of the given conspiracy theories—could be helpful to close the gap between specific (and therefore more reliable but context-dependent) and generic (and therefore independent but less reliable/selective) quantitative research.

This also builds a bridge to look more closely to country specifics in the characteristics of given conspiracy theories (Table 2). For we do not have the feeling that a quantitative-only approach to the measure of the prevalence conspiracy theories brings satisfactory results. At this point, the conception given in the measure of conspiracy beliefs additionally gives us a bridge to reach the meso-level of our variable. We consider the presence and dissemination of specific conspiracy theories and narratives to the middle layer of our explained variable. The measure of this level will have to be done via a hermeneutic approach, assessing the most widespread conspiracist narratives prevalent in a given case country. They may not only be assessed via this hermeneutical approach, which has its very own pitfalls, but also by analysing the aggregated actors of conspiracism in the case country: groups, networks or more institutionalised organisations (Yendell *et al.*, 2021, p. 25). In a reference case country that will not be analysed in the actual study like the USA, these could include actors and narratives like the QAnon movement, groups of 9/11 truthers (but also including actual organisations in a narrower sense like *Architects & Engineers for 9/11 Truth*), conspiracist networks inside the major parties, or also networks around single major proponents of conspiracy theories that gather a wider audience, e. g. Alex Jones or Tucker Carlson. This will most likely involve strategic actors as the ones mentioned above (parties, pressure groups, etc.), acting rational and exploiting conspiracist narratives strategically; but also non-strategic resonance chambers (e.g. online channels, 'alternative media') that tend to stabilise the prevalence of conspiracism in societies.

Table 2. The Three Layers of Prevalence of Conspiracy Theories (Micro, Meso, Macro).

Level	Scope of analysis	Examples
Micro	Individuals	Measures of conspiracy mentality or conspiracy belief
Meso	Narratives and organisations, aggregated individuals	Predominant narratives, political parties, civil society groups, informal networks
Macro	Systemic influence	Influence on elections, influence on political decisions

These close the gap to the macro level of our analysis which is of the most importance for our study. On this level we will, rather than only looking at the level of distribution, analyse how effective those conspiracy theories are on a systemic level. This means their actual influence on different subsystems of the case country, mainly—but not limited to—the political subsystem. Which role do conspiracy theories play in the results of national elections, are they getting effective in operational politics or might they even reach a hegemonic degree of influence over politics and political culture in the case country? Taking into consideration existing case studies (e.g. Butter & Knight, 2020; Önnerfors & Krouwel, 2021), statistical data, as well as other Open-Source Intelligence (OSI) resources, we will draw a mostly descriptive comparison on this level to shape the format of this central point of the explained variable.

The prevalence of conspiracy theories can be described as a syndrome that combines the levels of the conspiracist pattern in our analysis. This conspiracist pattern—or the prevalence of conspiracy theories—is viewed as contrasted to a democratic pattern, described in the following part 4. The prevalence of conspiracism, therefore, serves as an analytical bracket to analyse multi-level effects of conspiracism.

5 What's what: Core resources for democracy

In a further—explorative—step, we will model the explanatory variables that seem most promising to us. As we already explained, our focus thereby lies on the political system. From a political systems theory point of view, the political system constitutes one of many subsystems of society. In Talcott Parsons' action theory systematisation, the political system constitutes a subsystem of society mainly concerned with the "procedural rules" Parsons (1977, p. 186) and the authorisation of "collective action" Parsons (1977, p. 187) in a society, representing the goal-attainment function in his AGIL scheme. This framework will not stick too close to Parsons' action theory approach on society using it for reduction of complexity; it will rather use his schematic view on the analysis of society for setting up a logical structure for the analysis

of possible explanatory variables for the prevalence of conspiracy theories in a society. We will thereby not restrict to a view only on the political system, but we see the political system as most promising when explaining our identity-based approach on conspiracy theories.

The political system itself can, staying with systems theory, according to David Easton be subdivided in three core political objects that are for themselves dependent on support: the political community, the regime, and the authorities (Easton, 1979, p. 172). Those political objects can be coordinated with the three factors of greatest interest we have identified for inhibiting conspiracy theories: democratic identity, democratic resilience, and democratic (self-)efficacy. We will in the next steps explain how they correspond with Easton's subdivisions of the political system. We will, furthermore, give an overview on what we understand by these three concepts as they are, from our point of view, not quite self-explanatory. This lays the foundation for an operationalisation of the concepts in the following chapter of the framework.

2.1 What's democratic identity?

The first political object of Easton is the political community. Easton understands a political community as consisting of "members seen as a group of persons bound together by a political division of labour" (Easton, 1979, p. 177). While for him it is not necessary that they actually are a group or that they have a sense of being in a group together, there has to be some sense of community. For not feeling as a part of the community can lead to political alienation or in the last resort the end of the political community (Easton, 1979, 177–179). Easton sees the "[s]ense of political community" as an "indicator of the degree of cohesion in the division of political labor and thereby one measure of attachment for the political community" (Easton, 1979, p. 184).

We can easily coordinate Easton's concept of political community as the first subsystem of politics with the conception of what we understand as democratic identity. There have, however, over the last years been several tries to conceptualise democratic identity, either as a European identity, in the sense of a homogeneity of the body politic, or as a consensus about a set of core values while accepting differing political points of view (Bein, 2023, 18–20). While the first approach seems to narrow (or even thin) for our framework, the second approach of maximum homogeneity is contradictory of our understanding of democracy. The latter approach seems to be most congruent with our understanding of democracy as being a process of trade-offs that necessarily can't (and shouldn't) be decided inside the democratic system.

There have been some key publications in recent years on how to conceptualise this meaning of democratic identity (Bein, 2022a; Bein, 2022b; Bein, 2023; Bein, 2025; Gutmann, 2003; Heidenreich, 2014; Hidalgo, 2020). As Hidalgo (2019, p. 265), in recourse to his antinomies or trade-offs of democracy, points this out: "First, the implausibility to define the concept of democracy unequivocally; and second, the emphasis on democracy's multiple identities." Bein in his 2023 Monography further elaborates this conception, seeing democratic identity on an individual level as acknowledging the legitimacy of others' political ambitions and accepting one's own limitation in terms of claim for power (113). On a macro-level, he defines collective democratic identity as the permeability of the political system for different political identities, mechanisms of balancing those, also including the processes and institutions undertaking this (Bein, 2023, p. 113). Or as Easton put it in 1979 already under the concept of political community, there is a "plurality of political relationships […] through which the political objectives of the system are pursued" (177). He later also adds that, "if a sense of community fails to emerge and deepen over time […] it may leave a system extremely vulnerable to stress" (Easton, 1979, p. 187).

This is, we would argue, one of the processes we see at the moment in the emergence of conspiracy theories and their influence on politics. Not anticipating the empirical evaluation, we can see an increase of the erosion of pluralism and democratic identity going hand-in-hand with the emergence of conspiracy theories. We would, therefore, argue that a strong democratic identity, meaning the acceptance of other identifications and concepts of democracy, would play a vital role in inhibiting conspiracy theories.

We do, on the other hand, see of course that this might be a two-way street. While we expect a strong democratic identity to be a negative factor for the prevalence of conspiracy theories, conspiracy theories themselves could have a negative influence on democratic identity—in this sense, they are communicating vessels. To sort this out, we will, in the analysis of this particular topic have to have an eye mostly on the emergence of new conspiracy theories (e.g. COVID-19 related ones) and assessments of democratic identities before and after the spread of new conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy theories exactly undermine the role of identities and the sense of belonging in democracies which are crucial for facilitating constructive political participation in democratic societies. On the one hand, the belief in conspiracy theories inevitably results in a permanent fragmentation of cultural, social and political identities, since a high number of such conspiracy myths and narratives as e. g. the "great reset to capture democratic governances", the "great population exchange", the "Islamisation of the Western world" (aka "Eurabia" theory), the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" or several White genocide conspiracy theories implicitly aim to blame and to exclude ethnic, religious and cultural minorities as well as to prevent their political emancipation and integration. Hence, conspiracy theories are one of the biggest barriers that the traditional discrimination of certain groups (among these above all migrants and LGBTIQ+ collectives) comes to an end and that the same groups become able to be actively and meaningfully engaged in democratic participation. In this context, it is much more than a coincidence that conspiracy

theories often emphasise the alleged power of actually powerless groups, religious, ethnic and cultural minorities (Nera *et al.*, 2021) to ascribe the counter-conspirators a politically powerful role and even the legitimacy to maintain their existing social privileges.

On the other hand, conspiracy theories performatively provoke a simplistic good-evil-dichotomy and therefore necessarily lead to an extreme political polarization and the disregard for pluralistic views and values, individual and collective rights. If the pandemic has highlighted the importance of communities, mutual assistance and solidarity particularly in times of uncertainty, conspiracy theories that usually deny consensus opinion and are most popular in times of crises (Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017), are working against any common sense and especially against the general social feeling that everyone belongs to one and the same (democratic) group, regardless of the diversity of society, which would be the prerequisite for being able to form a community together. Moreover, as many conspiracy theories relate to supposed clandestine government plans and elaborate murder plots, they are obviously able to destroy any political trust in democratically elected governments (Aupers, 2012; Enders, 2019).

Finally, conspiracy theories paradoxically attack democracy, the motivation for democratic participation and the intention to engage in politics from two flanks: Since trust in conspiracy theories is usually accompanied by distrust of democratic institutions (Miller *et al.*, 2016; Moore, 2017; Moore, 2018; Renard, 2015), the followers of conspiracy theories are obviously threatened to fall into political apathy and passivity (Jolley & Douglas, 2014), provided that they share the impression of individual and collective powerlessness (cf. Adorno *et al.*, 1967; Blanuša & Hristov, 2020, 72 f.) and are convinced that the entire democratic system is corrupt and incapable of reform. But even if conspiracy theories "inspire collective action and social change attempts, especially in reaction to threatening events" (Jolley *et al.*, 2020, p. 232), the attempts to organise resistance and protest against the (alleged) conspirators (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014), which may subjectively speak in favour of saving democracy, is objectively in danger of damaging the idea of democracy as such. This becomes immediately evident as a result of the scapegoat function that characterises all intergroup conspiracy theories whenever accusing certain individuals and minorities of being responsible for crises and anxiety-provoking events (Moscovici, 1987). While this function can indeed strengthen the collective identity and homogeneity among the conspiracy believers, it is at the same time a fundamental contradiction to individual rights and democratic pluralism.

5.2 What do we mean by democratic resilience?

The second political object Easton sets up, he calls the regime. With regime he means constitutional or procedural rules for political life (Easton, 1979, 190–191). We can clearly see how the concept he calls the regime is strongly intertwined with his concept of political community, but also with our conception of democratic identity. He further defines the regime as "those parts of the established expectations in political life that may seldom be envisaged as part of a constitution" (Easton, 1979, p. 193) and also "some minimal agreement, or at least acquiescence, among the politically relevant members about the broad values within the context of which outputs would be acceptable" (Easton, 1979, p. 195). More than the concept of democratic identity we just described this second political object is oriented on values and norms—not merely on the acceptance of one other's values and norms.

We can coordinate this with the conception we would describe as democratic resilience. As the concept of resilience itself is quite dazzling in its use in science, we intend to develop our own concept of what we call democratic resilience. The concept, in fact coming from material science, originally meant the capability of a material to regain its original shape after deformation (Bröckling, 2017). It was, however, popularised in the 1980's in psychological science mostly by the Works of Emmy Werner in a longitudinal study on children in Hawaii (Werner, 1989; Werner & Smith, 1982). Werner seems to conceptualise resilience mostly as a counterfactor to psychosocial vulnerability and risk (Werner, 1989). This individual concept might also be suitable to be applied on societal contexts. Graefe (2021) sees the concept of societal resilience as a contrasting concept to societal transformation in reaction to external or internal stressors. Resilience in this sense can be used as a measure to trigger capacity to act as well as systemic maintenance (Graefe, 2021, p. 28). In political science, Merkel in 2023 also coined the specific phrase of *democratic resilience*. He sees democratic resilience as the ability of a democratic system to withstand internal as well as external stressors, to react to crises without giving up core democratic values or structures (Merkel, 2023, p. 99). This means, in a given democratic society there are democratic core structures, values and/or institutions that have to be upheld for systemic coherence. Or as Easton (1979, p. 194) puts it: "if the antagonists over [a] specific issue could operate on any value assumptions at all, they might also be involved in a much deeper struggle over fundamental orientations. Each issue would be transformed into a deep cleavage about a whole way of life […]". There has to be an agreement between the conflicting parties on what issues are at stake, and which issues might a priori be agreed on. Democratic resilience in this sense could also be understood as a counterpart of what Decker *et al.* in their research describe as the *authoritarian syndrome* (Decker *et al.*, 2020, p. 179). They describe it as a combination of sado-masochism and projectivity (Decker *et al.*, 2020, p. 196) that could be described as a form of *negative resilience*. So to say, the items used in this study could later on be correlated negatively with our conception of democratic resilience.

The understanding of these abilities and inabilities gives us a first grasp of what we understand as democratic resilience. It, however, needs further refinement to operationalise it. An approach for this is given to us by Rossmeissl (2021) who developed a trifold of resilience on a societal level, in his application for resilient cities and city communities. For him, resilience comprises of robustness (meaning the ability to

withstand stressors), flexibility (meaning the ability to find a set of different solutions for a given problem), and adaptability (meaning the ability to adapt to changing conditions in a system) (Rossmeissl, 2021, p. 82). Wolfgang Merkel in an approach that seems quite analogous to Rossmeissl, specifically describes the forms of democratic resilience as resist, adapt, and recover Merkel (2024, 355–357). Other than Rossmeissl, Merkel (2024) adds a temporal dimension to his trifold. The first reaction of a resilient (democratic) system would be resistance by absorbing or isolating a potential threat, not only in the political subsystem but others as well (Merkel, 2024, p. 355). The second stage of resilience would mean to adapt the system's capabilities (procedures, norms, institutions) to a potential threat (Merkel, 2024, 355–356). This could be coordinated with the eponymous concept of adaptability as well as the concept of flexibility with Rossmeissl. We therefore suggest summarising both those (quite nuanced) functions under the concept of adaptability to leave space for Merkel's third stage of recovery. This would mean the ability to restore the *status quo ante* of a system after dealing with stressors. On a systemic level, we would operationalise these three factors as relevant for comprising what we understand by democratic resilience.

5.3 What do we mean by democratic (self-)efficacy?

Not least, the third political object mentioned by Easton are the authorities. He states clearly that "[t]he occupants of authority roles need to be clearly distinguished from the roles themselves" (Easton, 1979, p. 212). In our sense that means to define the role of the *demos* (and its entities, meaning individual citizens but also actors on the meso-level) in a democratic society. We find the concept of self-efficacy or political efficacy particularly helpful in this. Bandura, who coined the concept of self-efficacy in the 1990s, describes it as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations" Bandura (1995, p. 2). Zimmerman and Cleary (2006, p. 47) describe it as the "subjective judgements of one's capabilities to organize and execute courses of action to attain designated goals".

Derived from his concept of self-efficacy, Bandura develops the term of collective efficacy, meaning „[p]eople's shared belief in their collective power to produce desired results" (Bandura, 2006, p. 29). On the political level, political efficacy therefore means „that one can have a hand in effecting social change through political activity" on the individual level and „the changeableness of the sociopolitical system and its responsiveness to public interest and action" on the societal level (Bandura, 2006, p. 29). As early as in the 1950s, a group of researchers already used the term political efficacy and defined it this way:

"the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process, i.e., that it is worth while to perform one's civic duties. It is the feeling that political and social change is possible, and that the individual citizen can play a part in bringing about this change. To the extent that this feeling of political efficacy is measurable, we would predict that it would be positively related to political participation." (Campbell *et al.*, 1954, p. 187)

Our own research as well as the study of Campbell *et al.* (1954) supports the assumption that political participation plays a major role in political efficacy (we would more precisely coin it as *democratic efficacy*). Political efficacy could, apart from possibilities for participation and from actual participation levels, on the also be measured by the willingness to participate as the ICCS study for school children does (Abs *et al.*, 2024).

There is, however, a second part also included in Bandura's conception of political efficacy: a major factor apart from participation is the matter of trust. So, we will have to operationalise political trust in democracy, democratic processes and democratic institutions as a second major factor of democratic efficacy.

6 Formulation of hypotheses

Based on this elaboration, we want to further refine our hypotheses on the causality within the field of conspiracism and democracy that we are looking at (Figure 2). The causal relationships between Democratic Identity, Resilience and Efficacy (D-IRE) and the Prevalence of Conspiracy Theories (PCT) consist of complex interactions between different layers of analysis as well as moderations and feedback loops. We, on the one hand, have to deal with a multi-level problem that needs us to take into account macro-effects as well as micro-effects and to look at the transmission belt connecting those layers via the meso level. On the other hand, we have to analyse the connections and effects happening between both democratic and conspiracist phenomena on the macro- as well as the micro-level. We will furthermore have to have a look at potential moderating effects in societal subsystems other than the political system.

6.1 Macro-Micro transmissions

Hypothesis 1: The political system on the macro level—namely the political community, the regime, and power and the authorities—influences through local networks, organisations, communities, and conception of democracy and values resources like democratic identity, democratic resilience, and democratic efficacy (Figure 3).

We suggest that the political bodies Easton formulated on a macro-level have a strong influence on the political conceptions of the populace on the micro-level. This mainly functions through mechanisms of support and trust (Pickel *et al.*, 2020, p. 93). Taking into account that we will research cases of democratic countries, Easton's political bodies are coordinated with the three democratic resources we already identified in Section 3. Those can be found on the left side of our diagram (the *democracy pattern*): The Political Community and its support on the macro-level coordinates with Democratic Identity of individuals. The Regime and its support on the macro-level coordinates with Democratic Resilience of individuals. The Authorities (to which we will add *Power* as a concept, as we do not think this category to be solely based on personal authority in a Weberian sense) and its support coordinate with Democratic Efficacy of individuals.

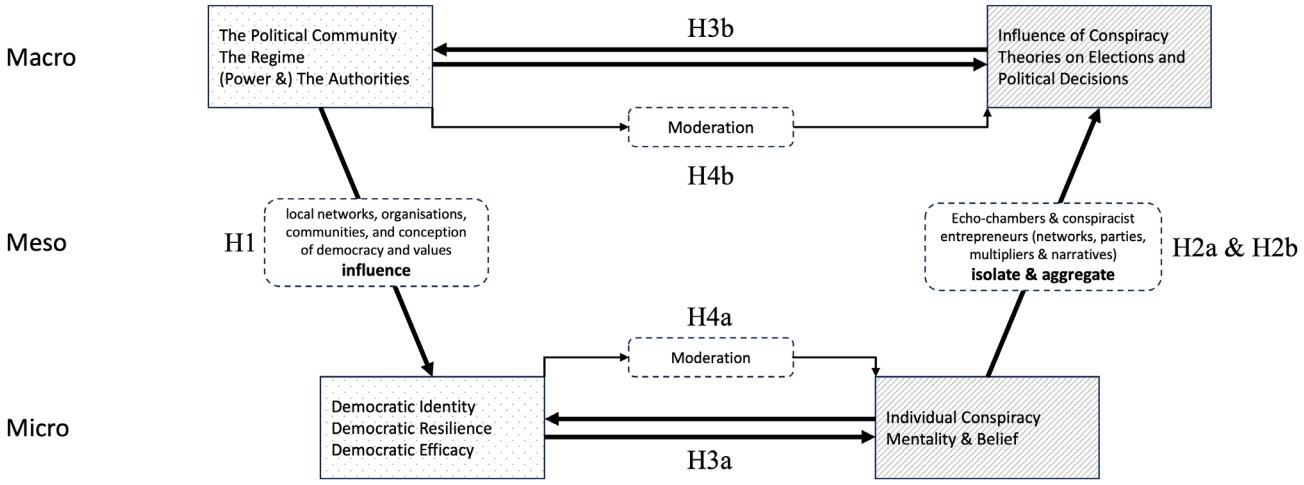

Figure 2. Diagram on our hypotheses to be made.

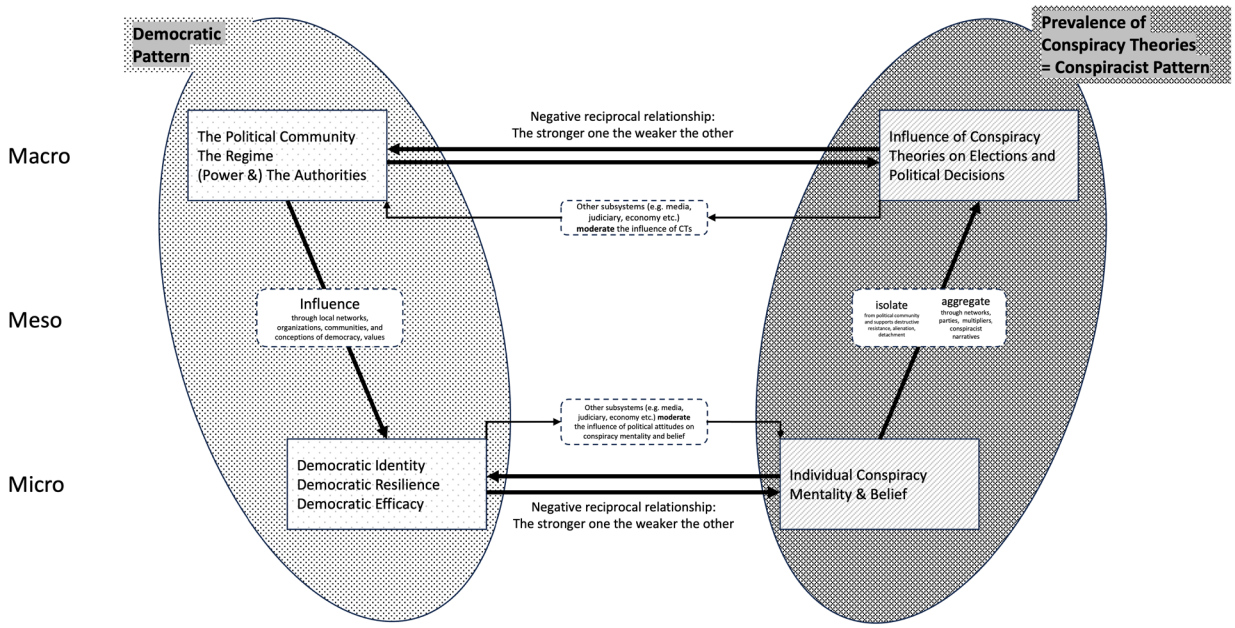

Figure 3. Identifying the democratic pattern (left) and the conspiracist pattern (right).

As for the part of democratic efficacy, we already showed that up in Bandura's postulate of the *responsiveness* for public interest that might also being seen as a sense for collective power. This can be seen as a role model for the transmission in the other fields as well. This transmission between the categories happens via the meso-level where we find collective versions of Democratic Identity, Resilience and Efficacy. The top-down influence works through local networks, organisations, communities as well as through narratives of conceptions of democracy and of values.

Democratic trade-offs or antinomies can be observed all over the macro-level of democratic resources. We can for example identify pluralist vs. homogeneist conceptions, communitarian vs. individual conceptions, or conceptions emphasising either direct democracy vs. post-democracy. This we will take into account when analysing the macro-level of our case countries.

Hypothesis 2a: Individual conspiracy mentality and conspiracy belief aggregate through networks, parties, multipliers and conspiracist narratives to influence of conspiracy theories on

elections and political decisions. Echo-chambers amplify and strategically acting conspiracist entrepreneurs (cf. political entrepreneurs) push ahead the conspiracist agenda.

On the right side (the *conspiracism pattern*) we can observe opposite effects. We suggest that general conspiracy mentality and specific conspiracy belief in individuals aggregate on the macro-level. The result of this aggregation can be observed in the political system as parties who adapted conspiracist policies are elected and/or conspiracist contents are adapted into concrete policies.

The transmission mechanism in this is that, vice-versa to Hypothesis 1, individual conspiracy mentality and conspiracy belief are aggregated through networks, parties, multipliers, but also through concrete conspiracist narratives across various media channels. We find mechanisms like on the one hand the well elaborated model of echo-chambers (Boutyline & Willer, 2017; O'Hara & Stevens, 2015), representing a reinforcement of ideology without deliberate or even strategic steering; this mechanism could, in e.g. Luhmann's terms, be called somewhat autopoietic. On the other hand we find planned spreading and distribution of conspiracist narratives by certain actors and multipliers. One could, based on the term *political entrepreneurs* used by Dahl, call those *conspiracist entrepreneurs*. They follow their own self-interest to a certain degree by putting forward conspiracism. Via this transmission, they reach the political system where they may exercise influence.

Hypothesis 2b: Individual conspiracy mentality and conspiracy belief also isolate from the political community and support destructive resistance, alienation and political detachment, also leading to higher influence of conspiracy theories on elections and political decisions. Echo-chambers seal off against the outside world, conspiracist entrepreneurs provide alternative authorities to majority institutions.

We, on the other hand, suggest, that conspiracism on an individual level does not only aggregate via the meso-level to form groups or collective narratives of conspiracism. Individual conspiracism also tends to isolate individuals and aggregated individuals (groups) from the political community as-a-whole. When we see the aggregation mechanisms of Hypothesis 2a as the ingroup phenomenon of identity building (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), we can see this as the according outgroup mechanism related to it. The aforementioned echo-chambers and *conspiracist entrepreneurs* show their effects on this mechanism as well. While echo-chambers—without the need to being planned—seal off their inmates against the outside world, *conspiracist entrepreneurs* provide alternative authorities to established institutions. The latter, at the first glance paradoxical, effect of questioning authorities by triggering alternative, much more authoritative structures can be subsumed under what the *F-scale* called *authoritarian submission* or even more precise, what Fromm described when mentioning the petit bourgeois who finds strange ways to harmonise discipline and a striving for authority with rebellion (Samelson, 1993).

We believe that his isolation from the political community or the populace supports the formation of deep cleavages in a political system and in a society overall. We base this hypothesis on the fact that we can observe that conspiracy mentality and conspiracy belief correlate with forms of destructive resistance, to alienation and to (political) detachment (cf. Bowes *et al.*, 2021; Kaplan *et al.*, 2016; Rahlf, 2023; Schnell *et al.*, 2024).

6.2 Democracy-conspiracism relation

Hypothesis 3a: On the micro-level there is a negative reciprocal relationship between democratic phenomena and conspiracist phenomena. The stronger the one, the weaker the other (Figure 4). Hypothesis 3b: On the macro-level there is a negative reciprocal relationship between democratic phenomena and conspiracist phenomena. The stronger the one, the weaker the other (Figure 5).

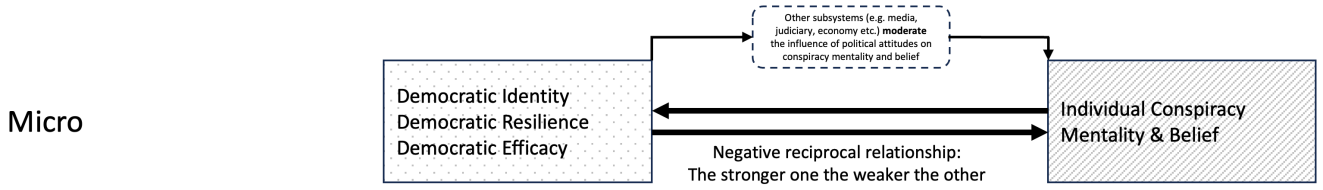

Figure 4. Focus on horizontal effects and moderating effects on the micro level.

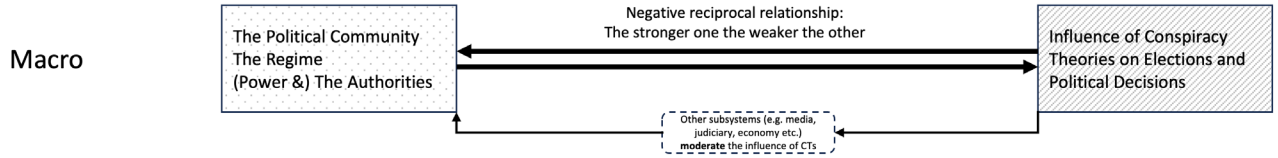

Figure 5. . . . and on the macro level.

As the democratic and the conspiracist patterns are both part of the political subsystem, we expect a strong relationship between them both on the macro as well as on the micro level. The relationship we expect has two characteristics: 1) we expect democracy and conspiracism to have a negative correlation and causation, and 2) we suggest this relationship to be reciprocal, meaning they are communicating vessels. This leads to the assumption that, on macro- as well as on micro-level, the stronger the democratic pattern is, the weaker the conspiracist pattern would be—and vice versa.

From empirical research we have strong evidence on the individual level for this to be true. Populist attitudes, authoritarian personality traits, stealth democracy, or distrust in government are seen to be positively related to conspiracism (Basile *et al.*, 2020; Bordeleau *et al.*, 2025; Herold, 2024; Mancosu *et al.*, 2017; Schlipphak *et al.*, 2022; Törnberg & Chueri, 2025). We will, taking that into account, also have a look on the opposite direction, as far as available data are suitable to research this. Meaning: what happens to D-IRE under the influence of conspiracism? Can we expect more expressions of powerlessness, susceptibility, political fragmentation or polarisation if we find stronger conspiracy mentality and beliefs? From our point of view, strengthening democratic identity can help to mitigate the spread of conspiracist ideation by e.g. enhancing feelings of community and respect for other groups, pluralist values, which makes individuals less likely to not perceive themselves as part of larger society or to see themselves threatened by other groups in spite of greater societal challenges. We have, on the other hand, less clear research on the macro-level that supports our Hypothesis 3b. Further research on this topic inside this framework will, therefore, bring promising results—e.g. analysing the relationship between governmental systems, fragmentation of party systems but also political polarisation with the influence of conspiracy theories.

6.3 Moderating effects

Hypothesis 4a: Democratic micro-phenomena—through other subsystems (e.g. civil society, media, culture, judiciary, or economy)—moderate the influence of political attitudes on individual conspiracy mentality and belief.

Hypothesis 4b: Conspiracist influence on elections and political decisions—through other subsystems (e.g. civil society, media, culture, judiciary, or economy)—moderate the influence of conspiracy theories on democratic macro-phenomena.

The core focus of this framework is to analyse the intra-political-system relations between democracy and conspiracism. We, however, expect to find effects of other societal subsystems, such as civil society, media, culture, judiciary, or economy, on the prevalence of conspiracy theories as well. This makes sense as the societal subsystems are, in our view, not isolated in a strict sense, but interacting with each other through tight couplings. So the media system of course has an influence on interactions inside the political systems via news coverage and agenda setting. The economic system also has an influence on peoples' political thinking in regard to economic prosperity and its connection to system satisfaction as a whole. We expect these moderating effects of extra-political-system factors to be effective on the macro- as well as on the micro-level of our analysis.

Giving a full image, we want to explore the macro-micro interactions in the democratic pattern (H1) as well as in the conspiracist pattern (H2a & H2b); we want to research effects between democracy and conspiracism on the micro-level (H3a) as on the macro-level (H3b). And, finally, we will also take into accounts moderating effects of other societal subsystems on the influence of political attitudes on conspiracism on the micro-level (H3a) and moderating effects of other societal subsystem on conspiracism's influence on the macro-level (H4b) (Figure 6).

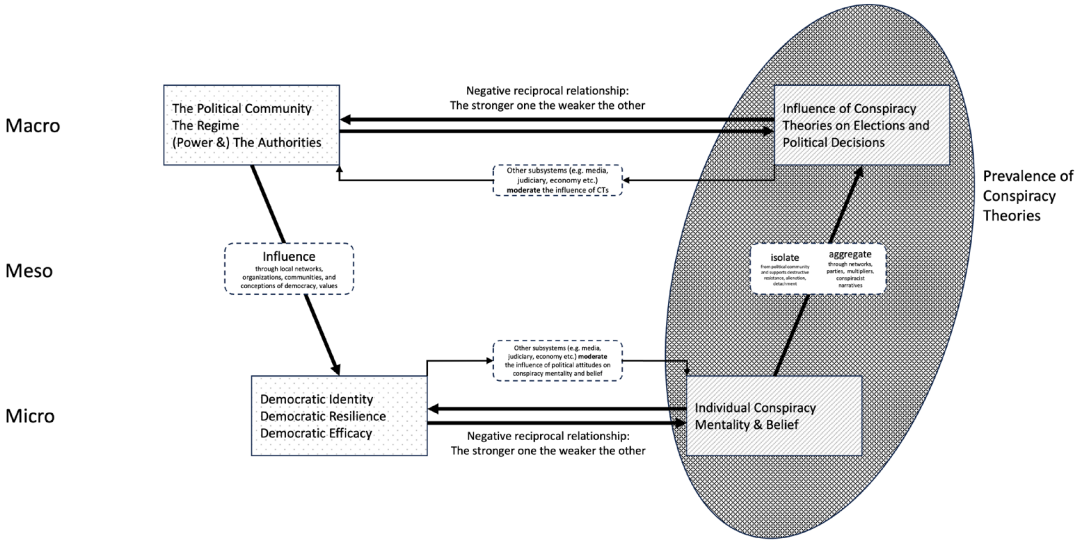

Figure 6. Full diagram showing our hypotheses.

7 Operationalisation of explanatory variables

In the next step we will have to operationalise our reflections and propose suitable measurements and items to implement the investigation of the concepts we suggested to research. Here we will identify suitable factors, measurements, inventories for our already identified variables inside the political system on which we will focus. But we will also try to figure out other possible variables that a) may be closely related to our variables inside the political system, or b) seem nevertheless promising from pre-existing studies. As we already explained, this framework will loosely be structured after Parsons' conception of society as a system. We already had a deep dive in our conception of the political system as main focus of the study (representing the goal-attainment function in Parsons' paradigm).

One step further, we will also look at the other different functions of society and at its subsystems, proposing more factors that we deem suitable to inhibit conspiracy theories or to strengthen democracy against its erosion through conspiracy theories. Therefore, we will delve into the other functions described by Parsons as well: integration (represented mostly by the civil society as well as the media system), latency (represented mostly by the cultural system and the judiciary), and adaption (represented by the economic system). The subsystems of these functions form the environment of the political system in the case countries we will be looking at (Table 3). We will, however, not fully immerse into Parsons' action theory framework but will use his conception for a more comprehensive overview and systematisation of potential factors to be looked at.

- Macro Level
  - The Political System
    * The Political Community: Political community measures: societal polarisation (von Nordheim *et al.*, 2024), citizenship norms (Bordeleau *et al.*, 2025)
    * Regime stability: Presidential instability vs. parliamentary stability (Linz, 1990), TE Democracy Index Functioning of government indicators ((EIU), 2025), stability of the party system.
    * Power & Authority distribution (participation): European Participation Index, activism intention scales (Bordeleau *et al.*, 2025), European Participation Index, TE Democracy Index Political participation indicators ((EIU), 2025), Corruption Index (Cordonier *et al.*, 2021; Hornsey & Pearson, 2022; von Nordheim *et al.*, 2024)
  - Other Subsystems
    * Media factors: media literacy (Craft *et al.*, 2017), trust in journalists and scientists (Mede *et al.*, 2025)
    * Economic indicators: inequality measures, economic development (Cordonier *et al.*, 2021; Hornsey & Pearson, 2022)
- Micro Level
  - Political Domain
    * Democratic Identity: Populist or anti-immigration attitudes (Bordeleau *et al.*, 2025), Political system rejection (Walter & Drochon, 2020)
    * Democratic Resilience: Support for democratic principles (Swami *et al.*, 2011), stealth democracy (Mancosu *et al.*, 2017), 'Consider democracy to be important' (Herold, 2024), Political Cynicism Scale (PCS) (Swami *et al.*, 2011)D
    * Democratic efficacy: Activism intention scale (Bordeleau *et al.*, 2025), power-distance (Hornsey & Pearson, 2022), satisfaction with and trust in democracy (Bordeleau *et al.*, 2025; Schlipphak *et al.*, 2022), Radicalism intention scale (Bordeleau *et al.*, 2025), Power-distance (Hornsey & Pearson, 2022), Representation within the political system (Walter & Drochon, 2020)
  - Other Domains
    * Cultural: Religion and religiosity (Bordeleau *et al.*, 2025; Mancosu *et al.*, 2017), magical thinking (Walter & Drochon, 2020), belief in simple solutions (Van Prooijen, 2017)
    * Economic: Self-described economic class (Bordeleau *et al.*, 2025), economic insecurity (Walter & Drochon, 2020), income (Herold, 2024; Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017)

Table 3. Comprehensive overview of a systematised look on societal subsystems, as represented in the AGIL-scheme.

Adaption	Goal-Attainment

• Economic System
• Science System
	• Political System
	  ○ Democratic Identity
	  ○ Democratic Resilience
	  ○ Democratic Efficacy

Latency (or Pattern-Maintenance)	**Integration**
• Cultural System • Education System • Judiciary	• Civil Society • Media

To give a full overview of items and measurements we discovered in reviewing the relevant literature, we will give a

comprehensive overview of the studies and data we took into account. Those include, in an alphabetical order, Bagg, 2024; Basile *et al.*, 2020; Bordeleau *et al.*, 2025; Cordonier *et al.*, 2021; Craft *et al.*, 2017; Fadhel, 2023; Herold, 2024; Hornsey & Pearson, 2022; Mancosu *et al.*, 2017; Mede *et al.*, 2025; Rottweiler & Gill, 2022; Schlipphak *et al.*, 2021; Swami *et al.*, 2011; Törnberg & Chueri, 2025; Van Prooijen, 2017; von Nordheim *et al.*, 2024; Walter & Drochon, 2020. We will also be able to extract measurements from bigger data-sets that are not directly related to conspiracism like Ziemes and Deimel (2024) (ICCS), De Spiegelaere and Vitols, 2020 (European Participation Index), ((EIU), 2025), Freedom House, 2025, Lemm *et al.*, 2022, Beierlein *et al.*, 2012, or V-Dem, 2025, amongst others.

We of course will also contribute own findings to the table of measurements, mostly on the macro and meso level when analysing the political system and having a closer look at predominant narratives in the case countries.

This part of the comparative framework is considered a living document that will require further refinement and changes in the next months in conducting the aforementioned case studies.

8 Discussion

There are, however, some limitations that come with this framework. Being very exploratively it has to deal with certain uncertainties. We are well aware of the limitations but will try to take measures in reducing those. We want to assess these limitations here.

- Biases: We can not, at least not by design, rule out biases in the measurements used in third-party studies. We will, however, have a close look at the methodology used in the studies we will take into account and in the original data we will use from other work packages inside the project.

- Redundancy: As the factors we want to assess, especially in the functional system for goal-attainment, are intertwined with each other, we cannot rule out inter-factorial dependencies or redundancies to some degree. We, however, tried to face this problem by refining our hypotheses in comparison to our first, internal draft.

- Incommensurability or unavailability of data: While for the extraction of some factors we relied on big-N quantitative studies, we also identified other factors that seem suitable for explorative analysis. However, in the creation of this framework, we could not check the availability of data for all case countries for the study conducted in the aftermath. This framework therefore only acts as a theoretical framework that will have to be further refined in the conduction of the comparative study or studies.

- Causal relations: In our exploratory research, we clearly hope to find possible causes for the prevalence of conspiracy theories, not only correlations. We must, however, admit that causal direction might be bidirectional on some of our factors and that explained and explanatory variables could in some cases be trapped in feedback loops. We tried to manage this also by redefining our hypothesis. We, however, encounter further bidirectional relations (mostly regarding H3a and H3b where we formulated this explicitly). We may at least to some degree mitigate this by including longitudinal studies or natural experiments—if available—to our data pool.

9 Outlook

This framework is part of the already mentioned EU-funded research project Tackling Conspiracy Theories by Fostering Resilience and Democratic Self-Efficacy (TaCT-FoRSED*)*. The overarching aim of this project is to gain a better understanding of the identity-related foundations of conspiracy theories, of their potential threat to democracy and democratic identities, as well as, on this base, finding measures to tackle conspiracy theories in education as well as in politics. This framework is part of the second work package of *TaCT-FoRSED*, using qualitative methodology to find new factors that might be helpful to tackle conspiracism. We work closely together with the colleagues conducting quantitative surveys as well as more historical research, who will potentially be able to test hypotheses deducted out of the work with this framework.

A medium-N study with eight case countries will be conducted (Figure 7). The cases selected span all over Europe from Spain on the Atlantic Ocean to Bulgaria as one of the easternmost cantilever of the European Union. More precisely, the comparative study will be conducted for the cases of Spain, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Bulgaria. This framework, however, stands alone as a general concept to research the connections between democratic societies and conspiracism, not only inside the study to be conducted in the course of the project. It is rather open to use in comparative research on the topic and also open for further refinement and adaption.

The insights gained in the study conducted inside this framework will also be used to develop a semi-structured questionnaire for interviews to study, on the micro-layer, ex-conspiracy believers and factors that were helpful to them in leaving conspiracism. This aims to use qualitative research to provide an indication of psychological personality factors in those affected who have been able to break away from such harmful thought structures, like narcissism or authoritarian personality traits. This series of interviews shall involve individuals from the countries already analysed in this comparative study. So, a connection between the findings gathered on a macro and meso layer, and conclusions on an individual level can be drawn.

In the end, as an overarching goal of the project Project *TaCT-FoRSED*, we hope to gain not only an advance in



Figure 7. Overview of case countries[12].

scientific understanding of conspiracism but also impact on education as well as on politics for strengthening democracy. As a collateral use of the latter measures, we hope to find factors strengthening democracy as a whole.

[12] Created with MapChart.

12 Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required.

11 Data availability

This article is a conceptual framework and therefore does not provide data on its own. However, the conducted case studies are planned be published via Open Research Europe.

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✗ **Alessandro Miani**
University of Bristol, Bristol, UK

I'm glad I had the chance to review this manuscript. The authors propose a comparative (cross-national) framework to understand the interaction between democratic conditions (macro level) and individual conspiracism (micro level). They add a "meso" level that includes conspiracy narratives and the actors who spread them and facilitate aggregation. The core idea is a loop in which the political system shapes citizens' conspiracism (top-down), and conspiracism then feeds back into political outcomes (bottom-up). The authors also sketch a way to test this framework empirically, using eight European countries and a set of working variables.

Overall, I think this is an interesting idea, and if implemented, it could develop into a very ambitious project. However, I found the manuscript in its current form difficult to evaluate, mainly because the main points are not easy to identify within a narrative that seems (at least to me) quite dispersed. Since the manuscript appears to support an empirical research plan, I believe it may be structured more clearly and with a more explicit link between the conceptual framework and the empirical strategy. In the following, I add a few comments that in my view could help present the project in a more empirical way.

The main issue for me is the implementation. How the specific variables are measured, which design, and what statistical analyses are planned. For instance, how exactly do the authors plan to estimate the effect of country-level variables on individual-level conspiracism? A related approach was used by Imhoff et al. (2022; see supplemental material: https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-021-01258-7), where country-level indicators (e.g., corruption perception index, human development, democracy index) were correlated against average country-level conspiracy mentality. Are these two approaches similar? If so, what is the contribution of the current framework? Relatedly, how do they plan to measure the impact of CTs (or conspiracism) at the systemic level? And what kind of data? Historical (see e.g., https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-025-02136-2), behavioral, surveys, or existing secondary datasets? If existing datasets are used (as briefly mentioned), which indicators are extracted and what do they represent? The manuscript also suggests that the micro-to-macro effect is mediated by the meso level, but at the moment it is difficult to see how the meso level would be measured

empirically. Section 7 does not include the meso-level variables.

In Section 4, the authors write: "We, however, have to find instruments to measure the prevalence, or pervasiveness, of conspiracy theories in a given society". As currently phrased, it seems the authors refer to the circulation of conspiracy narratives in the public sphere (e.g., identifying and counting narratives in social media, news outlets, or political speeches), rather than the prevalence or distribution of conspiracy beliefs or conspiracy mentality at the individual level. While Section 4 reads as a helpful overview of measurement tools for conspiracism, after reading it, I was still unsure how the authors measure conspiracism. In Section 7, I don't see conspiracism among the list of variables. Since conspiracism is central to this project, it would help if the authors explicitly specify what they intend to measure, and how these measures connect to macro- and meso-level outcomes. Also note that the CMQ measures conspiracy mentality on a continuum and so "prevalence of CMQ" is not appropriate.

In Section 3, the authors write: "We will take a look at the systemic level of European societies under the threat of conspiracism; a study with eight case countries included will be conducted". What is meant by threat of conspiracism? Does "being under threat" refer to the proliferation of conspiracy narratives in political discourse, or to higher average country-level conspiracy mentality scores? The authors selected eight countries, but the rationale is not explained.

In Section 7, media-related factors such as media literacy and trust in journalists/scientists are grouped into "other subsystems" at the macro level. They seem to fit more naturally at the micro level (individual traits/attitudes), although it is of course possible to aggregate them at the country level.

Is the rationale for, and objectives of, the study clearly described?

No

Is the study design appropriate for the research question?

No

Are sufficient details of the methods provided to allow replication by others?

No

Are the datasets clearly presented in a useable and accessible format?

No

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: social psychology, conspiracy theories, language analysis

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to state that I do not consider it to be of an acceptable scientific standard, for reasons outlined above.

Reviewer Report 24 January 2026

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Mert Can Bayar
University of Washington, Seattle, Washington, USA

Overall assessment and recommendation

This protocol addresses an important and timely topic: the relationship between conspiracy theories and democracy, including how democratic identities may interact with conspiratorial beliefs and narratives. I appreciate the authors' willingness to engage a politically polarized area that can be difficult to study, particularly given contemporary pressures in political and technological environments.

At the same time, in its current form, the manuscript's core argument and design are difficult to identify and evaluate. The conceptualization is not sufficiently stabilized (e.g., shifts between "conspiracy theories," "conspiracy ideologies," identity, religion analogies, and narratives without clear definitions or boundaries), and the methodological framework is described in ways that do not yet allow reviewers to assess feasibility, fit, or validity. For these reasons, my recommendation is not approved at this stage, with a strong suggestion that the editors consider re-review if the authors submit a substantially revised protocol that clarifies concepts, narrows scope, and specifies methods.

Major issues
1) Conceptual clarity and internal consistency

A primary concern is that key terms appear to be used interchangeably or in shifting ways without clear definitions, which makes the theoretical contribution hard to follow.

The manuscript moves between "conspiracy theories," "conspiracy ideologies," identity formation, and religious analogies, but does not provide stable working definitions (or cite a definition and adopt it clearly).

At multiple points, conspiracy theories are described as not "mere ideologies" but rather identities, yet later passages return to "conspiracy ideologies" as the central object of analysis. This creates confusion about what the unit of analysis is, and what conceptual claims the empirical analysis is intended to adjudicate.

Relatedly, the manuscript introduces multiple conceptual layers—myths, narratives, identities, ideologies, micro/meso/macro—without clarifying how these categories relate to one another (e.g., hierarchy, causal ordering, or analytic distinction).

A revision would benefit from (a) explicit definitions of the central constructs used in the protocol, (b) consistent usage across sections, and (c) a simplified conceptual map that explains how micro-, meso-, and macro-level concepts connect in the proposed design.

2) Argument structure and relevance of theoretical excursions

Several sections read as tangential to the protocol's stated aim and, as a result, dilute the manuscript's central logic.

For example, the manuscript contains broad claims and extended discussions that are not clearly integrated into the protocol's core research question(s), including:

The claim that "modern mass democracies are at war with knowledge and expertise." This is a strong statement that would require more justification and clearer connection to the protocol's analytic strategy. As written, it is not obvious how the subsequent sections operationalize or test this claim.

Extended theoretical moves (including discussion invoking Runciman and other frameworks) that appear as interpretive detours rather than steps in a cumulative argument toward the study design.

A revised version would likely be more persuasive if it reduces theoretical side paths and focuses on a smaller number of claims that directly motivate the project's research questions and design choices.

3) Claims that require qualification or reconsideration

Some claims are stated too categorically and may not be defensible as written.

The manuscript states that conspiracy theories are "usually not accessible to fact-based debunking strategies." This is presented as a general claim, but it is difficult to sustain given emerging evidence that certain interventions—including AI-mediated interventions—can reduce belief in conspiracy theories in some contexts. The authors may wish to qualify this claim and specify the conditions under which they believe debunking is ineffective (and what they mean by "fact-based" strategies).

4) Methods: feasibility, alignment, and evaluability

The current methods description leaves key elements underspecified, making it hard to evaluate whether the protocol can answer the questions implied by the title and framing.

The protocol references both most-different and most-similar systems designs, but it is unclear which of the eight cases correspond to each design and why. These are strong methodological claims that typically require explicit justification.

It is not clear from the manuscript whether the project includes survey- or experiment-based research. If it does not, then the inclusion of individual-level constructs (e.g., conspiracy mentality or conspiratorial thinking) raises immediate questions about measurement: how are these individual-level correlates operationalized and observed?

The manuscript notes collaboration with quantitative scholars, but collaboration alone does not

provide sufficient information for reviewers to assess measurement strategy, data structure, inferential approach, or limitations.

A major revision should specify: (a) what data are being used (and at what levels of analysis), (b) how key constructs are measured at each level, and (c) how the comparative design is implemented across the eight cases.

5) Scope: mismatch between broad framework and case-based approach

The protocol's stated goal—"a comparative framework for explorative cross-country analysis of factors promoting and inhibiting conspiracy theories"—could be valuable at the country level. However, the current framing appears to combine country-level comparative ambitions with individual-level determinants without clarifying how they are bridged.

If the analysis is primarily macro-level and case-based, it may be more coherent to focus the protocol on system-level factors and explicitly delimit what the project can and cannot claim about individual-level psychology.

This also raises additional clarifications needed for the conceptual framework:

What conception(s) of democracy are being used (e.g., deliberative vs. representative; direct vs. representative; hybrid regimes)? The manuscript would benefit from specifying what adjectives or institutional understandings of "democracy" are doing analytic work in the project.

How does the project position itself in relation to democratic erosion/backsliding literatures, given the implied assumption that conspiracy theories and democracy are negatively associated? What is the specific mechanism or "angle" (e.g., executive-led backsliding, norm erosion, etc.) that the project is meant to illuminate?

I raise these points because the scope currently feels broader than what can be convincingly delivered via the described protocol, and because narrowing and specifying would likely increase the manuscript's coherence and credibility.

Specific comments on selected passages

"Modern mass democracies are at war with knowledge and expertise..."
This is a strong claim that requires more development and a clearer link to the protocol's research questions and analytic strategy. As written, the connection is not sufficiently explicit for the reader.

Religion/identity framing (multiple passages)
The manuscript repeatedly draws parallels between conspiracy theories and religion (or "substitute religion"), spiritual authority, identity formation, and collective meaning-making. These are potentially interesting claims, but they introduce multiple large conceptual domains that need (a) careful definition, (b) clear boundaries, and (c) explicit explanation of how they advance the study's aims rather than functioning as analogies. In several places, the transitions from "religion" to "myths/narratives/identity" occur quickly and without clear conceptual staging, which makes the reader work harder than necessary to infer the intended logic.

"What diagnosis?" / difficulty following the throughline
At points the text refers to a "diagnosis" or overarching argument, but the cumulative logic is difficult to reconstruct because new claims and frameworks appear in successive paragraphs. A revision would benefit from clearer signposting: a small number of core propositions repeated consistently, with each section explicitly tied to those propositions.

Reference to Carl Schmitt
If Schmitt is used, the manuscript should handle that engagement with care and clarity (identifying his political affiliations and role) about why he is necessary for the argument being made. (My main request here is not about tone but about relevance and justification.)

Novelty question
The protocol states it seeks to identify correlates that inhibit conspiracy theories. Since a substantial literature already documents correlates (positive and negative), the manuscript should clarify what is new: is it the cross-country comparative framework, the integration across levels, a specific conceptualization of "democratic identity," or something else?

Recommendation

Not approved (major revision required).
This protocol has high potential and targets a consequential set of questions. However, the current version requires substantial restructuring to clarify (1) the project's conceptual core, (2) the definitions and boundaries of key terms, and (3) the methodological design and measurement strategy—especially regarding levels of analysis and the implementation of comparative designs. I would encourage the editors to consider re-review if the authors submit a significantly revised manuscript that addresses these issues.

I thank the authors for engaging an important topic and the editors for the opportunity to review this protocol.

Is the rationale for, and objectives of, the study clearly described?
Yes

Is the study design appropriate for the research question?
Yes

Are sufficient details of the methods provided to allow replication by others?
Partly

Are the datasets clearly presented in a useable and accessible format?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: I study comparative political behavior within 21st century online information systems and environments with a focus on conspiracy theories, democratic backsliding.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to state that I do not consider it to be of an acceptable scientific standard, for reasons outlined above.