

**Populists in power and conspiracy theories**

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Abstract:	<p>Populists' use of tropes such as conspiracy theories is claimed to play an increasingly important role in their politics. Populism and conspiracy theories present a number of common traits – Manicheanism, a sense of victimhood, and an ambivalence towards representative politics – but populists' use of conspiracy theories is politically purposeful. Targeting a conspiring elite serves to vilify real or fictional opponents and/or shield populists from hostile attacks. As such, we need to pay closer attention to the reason as why populists turn to conspiracy theories and the elements underlying populist conspiracism. Looking at three cases of populists-in-government, we argue that the definition of conspiring elites (who), the circumstances under which conspiracy theories are propagated (when), and the ultimate purpose of conspiratorial framing (why) are telling insofar as populist politics and their relationship with power are concerned.</p>

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## Introduction

There is an undoubted rise in interest in both populism and conspiracy theories, but a parallel dearth of empirical research on their connection (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017: 530; Bergmann and Butter, 2020: 333). Populism is in the ascendant in many parts of the world. From 'exclusionary' populism in Europe and the US to 'inclusionary' populism in Latin America (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013), we can see the geographical expansion of this phenomenon (Rovira Kaltwasser et al., 2017). Many populists have entered into governments and into the political mainstream (Pappas, 2014; Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015; Pirro, 2015; Akkerman et al., 2016). At the same time, and sometimes from the same sources, conspiracy theories can also be seen in contemporary mainstream politics. Conspiracy theories have moved out of the narrow niches of extremist politics in good part due to populists' own conspiracism and growing prominence. Both concepts have generated their own academic literatures. And while we generally seem to know little about the link between populism and conspiracy theories (cf. Taggart, 2018; Bergmann, 2018; Bergmann and Butter, 2020; Castanho Silva et al., 2017; Hameleers, 2020; Balta et al., 2021), the connection between the two is important as conspiracism has been defined as a 'populist theory of power' (Fenster, 2008: 8). Our article examines populists' use of conspiracy theories in power and breaks down the architecture of populist conspiracism. It particularly aims to identify the targets, the set of conditions, and the functional use of populist conspiracism in government, as the exercise of power provides an important test for the relevance and resilience of conspiracy theories in populist politics.

We need to be clear that not all populists invoke conspiracy theories and not all conspiracy theorists are populist. Conspiracism has been interpreted as a 'trope' or secondary and non-necessary feature of populist discourse (Taggart, 2018: 80–81; Bergmann and Butter, 2020: 334). The intersection between the two may be limited but it can also be illuminating. There are indeed a number of elements bringing together populism and conspiracy theories that justify their overlap, both conceptually and empirically. The people, the elites (and their mutual

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3 relationship), as well as the repudiation of politics, are elements that we see as essential to  
4 populism and which also recur in some conspiracy theories.  
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9 Populists' decision to draw on given conspiracy theories provides a crude but genuine measure  
10 of their style of politicking and their uneasy relationship with power. Part of our concern  
11 inevitably lies with the communication structure of conspiracy theories, for an increasing  
12 number of populists-in-government – ranging from Donald Trump in the US to Viktor Orbán in  
13 Hungary – use them 'to discredit the opposition and win votes' (Douglas et al., 2019: 23) and as  
14 a key part of their appeal to their constituencies. The case of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's rule in  
15 Turkey additionally shows the dilemma of populism when it becomes entrenched in power;  
16 relying on conspiracy theories might help populists divert attention from their 'establishment'  
17 status and preserve their 'outsider' quality while sitting in government (Balta et al., 2021). For  
18 this reason, conspiracy theories have been also interpreted as an 'innovation' of populists in  
19 power (Enyedi, 2020). We therefore argue that populist conspiracism is politically purposeful;  
20 *targeting a conspiring elite serves to vilify real or fictional opponents and/or shield populists*  
21 *from hostile attacks.*  
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37 Communication strategies and political campaigning are often geared towards activating  
38 conspiratorial attitudes (Hameleers, 2020; Mancosu et al., 2020) and it is likely that the  
39 mainstreaming of populism has had a significant impact on the spread of conspiracy theories  
40 among the larger public. Interpretations of events, invoking the interference of sinister actors,  
41 are moving from the countercultural fringe to the centre of the public debate. If conspiracy  
42 theories were once deemed the preserve of 'losers' and the marginal (Uscinski and Parent,  
43 2014; Darwin et al., 2014), their appeal is now to larger audiences and this is, in no small part,  
44 due to the mainstream status earned by many contemporary populists. This means that we  
45 need to pay attention to the reason as why populists turn to conspiracy theories and the  
46 elements underlying them.  
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59 The article connects populism with conspiracism, addressing how populists use conspiracy  
60 theories to cope with the pressure of government. We do this by first elaborating on the

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3 overlap between conspiracism and populism and the circumstances surrounding the use of this  
4 trope in populists' exercise of power. We then present three prominent cases of populist  
5 conspiracism in government, drawing on left-wing and right-wing populism. We conclude with  
6 a discussion of the who, when, and why of populist conspiracism in power and the implications  
7 of populists' use of conspiracy theories.  
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### 17 **Connecting populism with conspiracism**

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21 Conspiracism often has a pejorative connotation in both public and scholarly debates (e.g.  
22 Knight, 2000; Bratich, 2008). The analysis of conspiracy theories has been often concerned with  
23 the deviance and irrationality of individuals (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; van Prooijen and  
24 Jostmann, 2013; Douglas et al., 2017). Evidence moreover suggests that people tend to buy into  
25 conspiracy theories when driven by uncertainty and insecurity – elements which all feed into a  
26 spiral of scepticism (Douglas et al., 2017). In their most extreme and dramatic examples,  
27 conspiracy theories have inspired deadly terrorist attacks in the US, New Zealand, and Germany.  
28 But while these cases speak to the broader sources and outcomes of this phenomenon,  
29 relatively little attention has been paid to the conspiracism of contemporary parties, movements,  
30 and leaders. For instance, much attention has been paid to the myth of 'Eurabia' and how it has  
31 informed the vision of Norwegian far-right terrorist Anders Behring Breivik (Berntzen and  
32 Sandberg, 2014). In contrast, the adoption of the same conspiracy theory by the populist radical  
33 right Alternative for Germany in Germany, the League in Italy, or the Party for Freedom in the  
34 Netherlands has received significantly less consideration.  
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51 Looking at populism allows us to examine the functional role of conspiracism and to see the  
52 rationale and the basis of the popular appeal of some conspiracy theories. We are therefore  
53 concerned with the way that these theories are used and spread by populist actors, and  
54 whether politicians are likely to propose the existence of a conspiracy as a fundamental feature  
55 of their political appeal. We can identify a propensity for populists resort to conspiracy theories  
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3 to vilify opponents and shield themselves from hostile attacks. This should become particularly  
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5 apparent for populists in power (e.g. Balta et al., 2021).  
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9 Most authors concur with the notion that conspiracies are secret plots orchestrated by a group  
10 of powerful actors (Cubitt, 1989; Keeley, 1999; Pidgen, 1995; Barkun, 2013). We draw five main  
11 elements of conspiracy theories from the literature on conspiracy theories. First, it is vital that  
12 the actions of the conspiracy are intended for it to qualify as a fully-fledged theory (Popper,  
13 1987: 351). What makes conspiracy theories distinct is a clear ascription of agency to those who  
14 are involved with the conspiracy. Seeing intentionality where others see complexity, even  
15 randomness, is therefore a key feature of conspiracism. Second, it is essential to this agency that  
16 it is collective and not individual. Because there are a number of individuals and/or groups  
17 involved in setting up a plot, it requires them to act in concert, to coordinate, and therefore to  
18 conspire. Collusion reinforces the importance of the collective nature of the conspiracy and the  
19 differentiation from an individual with overweening power. Third, for the collective agents to  
20 conspire and to work together, this must not be an open process (Cubitt, 1989; Barkun, 2013).  
21 Secrecy is therefore endemic to the way the conspirators are imagined. This secrecy may extend  
22 from simply keeping actions hidden to actively trying to obfuscate reality by sowing discord.  
23 Fourth, conspiracies are essentially monistic. Politics is seen in a non-pluralistic way and there is  
24 the inherent assumption that a conspiring and powerful elite and a deceived and powerless  
25 people are both unified entities. Notions of conspiracy theories advancing among the voiceless  
26 date back to the work of Richard Hofstadter (1964) and are substantiated by feelings of  
27 powerlessness among the public at large (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999). This reinforces a  
28 tendency for politics, in this way of thinking, to be both dualistic and potentially polarised.  
29 Finally, and related to the previous point, the conflict between the people and the elites is  
30 portrayed by conspiracy theorists as a wider moral conflict between good (the people) and evil  
31 (the elites) (Barkun, 2013). The belief that the world is subject to polarising struggles and that  
32 the unfolding of specific events can be attributed to the machinations of treacherous groups is  
33 intrinsic to the paranoid style of the mass public (Oliver and Wood, 2014).  
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3 Conspiracy theories essentially provide unorthodox explanations for the occurrence of real-  
4 world events. Such theories run counter to official accounts or those that are widely accepted in  
5 the public sphere. Conspiracy narratives frame specific events as the product of deliberate plots  
6 by covert forces, which are seen to reproduce asymmetrical power – and, by implication,  
7 knowledge – relations within society. And it is precisely the adversarial posture of populists that  
8 makes them prone to use these theories, be they in government or in opposition.  
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17 There is a widespread tendency to conflate conspiracy theories with ‘fake news’ and political  
18 misinformation (Bergmann and Butter, 2020). While populists can indeed be found propagating  
19 fake news as much as conspiracy theories (Muirhead and Rosenblum, 2019), the first essentially  
20 consist in ‘the deliberate publication of fictitious communication, often spread for a political  
21 purpose’ (Bergmann, 2018: 153). Unlike conspiracist dogmatism, which is grounded in seeking  
22 evidence in support of such theories (e.g. Popper, 1987), fake news fall within the remit of  
23 falsifiability, presenting aspects which are thus open to being debunked (Barkun, 2013; Tandoc  
24 Jr et al., 2018). Fabricated stories do not necessarily involve conspiracy and a deceived people,  
25 and ultimately fail to qualify as theories as they do not aim at providing grand explanations of  
26 real-world phenomena.  
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#### 41 *Terms of convergence*

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45 As some of these aspects already make clear, populism and conspiracy theories share a number  
46 of features. Conspiracy theories have long been linked to populism and they seem more and  
47 more common to a number of contemporary populist actors (Taggart, 2018). As Hofstadter  
48 (1955: 70) noted ‘[t]here is something about the Populist imagination that loved the secret plot  
49 and conspiratorial meeting’ and populists are particularly prone to conspiracy theories (Wiles,  
50 1969: 167). More recently, Paul Taggart (2018) described conspiracy theory as a ‘trope’ of  
51 populism, David Runciman (2018: 65) as ‘the logic of populism’, and Catherine Fieschi (2019:  
52 160) as ‘the currency of populism’. This means that conspiracy theories are not always present  
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3 with populism but in populism's difficulties with politics (its 'unpolitics'), conspiracism appears as  
4 an alternative to politics that populists frequently resort to (Taggart, 2018).  
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9 A more systematic account of the communication of Donald Trump in the US and Geert Wilders  
10 in the Netherlands showed that both right-wing populist leaders blame the elites for concealing  
11 the truth and that evil forces are at play to damage them (Hameleers, 2020). 'To make a musical  
12 analogy, one could maintain that if populism is the *theme*, then many conspiracy theories are  
13 *variations* on the theme' (Castanho Silva et al., 2017: 425). But this link has been made  
14 somewhat casually and never quite developed in much depth (cf. Fenster, 2008; Castanho Silva  
15 et al., 2017; Bergmann and Butter, 2020).  
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25 One recent exploration of populism and conspiracy theory by Eiríkur Bergmann (2018) offers a  
26 comprehensive overview of conspiracy theories, but is somewhat less elaborate in its  
27 consideration of populism and suffers from some definitional problems. Bergmann tends to  
28 conflate far-right politics with populism; this means that a portion of conspiracy theories  
29 covered really belongs to the realm of anti-democratic extremist politics, hence falling outside  
30 the remit of populism (and democracy).<sup>1</sup> As a result of this conflation, a portion of conspiracy  
31 theories deployed by populists of other ideological persuasions (i.e. not right-wing) is not  
32 considered. Reflecting on their unsystematic overlap, populist actors can be found describing  
33 their opponents as an elite conspiracy (Hawkins, 2009, 2010).  
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45 Overall, there are three terms of convergence between populism and conspiracy theories, or  
46 what might be termed *populist conspiracism*: Manicheanism, victimhood, and an ambivalence  
47 towards representative politics. First, both populism and conspiracy theories tend to interpret  
48 the world according to a binary scheme, pitting 'the people' against 'the elite', or the  
49 conspirators against the conspired, and see this conflict as both political and moral (Castanho  
50 Silva et al., 2017). Yet, the preference for Manichaeian narratives and the reduction of events to  
51 a struggle between good and evil (Barkun, 2013; Oliver and Wood, 2014), should be qualified  
52 further. While the populist worldview defines the people as good and pure, and the elite as bad  
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3 and corrupt (Mudde, 2004), conspiracism sees this division unfolding between an *unknowing*  
4 people and a *conspiring* elite (van Hauwaert, 2012).  
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9 The Manichean element in populist conspiracism reflects an 'epistemic cleavage' between the  
10 lies of the outgroup and the truths of the ingroup (Hameleers, 2020: 7). Conspiracy theories  
11 therefore reinforce the anti-elitist moral dualism underlying populism. Both populism and  
12 conspiracy theories tend to funnel circumstances through a monocausal logic, essentially  
13 holding a small clique responsible for all the ills of the world. But while populism elaborates  
14 these circumstances in ideological terms, conspiracism does this through teleological thinking.  
15 Populism frames these tensions through a range of different lenses such as nativism, democratic  
16 socialism, or other ideologies (Taggart, 2000; Mudde, 2004; Stanley, 2008), whereas  
17 conspiracism attributes them to the agency of 'the elites'.  
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29 Second, conspiracism and populism both side with the (alleged) losers of socio-cultural and  
30 economic conflicts. This particular framing blames conspiring elites, with access to powerful  
31 resources, for the state of victimhood of ordinary people (Castanho Silva et al., 2017: 427). At  
32 the most basic level, both reproduce a specific theory of power, whereby believers and  
33 audiences (the victims) are subject the plots of a secretive 'power bloc' (the perpetrators) that  
34 controls society and aims at global takeover (Fenster, 2008). Populist conspiracism is concerned  
35 with imbalance or 'power discrepancy between the people and the elites' (Hameleers, 2020: 4),  
36 which is part of a general charge that the people are not getting (to know) what they deserve.  
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47 Third, populism and conspiracy theories both feed on and foster distrust towards the status quo  
48 (Hameleers, 2020: 4). The underlying logics of populism and conspiracism are essentially  
49 majoritarian, identifying the source of morality in the deceived/excluded many, as opposed to  
50 the deceitful few. Questioning the prevailing order poses a threat to established institutions and  
51 has the potential to disrupt liberal values (Fenster, 2008: 84). Picking up on populism's  
52 democratic character and reflecting on its strained relationship with representative politics, it can  
53 feed illiberal tendencies by drawing on conspiratorial manipulation. But populist conspiracism  
54 might be 'on to something' by singling out forms of power concentration and unaccountability.  
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3 It can indeed raise issues that need to be addressed (Douglas et al., 2019: 17) and it may at  
4 times provide answers 'to an unjust political order, a barren or dysfunctional civil society, and/or  
5 an exploitative economic system' (Fenster, 2008: 90).  
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### 10 11 12 13 **Populist conspiracism: who, when, and why?** 14

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17 Conspiracism is used by populists as a way of suggesting alternative narratives into the public  
18 debate and dramatising the corruption of elites. Moreover, it helps populists fabricate powerful,  
19 secret enemies. We can identify the who (the targeted elites), the when (the set of conditions),  
20 and the why (the functional utility) of populists' use of conspiracy theories. Conspiracism is an  
21 accompaniment to populism and often serves political purposes. Factoring in populists'  
22 relationship with power reveals a key function of populist conspiracism as it helps populists  
23 sustain their antagonistic posture and their Manichean anti-elite discourse in opposition as  
24 much as in government.  
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35 Populists' democratic impulse is to shield people and government against conspiracies (Shils,  
36 1956: 99). This means that, when in power, populists will use conspiracy theories to sustain their  
37 position in government. Conspiracy theories serve as a 'cognitive refuge' of populism when it  
38 attempts to overcome the institutional dilemmas it faces when in power (Taggart, 2000: 106).  
39 Conspiracy theories can help populists explain why they have difficulties with the institutional  
40 structures of politics and sustain their fight against the system once they become part of the  
41 system (Balta et al., 2021). With the growing occurrence of populists in government and their  
42 seemingly more frequent endorsement of conspiracy theories, we should try to make sense of  
43 populists' contentious relationship with power by pinpointing the who, when, and why of  
44 populist conspiracism.  
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57 Looking at the use of populist conspiracism in the exercise of government, it is useful to  
58 consider which outgroups populists attack and the internal/external location of conspiring elites.  
59 Recent work on right-wing populist communication addressed conspiring outgroups,  
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3 interpreting them as those working together to conceal the truth and pushing their agenda  
4 (Hameleers, 2020: 9). Drawing on this description and extending it to the whole pool of populist  
5 actors, we could for example include the mainstream or non-aligned media as well as political  
6 elites and opposition parties among internal outgroups. At the same time, we could list various  
7 'dangerous others' (e.g. foreign agents and governments, immigrants, etc.) among external  
8 outgroups.  
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17 Clearly, such a differentiation is only ideal-typical as internal and external outgroups could be  
18 claimed to jointly conspire against the unknowing people. The distinction nevertheless offers a  
19 broad sense of the preferred targets of populist conspiracism. Internal outgroups are proximate  
20 from a socio-cultural and political perspective; propagating conspiracy theories targeting them  
21 has the main purpose of sowing discord – or waging all-out war – at the local level. Conversely,  
22 external outgroups may be perceived as distant and would thus serve to mobilise the national  
23 deceived ingroup against the conspiring outgroup. Moreover, while populist conspiracism  
24 targeting internal outgroups (e.g. opposition parties or non-aligned media) tends to have a  
25 partisan character, attempts at 'rallying round the flag' using external outgroups is likely to  
26 depend on the 'general' or 'ideological' connotation of conspiracy theories (Oliver and Wood,  
27 2014). On the one hand, ideological conspiracies identify an underlying political motivation in  
28 the agency of conspirators. On the other, general conspiracies are those for which no clear  
29 ideological position can be appended to the group of conspirators, as could be the case for big  
30 industrial groups or secret societies (Mancosu et al. 2017). Therefore, ideological conspiracies  
31 are likelier to emphasise the 'community' aspect and bring together the national ingroup  
32 against an external, politically motivated, outgroup.  
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51 The when and why of populist conspiracism in power are closely interrelated. Populist  
52 conspiracism is generally deployed at a particular time point and in response to circumstances.  
53 Populists have an issue with being in power when they have arrived in office by attacking those  
54 in power and by portraying themselves as outsiders. Being in government then provides a  
55 particular challenge for populists. Conspiracism can be a way to meet this challenge. Populism  
56 thrives on a sense of real or perceived crisis (Taggart, 2000; Moffitt, 2015) and we can therefore  
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3 rationalise their use of conspiracy theories as a way to foster a state of permanent alert or as a  
4 more circumscribed reaction to times of difficulty. In the first scenario, conspiracy theories allow  
5 populists to continuously insist on the existence of a plot to damage the unknowing people and  
6 people's representatives – i.e. the populists-in-power themselves. They frame the people and  
7 the government of the people as being under constant attack, focusing attention on these  
8 threats to potentially maintain public support. In the second scenario, populists' trajectory in  
9 government may be fraught with failures and missteps – as often happens with the exercise of  
10 public office. Unlike the majority of political actors, however, populists may respond to these  
11 challenges by invoking conspiracy theories as explanations for these failures. The objective  
12 might be then to divert attention from political failure and regain public support.  
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25 These elements are summarised in Table 1.

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33 Populists in government can resort to conspiracism in a purposeful manner. They may craft or  
34 sustain narratives of conspiring elites as deliberately sabotaging the agenda of populists and, by  
35 implication, subverting the will of the people. This is a potentially resonant narrative to justify  
36 failure and/or divert public attention while in government, especially in the face of declining  
37 popular support. For populists, 'conspiracy' may thus qualify as the functional opposite of the  
38 'heartland'; both are sufficiently vague and profound to invigorate myths surrounding elite rule  
39 (Taggart, 2000: 106).  
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### 51 Populist conspiracism in power: an empirical overview

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55 We now overview how populist conspiracism plays out in practice. Drawing on three cases of  
56 populism in power, we look at the conspirators that populists target, the set of conditions under  
57 which they turn to conspiracy theories, and the functional utility that these narratives serve. We  
58 examine the cases of Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Donald Trump in the US, and Hugo Chávez in  
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3 Venezuela, who have all been identified as populist (Enyedi, 2020; Norris and Inglehart, 2019;  
4 Hawkins, 2010) and have all used conspiracy theories while in power. These illustrative cases  
5 offer us variation in terms of ideology and also regional reach with populists in Europe and the  
6 Americas.  
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13 These cases all represent populism in government without being encumbered by a coalition.  
14 While in the US and Venezuelan cases this is a direct effect of their presidential systems,  
15 Hungary is a parliamentary system that has delivered two-thirds supermajorities since 2010.  
16 Orbán is currently serving his third consecutive term as Hungarian prime minister (fourth  
17 overall), Trump served as US president between 2017 and 2021, and Chávez was president of  
18 Venezuela between 1999 and his death in 2013.<sup>2</sup> In circumstances in which populists rule on  
19 their own, the decision to resort to conspiracy theories and the scope of populist conspiracism  
20 can be attributed to populists themselves, and we can rule out the influence of third parties. At  
21 the same time, populists' status in government allows us to appreciate how conspiracism fits  
22 within populism's issues with the exercise of power.  
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### 37 *Orbán and ethnic substitution*

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41 Viktor Orbán and his party Fidesz returned to power in 2010 after an eight-year stint in  
42 opposition. Owing to a two-thirds supermajority in parliament, the Orbán government was able  
43 to launch a radical project of legislative reform, which has been commonly described as setting  
44 Hungary on an illiberal track (Vachudova, 2020; Enyedi, 2020). After nullifying the rule of law  
45 and tilting the playing field in its favour, Fidesz devoted its second consecutive term in  
46 government (2014-2018) to the demonisation of migrant populations – to the point that the  
47 victory at the 2018 general election was almost exclusively secured through this strategy.  
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57 Opposition to Islam has become a mainstay of many contemporary populist right-wing parties  
58 (Betz, 2013) and it does not, in itself, provide an instance of conspiracism. Its formulation  
59 through the lens of 'ethnic substitution' however adds a conspiratorial element to the argument.  
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3 Ethnic substitution is essentially a narrative of white genocide – once confined to the extreme-  
4 right – that is sometimes known as the ‘Great Replacement’ from the writings of Renaud Camus,  
5 ‘Eurabia’ from the term coined by Bat Ye’or (born Gisèle Littman), or less frequently ‘Kalergi  
6 plan’ from one of the early advocates of European integration. According to such theories,  
7 there is a concealed attempt to replace the white Christian population (especially in Europe) by  
8 promoting mass migration from African and Arab countries, as well as encouraging their  
9 demographic growth. Depending on the conspiracists considered, the actors orchestrating such  
10 plots had generally been identified with the Clinton Foundation and/or Hungarian-American  
11 financier and philanthropist George Soros (through the Open Society Foundations) by way of  
12 the financial support given to humanitarian NGOs rescuing migrants and asylum seekers. These  
13 theories came in from the margins into the mainstream around the peak of the so-called  
14 ‘migration crisis’ in summer 2015. After that, replacement and anti-Soros conspiracy theories  
15 gained ground globally. Among their chief advocates is Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán,  
16 who invested taxpayers’ money in costly campaigns targeting migrant populations and  
17 demonising Soros.  
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35 One of the slogans of the several billboards disseminated across Hungary in this period read:  
36 ‘Soros wants to transplant millions from Africa and the Middle East’. In response to these  
37 allegations, other posters – always funded by the Hungarian government – urged: ‘Don’t let  
38 George Soros have the last laugh!’. This campaign was run within the framework of the 2017  
39 ‘national consultation’, which consisted of surveys sent to Hungarian households by the  
40 government and asking leading questions on what was labelled as the ‘Soros plan’.<sup>3</sup> At the final  
41 event of the campaign, Orbán (2017) vowed to ‘stand in the way of [Soros] grand plan and his  
42 grand business project’. In light of the political influence exerted over democratisation in post-  
43 communist countries and his sustained push for liberal ideas, Soros has often been portrayed as  
44 using his wealth for shady purposes. Claiming the existence of a deliberate plot to support  
45 groups, NGOs, and smugglers flooding the country with migrants only helped exacerbate  
46 preconceptions about the Hungarian-American financier and philanthropist. It is also interesting  
47 to note that, while born in Hungary and supporting liberal causes across Central and Eastern  
48 Europe (and beyond), Soros had spent most of his life outside of the country and is best  
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3 interpreted as an external conspirator. In nativist terms, his Jewish origins would be also  
4 sufficient to locate him 'outside the Hungarian nation' and to provide anti-Semitic undertones to  
5 the attacks on him (e.g. Mudde, 2007).  
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11 Blaming Soros for the migrant crisis and insisting on such a conspiracy framing did in fact serve  
12 several purposes. After the 2014 general election, Fidesz put forward a contentious proposal on  
13 the taxation of Internet usage (October 2014) and was later embroiled in the Quaestor  
14 brokerage scandal (March 2015), which was the biggest financial scandal ever recorded in  
15 Hungary. Both events led to a sharp decline in Fidesz's support (Politico, n.d.) and sparked  
16 widespread popular discontent (Pirro and della Porta, 2021). In the wake of the Paris terrorist  
17 attacks (January 2015), Fidesz started politicising the issue of immigration – an issue previously  
18 absent from the Hungarian public debate – to divert attention from its political failures. With  
19 some of its most visible consequences unfolding along the Western Balkan route, the migration  
20 crisis of summer 2015 only bolstered Orbán's 'political masterpiece': from the absolute  
21 marginality of the issue, one Hungarian in three had come to regard immigration as the most  
22 important issue faced by the country in autumn 2015 (Eurobarometer 84).  
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37 At the same time, placing Soros at the centre of a conspiracy theory on ethnic replacement  
38 responded to two long-standing objectives of Fidesz: winning far-right voters and spreading  
39 Euroscepticism among the larger public. On the one hand, Soros can be rightfully defined as  
40 *the* bogeyman of the post-communist far right (Ramet, 1999). Hungarian nativists have  
41 repeatedly vilified him since the 1990s and much dislike has to be attributed to the Jewish  
42 origins of Soros. This means that these theories could be partly interpreted as an anti-Semitic  
43 dog-whistle form of politics. On the other hand, Fidesz kept up a strained relationship with the  
44 EU since it came to power in 2010, especially given the attacks on civil rights and the rule of law.  
45 In the run-up to the 2019 European Parliament election, another billboard campaign featured  
46 Soros – this time pictured with then-President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude  
47 Juncker. The poster read: 'You have the right to know what Brussels is planning to do!',  
48 essentially suggesting that the EU had been following Soros' orders regarding the introduction  
49 of compulsory resettlement quotas and had thus been part of the conspiring network around  
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3 him. Conspiracism under Orbán's rule has thus moved from the margins to the mainstream, and  
4 was steadily embedded into Fidesz's mode of governance.  
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### 10 11 *Trump and the deep state and QAnon* 12 13 14

15 The Trump presidency looks to be suffused with examples of conspiracism. Trump constructed  
16 his appeal as a candidate and as a president through active aggressive demonisation of various  
17 groups – be they immigrants, Muslims, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Democrats,  
18 Black Lives Matter activists, China, or others. Those groups were ascribed by Trump as acting  
19 duplicitously and with hidden motives. The COVID-19 virus was therefore labelled as the 'China  
20 virus' by Trump. The attempt at impeachment by the Democrats was labelled as an 'illegal,  
21 partisan attempted coup', the FBI investigation into Russian links a 'witch-hunt' and the 2020  
22 election as a stolen election. The language of conspiracy and the label of conspiracy theories  
23 are everywhere in describing Trump, his voter base, and his links with the voter base. Trump  
24 himself was often not the active initiator of the conspiracy theories but it is invariably the case  
25 that, where conspiracy theories existed, Trump associated himself with them, albeit indirectly.  
26 His appeal has been built on those direct or indirect associations. In practice, it often appears  
27 that he ascribed agency and ulterior motives to the actions of those he opposed.  
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43 Here we focus on two conspiracy theories used by Trump and his administration. The first is the  
44 concept of the 'deep state'. This is an idea that predates Trump (Hellinger, 2019) but that has  
45 been picked up by his administration, particularly Steve Bannon the early days of his  
46 administration. The idea of the deep state is a very functional device for a president in office as  
47 it portrays institutionalised opposition within the state and serves as an explanation of why a  
48 politician is unable to deliver on their promises. It has, inherent within it, the association with  
49 collusive and coordinated activity covertly used to forward a particular agenda – or to thwart an  
50 existing agenda. Bannon departed the administration in 2017. But it is notable that the deep  
51 state idea remained. It surfaced again in relation the COVID-19 pandemic, with Trump  
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3 implicating the US Food and Drug Administration and even Anthony Fauci, his chief  
4 epidemiologist, as part of the deep state.  
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9 The second conspiracy theory is that of QAnon. According to this theory, there is a shadowy  
10 network of people that worked to frustrate the Trump administration. QAnon is an umbrella  
11 term for internet-based theories that argues the existence of a Satan-worshipping network  
12 engaged in global child sex-trafficking ring (*New York Times*, 20 August 2020). The network  
13 includes top Democrats (like former US president Barack Obama and Hilary Clinton), various  
14 celebrities (like Oprah Winfrey), and world figures (such as the Dalai Lama). Like the deep state  
15 theory, the idea predates the Trump administration but was amplified by his implications of  
16 support. While Trump has not advocated the QAnon theory directly, he has praised the  
17 movement and noted their support of him, and QAnon images have been used by the Trump  
18 campaign in 2020 (*Washington Post*, 2 August 2020).  
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31 The storming of Capitol Hill in January 2021 saw the culmination and effects of the conspiracy  
32 theories with QAnon supporters and advocates of the deep state theories prominent among the  
33 rioters. Of course, the discourse and election denial of Trump in the wake of the November  
34 election was a clear catalyst. However, Trump's assertion of a stolen election does not itself  
35 amount to a conspiracy theory; the alleged conspirators were the Democrats and the alleged  
36 plot was hardly secret but a brazen attempt to oust Trump and undermine his supporters,  
37 according to his narrative. What the episode shows is the power and cumulative potential  
38 effects of conspiracism.  
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49 Overall, Trump's sustained negativity, demonisation, and polarisation towards his enemies  
50 means that much of what passes for conspiracism is often an extreme hostility towards his  
51 opponents and tendency to assert nefarious motives and means to them but actually stops  
52 short of identifying a hidden conspiracy. There are however two incontrovertible cases of  
53 conspiracy theories which involve the invocation of a sustained network actively and secretly  
54 conspiring: the deep state and QAnon theories. What is notable about the use of these  
55 conspiracy theories is the timing. The roots of the deep state theory mostly but not exclusively  
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3 lie in the first few months of Trump's presidency and can be seen as a continuation of Trump  
4 election campaign theme about taking on the Washington establishment and 'draining the  
5 swamp'. The QAnon theory surfaced in the latter part of his presidency and, again, this timing  
6 coincided with the campaign for re-election and came to fruition with the storming of Capitol  
7 Hill. Trump's use of conspiracism therefore appears to be linked to his propensity for negative  
8 campaigning rather than as a mode of governance.  
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### 19 *Chávez and US plots*

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23 Instances of populist conspiracism denouncing US plots abounded during the presidency of  
24 Hugo Chávez (1999-2013) – and, since 2013, by his successor Nicolás Maduro.<sup>4</sup> During his time  
25 in government, Chávez propagated conspiracy theories 'at a staggering rate' (Carey, 2019: 445).  
26 Several claims were made by the Venezuelan government, according to which the US and the  
27 CIA conspired against Chávez and planned his assassination to prevent the fulfilment of the  
28 Bolivarian revolution and attain socialism in Venezuela.  
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37 The US has been repeatedly involved in Latin American affairs in order to prevent the  
38 instatement, or to try to attain the removal, of uncongenial regimes. The coup against  
39 Guatemalan president Jacobo Árbenz in 1954, leading to the dictatorship of Carlos Castillo  
40 Armas (1954-1957), or the Bay of Pigs invasion (Cuba) in 1961, as well as the assassination  
41 attempts against Fidel Castro, are some examples of US-backed military interventions against  
42 Latin American governments. The resulting tension between anti-imperialist politics and the  
43 tyrannical tendencies attributed to the US fed into several conspiracy theories targeting US  
44 presidents, agents, and aides. This is all the more resonant when placed in the context of  
45 'missionary politics', whereby a charismatic leader leads a chosen people 'toward redemption  
46 and salvation' in the struggle 'against all-powerful and conspiratorial enemies' (Zúquete, 2008:  
47 92).  
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3 In Venezuela, Chávez denounced the corruption of the old Punto Fijo regime (i.e. the informal  
4 system of party cooperation emerged after the country's transition to democracy in 1958) and  
5 US-led international capitalism. Read through this ideological lens, both the US and the Punto  
6 Fijo system ultimately aimed at subverting the good of the Venezuelan people (Hawkins, 2010:  
7 45) and both deserved a revolutionary response. At the heart of Chávez's project lay the  
8 realisation of 'twenty-first-century socialism', which proposed a radical transformation of the  
9 pre-existing corrupt system and a redemptive path towards dignity and justice. From these  
10 premises, it is possible to understand the scope of Chávez's diffuse conspiracism. It was a  
11 narrative designed to sustain the mobilisation potential of popular support while in power and a  
12 central aspect of his style of government. 'For Chávez, the will of the people is always seen as  
13 juxtaposed against, indeed subverted by, the efforts of a conspiring minority that pursues its  
14 own interests at the expense of the whole' (Hawkins, 2010: 61).

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29 On numerous occasions, the Venezuelan leader blamed US president George W. Bush for  
30 anything malicious that could have happened to him (Pérez Hernáiz, 2008; Zúquete, 2008).  
31 Aside from the several – more or less substantiated – claims concerning US plots to kill the  
32 president, Chávez's own illness and eventual death by cancer in 2013 were also the object of  
33 widespread conspiracism, suggesting that US agents used 'nano weapons' and inoculated  
34 cancer into the Venezuelan leader as early as 2005. These would of course add to the broader  
35 attempts by the US and the local oligarchy to wage economic war against the government, so  
36 as to bring down the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) (Carey, 2019).

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47 The conspiracy theories used by populists in Venezuela resonate with the ideological  
48 underpinnings of their politics as well as with the anti-American mass mobilisations in their  
49 support. *Americanismo* or anti-imperialism is a crucial ideological component in the articulation  
50 of the radical democratic model advocated by PSUV and their attack on foreign political  
51 intervention (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). While fostering a continuous source of  
52 support around leaders at home, conspiracies involving US plots fed into populist attacks on the  
53 elites of Latin American systems, at the same time fuelling populist aspirations of radical or  
54 revolutionary democracy (de la Torre, 2010; Hawkins, 2010; Zúquete, 2008).

## Discussion and conclusions

We started our article noting conspiracism's entry into the political mainstream and the seeming entrenchment of these narratives in populists' discourse. There are reasons for populist advocacy of conspiracy theories, which mean that we can see conspiracy theories as a populist trope (Taggart, 2018). Populists' attempt to activate conspiratorial attitudes can be a part of their strategy in power (Balta et al., 2021). The intersection between populism and conspiracy theories is still however a secondary concern to the social scientific scholarship (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Bergmann, 2018; Bergmann and Butter, 2020). With this contribution, we sought to highlight their terms of convergence and their relevance, theoretically as much as empirically.

We first defined populist conspiracism as politically purposeful in that it helps populists sustain their antagonistic role. To target a conspiring elite is to vilify opponents and/or shield populists from hostile attacks. In their use of conspiracy theories, populists highlight at least three terms of convergence with this trope – Manicheanism, a sense of victimhood, and an ambivalence towards representative politics. It is also the case that conspiracy theories serve particular functions in the populist playbook. The definition of conspiring elites (who), the circumstances under which conspiracy theories are propagated (when), and the ultimate purpose of conspiratorial framing (why) tend to reveal important aspects of populist politics and their relationship with power. In essence, if conspiracism stays with populists governing on their own, and on their own terms, we can reasonably isolate the influence of other actors in propagating these narratives.

Upon closer inspection, ideologically diverse cases across a range of regions such as Orbán in Hungary, Trump in the US, and Chávez in Venezuela shared a number of features. First, conspiracism unequivocally helped demonise and delegitimise enemies (i.e. the conspiring elites), feeding into the moral dichotomisation at the heart of populists' worldview. The

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3 conspiring elites however varied according to the ideological orientation of the populists.  
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5 Chávez, who had put anti-imperialism at the core of his socialist revolution, relentlessly targeted  
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7 the US as the source of personal and national ills. Orbán, who has decidedly steered towards  
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9 the far right since coming back to power in 2010, framed opposition to migrants in terms of  
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11 ethnic substitution, blaming Soros as the chief responsible for the looming threat. While  
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13 enemies for both qualified as external as the targeted elites are not 'part of the nation' (Mudde,  
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15 2007), the deep state conspiracy (and at least in part QAnon) advocated by Trump defined  
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17 enemies that are internal to the state. Although the existence of a covert network controlling the  
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19 state and frustrating governmental action is common to other populists-in-power in Poland  
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21 (Jarosław Kaczyński) and Turkey (Recep Tayyip Erdoğan), the right-wing character of this  
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23 conspiracy holds as long as targeted elites are identified as ideological opponents (i.e. left-wing  
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25 and progressives). There is however no reason to assume that left-wing populists should not  
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27 turn to similar conspiracy theories.  
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32 Second, the timing of populist conspiracism reflects populists' desire to promote or prolong a  
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34 sense of crisis. Chávez in Venezuela seemed concerned with creating a state of permanent alert  
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36 against the US threat (with no discernible interruption to note). Orbán's successful attempt at  
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38 demonising migrants or Trump's denunciation of conspirators against his administration were  
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40 more circumscribed. The conspiracism of Orbán and Trump seemed by and large dictated by  
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42 electoral considerations. Orbán has however presented his government as the bulwark against  
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44 the Islamisation of Europe far beyond the 2015 migration crisis and waged a prolonged war  
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46 against liberalism throughout his stay in power. This resonates with Chávez's own attempt to  
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48 continually find new, imagined enemies to fight, especially once public support started to  
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50 decline after 2002 (Hawkins, 2010). In a way, the timing and length of populist conspiracism is  
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52 telling insofar as populists' mode of governance is concerned. The more relevant and persistent  
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54 their conspiracism, the greater their aspiration to rule according to emergency powers, and thus  
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56 the willingness circumvent the constraints posed by representative politics and the rule of law.  
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Third, the functional utility of populist conspiracism in power is to rally the people – i.e. the  
deceived people, the victims – against a common enemy, but importantly around populists-in-

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3 government. In examining populist conspiracism, we differentiated between sustaining and  
4 regaining public support. Chávez's insistence on the presence of US plots would indicate a  
5 consistent attempt at mobilising people. The rationale underlying Orbán and Trump's  
6 conspiracism seems conversely reactive and aimed at recovering from declining approval rates.  
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8 Regardless of the proactive and reactive logic at stake, populist conspiracism intelligibly helps  
9 diverting attention from possible failure in government.  
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17 Drawing back from the specifics of Orbán, Chávez, and Trump we can make some general  
18 observations about the relationship between populism and conspiracism that seem to follow  
19 from the cases. The first observation is that, if we are precise in our identification of conspiracy  
20 theories, then it appears that conspiracism is less frequently used by populists than we might  
21 assume if we were to look at the wider use of the term. The demonisation of their enemies and  
22 the Manichaeism of populists leads to the assumption that charges made by populist spill  
23 over into conspiracism, but this is not often the case in practice. There is nothing incompatible  
24 between populism and conspiracism, but there is also nothing inevitable about their linkage.  
25 There is a parallel here: populism, when defined precisely rather than used in its vernacular  
26 sense, is less common than is often asserted. The loose use of concepts leads to over-extension  
27 of their application.  
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41 The second general observation we can make is that there is something eminently fungible or  
42 malleable about conspiracy theories. The very opacity and vagueness of the networks implied in  
43 these theories means that conspiracy theories are effective tools when employed for political  
44 appeals. Their slipperiness means that they can be easily implied and definitive refutations are  
45 hard to come by. This is the reason that populism seems to imply conspiracism as much as it  
46 does, but why full-blown populist conspiracism is thinner on the ground.  
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55 The final remark we would make is that while populism always has an implied 'heartland'  
56 (Taggart, 2000), the identification of an evil, manipulative, and powerful network of conspirators  
57 is a mirror to the heartland. While the heartland embodies all that is good and that is to be  
58 recaptured with populist success, the conspiratorial network embodies all that is bad and  
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3 threatening to the heartland. Both concepts are similar in that they are essentially vague, ill-  
4 defined, but nonetheless heartfelt and powerful mobilising ideas for their constituencies. On  
5 these grounds, conspiracism is unlikely to wane, but may progressively acquire the same  
6 resonance as the heartland in populists' discourse. Populists' ability to deny failure, divert  
7 attention, and lay the blame on the bad elites resonates as long as they are able to entrench  
8 conspiracism as part of their politics of crisis.  
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For Peer Review

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34 <sup>1</sup> One of the most consequential conspiracy theories in contemporary history relates to the anti-Semitism of the  
35 extreme right and suggests a Zionist plot to control the world. While more or less covert anti-Semitic conspiracy  
36 theories are gaining ground among populist circles, anti-Semitism is a trademark feature of the non-democratic  
37 extreme right rather than populist politics (e.g. Heins, 2007).

38 <sup>2</sup> Much more could be said about their different pathways to government, deeds in power, and strategies to hold  
39 on to it. However, we are here solely concerned with their conspiracism and the elements underlying it, and believe  
40 that their right-wing (Orbán and Trump) rather than left-wing (Chávez) ideological orientation, and geographical  
41 location (Europe rather than the Americas) can provide preliminary insights into similarities and differences across  
42 the three relevant elements outlined.

43 <sup>3</sup> Soros did in fact outline a plan to rejig the EU asylum system to address the migration crisis, but Fidesz's  
44 campaigning intended to deceive people into regarding it as a fait accompli (see Soros, 2015).

45 <sup>4</sup> Chávez's own conspiracism draws additional leverage from a failed coup attempt against him in April 2002, which  
46 saw the Venezuelan president being ousted from power and then reinstated over the span of just two days.  
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Table 1. Relevant elements for populist conspiracism in power

<i>Element</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Scope</i>
Who	Targeted elites	Internal vs. external outgroup
When	Set of conditions	Circumscribed vs. permanent crisis
Why	Functional utility	Sustaining vs. regaining support

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