



The *Great Replacement* and Other Conspiracy Narratives: Intersectional Antidemocratic Features of Authoritarian Populism and the Far Right

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to parse the antidemocratic potential of conspiracy narratives in a political context, including their intersectional and gender dimensions. It seeks to contribute to a better understanding, from a democratic theory and intersectional perspective, of: 1) how authoritarian populism and conspiracism are related and what composes their respective antidemocratic impetuses and 2) how this relationship might play out in processes of ‘mainstreaming’ far right content on the one hand and in processes of radicalisation via conspiracy narratives on the other. I pursued the thesis that conspiracism takes some of the most essential antidemocratic features of authoritarian populism to the extreme, exacerbating its antidemocratic impetus. I use illustrative examples from the *Great Replacement* conspiracy narrative (and those closely connected to it, such as *Eurabia*, Soros and *white genocide* conspiracism) in online media platforms. The illustrative examples also demonstrate that antidemocratic features cannot be understood without considering their intersectional dimension. Focusing more closely on this dimension of far right and authoritarian populist strategies, I suggest the term ‘strategic intersectionality’. Finally, I show how the shared structural characteristics of authoritarian populism and conspiracism, including its gendered, intersectional nature, might facilitate both the normalisation of far-right content and radicalisation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

It remains largely uncontested in scholarly work that conspiracy narratives reinforce violence and extremism and thus may act as amplifier of anti-democratic radicalization (Davis 2024; Davey and Ebner 2019; Ebner 2023; Farinelli 2021; Lamberty and Knäble 2020; Littvay 2022; Rottweiler and Gill 2020; Vegetti and Littvay 2022). Conspiracy narratives are driving an increasing number of lone offender terrorist attacks, such as – to mention one of many – the one in the Hanau synagogue. The attacker drew from the *Great Replacement* conspiracy theory (Crawford and Keen 2020), along with combining antisemitic, racist and antifeminist and sexist narratives (Jasser, Kelly and Rothermel 2020; Lamberty and Rees 2021, 284). Conspiracy narratives are also increasingly entering the ‘mainstream’, being used by political actors and normalised in media discourse (Bergmann 2018; Ebner 2023; Ekman 2022; Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019; Önnersfors and Krouwel 2021). Against this backdrop, the article asks what the antidemocratic potential of political conspiracy narratives actually consists of – in its political use in authoritarian populism, extremist and mainstream discourse.¹ The *second part* of the paper ties in with current debates in populism, democracy and conspiracy theory research and elaborates on the relationship between authoritarian populism and conspiracy theory, carving out the respective antidemocratic features. The *third part* seeks to exemplify and analyse the main characteristics of these antidemocratic features, giving illustrative examples from the online spread of the *Great Replacement*, *Eurabia* and *white genocide* narratives. Simultaneously, it also highlights the gendered and intersectional notion at the core of these antidemocratic patterns. *Part four* engages with this intersectional notion which surfaces in populism as well as conspiracism. Additionally, it highlights how racism and antisemitism are connected in the *Great Replacement* conspiracy narrative, a still rather neglected aspect in intersectionality research. *Part five* discusses conclusions and further research desiderata. The article presents a theoretical case study with illustrative examples and does not present representative claims.

2. AUTHORITARIAN POPULISM AND CONSPIRACISM – DEBATES AND CONCEPTS

ANTIDEMOCRATIC FEATURES OF AUTHORITARIAN POPULISM FROM A DEMOCRATIC THEORY PERSPECTIVE

While the antidemocratic potential of conspiracy narratives – at least specific ones, such as *Great Replacement* conspiracism – is widely acknowledged (Davis 2024; Davey and Ebner 2019; Ebner 2023; Farinelli 2021; Lamberty and Knäble 2020; Littvay 2022; Rottweiler and Gill 2020; Vegetti and Littvay 2022), the antidemocratic character of populism is contested. It largely depends on the theoretical conception and definition of populism – whether it is seen as genuinely antidemocratic or potentially democracy-enhancing. Two approaches stand behind these two adversarial assessments of populism, both viewing constructions of the people/we, and particularly the drawing of their boundaries, as pivotal. On the one hand, the radical democratic approach of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe detects a democratic and politicizing potential of populism, i.e. that it potentially challenges

¹ The work on this article was also made possible by my assistant professorship at the European Forum of the Hebrew University in 2022/23. I thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

hegemonic discourse by articulating ‘equivalential chains of unfulfilled demands’ (Laclau 2005, 177) and that it may take on an agonistic character, which is relevant for democracy (Mouffe 2014, 28–29). Mouffe also argues that the ‘logic of democracy’ necessarily implies a ‘moment of closure which is required by the very process of constituting the “people”’ (Mouffe 2000, 43). However, Mouffe gives no indication of how this closure can be democratically legitimised. On the other hand, democracy theorists such as Urbinati (2019) and Müller (2017) define the excluding, anti-pluralist moment of populism as salient for its antidemocratic thrust and thus do not see a democratising potential in populism. Altogether, however, there is broad agreement that the respective construction of ‘the (true) people’ is key in populism (Canovan 2004, 247, 544; Laclau 2005, 48; Mudde 2004; Rancière 2017, 8, 247; Urbinati 1998, 111). Hence, regardless of whether populism is conceived of as primarily a ‘thin ideology’ (Mudde 2004), a political strategy (Urbinati 2019), a political style or a mix of those (Wodak 2015), constructions of ‘the people’ are always at the centre. It is characterised by an exclusionary understanding of an alleged ‘true people’ who are, in fact, usually a minority (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2023) but class themselves as a majority. It is a majoritarian claim of a (homogenous, autochthone, pure and often victimised) people that tends to culminate in a delegitimization of others (Müller 2017, 27–31; 2022, 611). Thus, building on the approach of Urbinati (2019) and Müller (2017; 2022), majoritarianism and antipluralism serve as a measure and an expression of the antidemocratic potential.²

I argue that populism is authoritarian and antidemocratic when it is based on an essentialist notion of the demos, which at the same time results in abandoning the notion of democratic equality. This is the case when the boundaries of the demos are prefigured and explicitly not up for democratic negotiation (Müller 2017, 94), resulting in an a priori exclusion of specific groups from the demos. Such an exclusion contradicts the democratic principle of equality. This definition of authoritarian populism and its antidemocratic thrust does not deny that there is a necessary moment of closure and boundary-drawing in constituting the demos, as Mouffe states. In contrast to Mouffe’s approach, however, the pluralist approach defines openness for the negotiation of this closure as a democratic precondition and at the same time confines the legitimate closure of the people. The boundaries must be a possible matter of democratic negotiation, and legitimate boundaries must not be prefigured by essentialist and nativist ideas, which exactly impede democratic negotiation.

CONSPIRACISM

For the basic definition of this term, I draw on Barkun (2013), who defines the basic assumptions of conspiracy beliefs as being: *nothing is like it seems, everything is connected and nothing happens by accident* (Barkun 2013, 3–4). Barkun also introduces a distinction between event-related conspiracy beliefs – which, in principle, could be proved and evident – on the one hand (e.g. the Watergate scandal) and the belief in systemic conspiracy or even super conspiracies on the other. The latter include all-encompassing conspiracy narratives about (supra)regional or even global, history-driving meta conspiracies (Barkun 2013), which, per definition, can never be proven. Given the criticism of the term *conspiracy theory* (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019), I

² Such a view does, however, not imply that the analysis of (authoritarian) populism overlooks or neglects its socioeconomic basis and historical contexts but instead focuses on its salient expressions in the realm of discourse and political culture.

mainly refer to conspiracy narratives, conspiracy claims and *conspiracism*. Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019) distinguish between a ‘conspiracy theory’ on the one hand and ‘conspiracy without the theory’ on the other. The latter they term as *conspiracism*.³ Building on this meaning, I refer to the imaginations of systemic conspiracies in the sense of Barkun – more precisely, those which are currently politically used and successfully disseminated (particularly in Europe), such as the *Great Replacement*, *Eurabia*, *white genocide* and anti-Soros conspiracism.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AUTHORITARIAN POPULISM AND CONSPIRACISM

With regards to debates about the relationship between authoritarian populism and conspiracy theory, the question of common denominators and similarities sits at the centre. Are both these phenomena ‘manifestations of the same underlying something’ (Littvay 2022, 130)? Is there a necessary relationship between populism and conspiracism (see overview in Bergmann and Butter 2020, 332–334), or just an ‘elective affinity’ (Müller 2022, 609)? Does the wish to destroy the pluralist party system in representative liberal democracy manifest in both (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019, 84)?

There are representative studies showing that populist attitudes positively associate with belief in conspiracy theories (Balta, Kaltwasser and Yagci 2022, 634; Decker and Brähler 2020, 270; Guinjoan and Galais 2023). Scholarly work on the relationship between conspiracy theory and authoritarian populism highlights strikingly common traits that overlap in conspiracism and populism: a Manichean world view and an imaginary of harmful elites doing damage to ‘the people’ (Hauwaert 2012, in Bergmann and Butter 2020, 333; Priester 2012), which has also been proven to be salient in quantitative analyses (e.g. Castanho Silva, Vegetti and Littvay 2017). An interconnectedness also becomes visible when conspiracy narratives are used in attacks on core institutions of liberal democracy like parliaments, e.g. on the German Reichstag or the US Capitol and many others (Ebner 2023; Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019). However, not all authoritarian populist actors make use of conspiracy narratives, and it is only segments of populist party support that resort to conspiracism. In short, authoritarian populism does not necessarily require conspiracism to function (Bergmann and Butter 2020, 334; Müller 2022, 609). At the same time, there is no doubt that they often converge. Even though populists in opposition and in power do use conspiracy narratives, how they use them changes depending on how embedded, or even entrenched, their power is. Accordingly, the parties and their supporters do resort to conspiracism in varying degrees. Hence, there is rather a non-necessary relationship between them, or rather, an ‘elective affinity’ (Müller 2022, 609). But what does this non-necessary relationship consist of?

³ The former includes examples such as the British conspiracy against the American Revolution or about the assassination of Kennedy and at least pretend to follow journalistic or even scientific standards, trying to make sense of the political world and to offer explanations (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019, 19–20), and they may even represent a legitimate strain of democratic scepticism (Tulis in Muirhead et al. 2020, 160). The latter are merely bare assertions (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019, 26), which manufacture facts and create fictional worlds (Tulis in Muirhead et al. 2020, 159) – like, for example, Pizzagate or QAnon, along with the *Great Replacement* narrative and the Jewish conspiracy behind it. Conspiracism might seem, or try, to connect to ‘conspiracy theory’, and thus there might seem to be an overlap (Tulis in Muirhead et al. 2020, 160), but conspiracism does not accept any facts that disprove it. Instead, it asks ‘ominous questions’ (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019, 27).

I argue that, where political conspiracy narratives resonate with the antidemocratic features of authoritarian populism, they potentially function as drivers in the mainstreaming of far-right content, paving the way for extremist ideas to flow from the fringes out into the political and media debate. From this perspective, these shared antidemocratic features define the non-necessary relationship between authoritarian populism and conspiracism, and they manifest, again, in the respective constructions of *we*/'the people'. Taking up the definition of the antidemocratic pattern of authoritarian populism given above, a closer look at *we*- and *demos* constructions in conspiracism leads to the following observations: 1) While majoritarianism and antipluralism in authoritarian populism often implicitly expose a logic of *existential threat*, in the sense of a Schmittian friend–enemy distinction (Bischof 2018; 2022) – such as, for example, in the Austrian case (Bischof 2018) or in various current expressions of culture war logic (e.g. Busbridge, Moffitt and Thorburn 2020; Slačálek 2023) – this is even sharper in conspiracy narratives. It is the very existence of the '*we* group' that is at stake, in a physical and/or in a cultural sense, and, in order to secure this existence, the enemy has to either be defeated or annihilated. 2) The various "*others*" (national, ethnic, sexual or other minorities) are not only excluded from '*we*/'the people'; they are seen as enemies, which means that they cannot be viewed, at all, as legitimate political opponents in democratic conflict or legitimate political subjects in democratic debate or negotiation. If '*others*' of all kinds per se pose an existential threat to '*we*, the people', then any kind of democratic negotiation, deliberation or compromise is impossible. In summary then, the essential antidemocratic features to be detected in political *we*- and *demos* constructions (with antidemocratic tendencies) are a Schmittian friend–enemy distinction based on the notion of *existential threat*, leading to the complete *delegitimisation* of '*others*' as political subjects, be they political antagonists, elites or minorities. A third component characteristic of conspiracism, the notion of *urgency* (Hofstadter 1964), accelerates the antidemocratic thrust of existential threat and delegitimisation of others. In the following, I will give a few illustrative examples for how these notions of existential threat, delegitimisation and urgency manifest in the *Great Replacement* narrative and others closely connected to it. The examples also show that these notions are, at their core, characterised by an intersectional, gendered dimension, which will be analysed in greater detail in the fourth part.

The examples collected present phenomena particularly relevant to the research interest and should serve the formation of hypotheses. There is no representative claim. The exploratory search included blockchain and other video platforms such as Odysee (Forward Research, Mesquite, TX, USA) and YouTube (Google LLC, Mountain View, CA, USA), which are important in disseminating conspiracism (Matlach, Hammer and Schwieter 2022; Schwarzer 2022), as well as other online sites and media that take up the respective conspiracy narratives. The exploratory search was based on the state-of-the-art literature on the *Great Replacement*, *Eurabia* and *white genocide*, using the key terms '*replacement*', '*genocide*', '*defend Europe*' and '*Soros*'. In order to grasp tendencies in how conspiracy narratives are disseminated and '*mainstreamed*', I reconstructed in an exemplary way the use of the term '*replacement*', which is key in the *Great Replacement* conspiracy narrative, across fringe online platforms, online and offline political discourse and parliamentary debates.

The narrative of the *Great Replacement* conspiracy was coined in 2011 by Renaud Camus, a French right wing extremist writer, in his book *Le Grand Remplacement*, which subsequently greatly influenced the Identitarian movement in France and then other movements in other countries (Ekman 2022, 4; Goetz 2021, 66). This idea spreads the notion that Jewish elites promote non-white immigration in order to dominate the white population (Ekman 2022, 5). The term successfully replaced older and more stigmatised ones such as *Volkstod* ('death of people') and *Umwolkung* ('ethnicity inversion') (Ekman 2022, 4), thus also placing reproduction and population policy at the centre of the far-right discourse (Goetz 2021, 64) and advocating for the idea of a 'pure people' (Taguieff 2024, 340). The leader of the Austrian Identitarians, Martin Sellner, soon recognised the strategic value of the term, calculating that, 'as a first step, we need to popularise the "Great Replacement" throughout the patriotic camp and incorporate it into everyday language. From there, it will flow more and more into the media debate' (Sellner 2015). Considering that it was coined only in 2011, the spread of both this narrative and term has indeed been remarkable. Ebner (2023) found that, particularly after 2015, there has been a striking spread and mainstreaming of conspiracy theories, including the *Great Replacement* (Ebner 2023, 282; 286), with the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic playing a pivotal role in this (Ebner 2023, 283). The 'replacement' narrative also builds on theories of *white genocide*, which have flourished in Neo-Nazi milieus since the 1980s (Askanius 2021; Ekman 2022, 5).

This narrative is also connected to that of the *Eurabia* conspiracy, which is 10 years older than the 'replacement' conspiracism and sees a silent takeover of Muslims in Europe, promoted by a liberal/left wing elite (Bergmann 2018, 2; Ekman 2022, 5). Moreover, replacement conspiracism often connects to the Soros conspiracism⁴ (Plenta 2020). I argue, along with Mattias Ekman, that the *Great Replacement* conspiracism is a flexible political strategy (Ekman 2022, 2), which both connects to and encompasses various other similar conspiracy narratives such as *white genocide*, *Eurabia* and *Soros conspiracy*. *Great Replacement* conspiracism serves as a good example when examining how a conspiracy narrative translates into different sectors of political discourse. The *Great Replacement* narrative has been particularly successful in terms of wide and rapid distribution, as well as regarding its use by authoritarian populists particularly in Europe but also in the USA (Davey and Ebner 2019; Ebner 2023; Ekman 2022). Thus, it can be seen as particularly influential, and it is a good object of study for identifying structural connections between far-right conspiracy theories and populist rhetoric. At the same time, it well exemplifies the intersectional character of the antidemocratic thrust of political conspiracy narratives.

As the examples of *Great Replacement* and related narratives such as *Eurabia*, *white genocide* or George Soros show, the people-elite antagonism is presented as an existential threat, signalling maximum urgency. It projects the idea that nefarious elites are plotting against the European people by intentionally replacing (allegedly)

⁴ The Soros conspiracy myth was established predominantly in the 2013 Hungarian election campaign by Orban's advisors. Smaller-scale earlier versions can be traced to Slovakia (Langer 2021, 165). It was accompanied by a spike in online distribution within the following years (Grassegger 2019); thereby, it combines perfectly with *Great Replacement*, *Eurabia*, *white genocide* and other similar conspiracisms. Anti-Soros conspiracy narratives are not only used by right wing actors in Europe and the USA such as Trump and AfD (Lorenz 2024) but also by left-wing parties in Eastern Europe (in Hungary but also in Romania, Slovakia and Poland) (Langer 2021, 175ff.).

homogeneous nations with non-European peoples. In the foreground, anti-Muslim racism (due to the ‘Muslim threat’), but often also racism towards refugees in general, appears as the major problem. Images of (mass) migration are portrayed as undermining Europe, eroding its ‘ethnic character’. The main feature of this idea is the threat’s existential character and the urgent need to counteract it. This is exemplified, for instance, by a banner with the slogan ‘multiculturalism is genocide’, with the symbol of a skull and crossbones next to it.

EXAMPLE 1: EXISTENTIAL THREAT – GENOCIDE

Viewing ‘multiculturalism as genocide’ as on this sticker (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/countering-radical-right/great-replacement-theory-historical-perspective/>) is viewing it as an existential threat. This implies, on the one hand, that people of ‘non-European ethnicity’ pose a threat to Europe, be they immigrants with third country nationality or EU citizens who/whose parents were born in non-EU countries. This is why the *Great Replacement* conspiracy narrative appears, above all, as a profoundly racist one, particularly focussing on the perceived un-European nature of Islam (Davey and Ebner 2019, 13; Ekman 2022, 4), Muslim immigrants and Muslim EU-citizens alike. These narratives are not confined to scapegoating Islam and often also target immigration from African countries or various groups of refugees. Many scholars explore the position of Islam as the ‘absolute other’ in Europe in the often-intermingling *Great Replacement*, *Eurabia* and *white genocide* conspiracy narratives (Önnerfors and Krouwel 2021, 16; see Bergmann 2018; Gualda 2021). This is most strikingly the case in the *Eurabia* conspiracy narrative, which has, at its very core, the idea that Europe will end up under the rule of Islam (Bergmann 2018, 38–39). *Great Replacement* and *white genocide* narratives also vilify Islam in the same vein, suggesting the threat of replacement through Muslim immigration in the foreground (Bergmann 2018, VIII; Ekman 2022, 5).

Viewing ‘multiculturalism’ as an existential threat means that those who promote it are also an existential threat. Among its promoters are politicians, ‘power elites’ and the European Union (Bergmann 2021), who are either accused of facilitating the replacement and erosion of ‘European civilization’ from within (Önnerfors and Krouwel 2021) or of plotting with the Arab League to bring about *Eurabia* (Giséle Littmann alias Bat Ye’or in Bergmann 2021, 39). In many cases, minorities are behind the elite, above all Jews, or ‘the Jew’, respectively, as the following example of the vilification of George Soros shows. A great many of the variants of the *Great Replacement*, *Eurabia* and *white genocide* narratives identify a behind-the-scenes, Jewish world conspiracy, as the real threat. Sometimes these real but hidden perpetrators are introduced via cryptic allusions and other times are personalised – take, for instance, George Soros. Soros is depicted as a major destructive force: a ‘globalist’ behind the EU elites – this is also a common feature in anti-EU conspiracy narratives (Krouwel and Van Prooijen 2021, 25) – but also as the “angel of death” and destroyer of America (Escuela 2020), the enslaver of the European Union and its peoples (MarianoDigital 2020).

EXAMPLE 2: IMAGE OF GEORGE SOROS AS AN ENSLAVER

This image, which can be found on many webpages (<https://mirdig.wordpress.com/2020/04/28/george-soros-al-asalto-de-la-union-europea-para-esclavizar-a-los-ciudadanos/>) exemplifies the intersectional dimension of this conspiracy

narrative as well as its claim of an existential threat.⁵ The antisemitic dimension is intrinsically connected to its (anti-Muslim) racist dimension. Both are connected and function within a 'larger pattern' of these narratives (*Great Replacement*, *Eurabia* et al.). At the same time, its intersectional character is exemplified. A closer look at the insignia on Soros' fist of oppression in Example 2 makes clear that Islam and Muslims ('create *Eurabia*'), feminism ('prevent birth') and LGBTIQ* minorities (who 'indoctrinate children') are symbolised as the most important insignia on Soros' threatening, iron fist, symbolising his 'efforts' to enslave and subjugate. The other insignia on Soros' fist are 'abortion' and 'paedophilia', which are clearly connected to 'feminism' and 'LGBT' by attributing it to 'LGBT' 'hypersexualisation'. This insight into conspiracisms' imagination of the 'behind the scenes' also shows what is hidden behind the nefarious 'elites': a hierarchy of minorities – namely Muslims, LGBTIQ* and feminists – all instrumentalised and weaponised by Soros, the personification of the most dangerous minority, Jews. Thus, anti-Muslim racism, antisemitism, sexism and homophobia are intrinsically connected and surface (depending on various versions of conspiracy myths) as (integral) parts of an intersectional structure – as parts of the same fist of subjugation – even though single parts might come to the foreground in different contexts. Additionally, it is obvious that anti-Soros conspiracism is a strikingly global phenomenon; images like the one above can easily be found online in various (trans)national party-political contexts, blogs and posts by various actors and movements, which also expose their considerable contradictions. In some, he is depicted as a socialist, in some as a liberal who wants to destroy 'democratic freedom' (see [Escuela 2020](#)) and in others as a reckless capitalist and neoliberal (see [Korolczuk and Graff 2018](#); [Krouwel and Van Prooijen 2021](#)). This mirrors, on the one hand, the structure of antisemitism; on the other, it is also typical for the global spread of conspiracy myths. Anyone who connects political opponents (who are pro-feminist, pro-human rights, pro-LGBTIQ*) with such stereotypical images of existential enemies is hardly willing to view them as legitimate political actors. Thus, conspiracy beliefs of this kind promote the delegitimization of 'elites' and minorities alike, with at least some of these minorities, such as Jews, hiding 'behind' and steering the elites. This is all the more the case if, in addition to a perceived existential threat, there is also a pronounced sense of urgency. In the case of *Replacement-Eurabia* conspiracism, this urgency appears in the form of violent chaos, flooding and invasion ([Davey and Ebner 2019](#); [Gualda 2021](#)). A 'fight for Europe' video, extracted from the platform Odysee,⁶ exemplifies several appearances of this notion of urgency.

EXAMPLE 3: URGENCY – VIDEO 'FIGHT FOR EUROPE' ON THE PLATFORM ODYSSEE

In this scene (<https://odysee.com/@AvaWolfe:d/AVE-EUROPA-FIGHT-FOR-EUROPE:4,2:30>), two male migrants/refugees, depicted as violent and chaotic (signified by a burning car in the background and their black hoodies) are approaching the spectator/camera. When they are almost there, the one closest to the camera appears to shout a battle cry, presenting a picture both frightening and stereotypically racist at the

⁵ Even though enslavement is not an existential threat leading to physical death, it is clearly framed as existential threat in terms of "culture" and identity.

⁶ Odysee is a block chain-based platform that portrays itself as a libertarian enterprise and an alt-tech alternative to YouTube. Besides lifestyle influencers and cooking instructions and the like, it hosts a great deal of conspiracism and Neo-Nazi content ([Matlach, Hammer and Schwieter 2022](#); [Schwarzer 2022](#)).

same time. This signifies that it is almost too late. The invasion, which also here takes on the form of an attack, has not only begun; it is about to succeed. This urgency also insinuates that, given the overwhelming and immediate threat, 1) any measure is legitimate to prevent the catastrophe, including violence, and 2) there is absolutely no time to think or question these insinuated (violent) counter-measures. In the same video (<https://odysee.com/@AvaWolfe:d/AVE-EUROPA-FIGHT-FOR-EUROPE:4, 4:25>), after a long sequence depicting threat and danger accompanied by dramatic music, images of armoured knights, standing on a hill next to a cross and a flag, appear; after that, other European national flags appear, pointing to possible 'ways out' (4:25).

The existential threat in this example is depicted as a (violent) attack or invasion by (male) migrants and/or violent chaos. Another way of depicting the existential threat is to view it as a dangerous feminisation of Europe, signifying decay. This is inherent in the European trajectory of cultural pessimism expressed, for example by Oswald Spengler and others, which reflect on an essence of Europe in decline (Önnerfors and Krouwel 2021, 9; Ifversen 1997) or also in a call to defend Europe, portrayed as a weak, feminine figure in need of protection, as it is often portrayed in the long iconographic tradition of Europe (see Bischof 2015). The latter is illustrated by an Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) post.

EXAMPLE 4: EURABIA

This poster, used in an AfD campaign in Berlin 2019 (AFD Berlin 2019), <https://x.com/AfDBerlin/status/1115572899115675649>, can be interpreted as a scary picture of a feminization of Europe or as an urgent call for (European nations') male knights/fighters to defend the fragile and delicate essence of European civilization. Regardless of the way the different threat scenarios play out, in most cases, they imply a claim for re-masculinisation in the sense of a militant fortification. 'Only if we rediscover our masculinity ... we will be able to defend ourselves',⁷ as AfD leader Björn Höcke says (Höcke 2015). The exclusive populist claim of 'we are the people' rooted in an existential friend-enemy logic is, in general, bound to a masculinist⁸ representative claim (Bischof and Löffler 2023) because it relies on a male-coded war imaginary. Being 'able to defend ourselves', in this context, implies a specific and masculinist affective trait of 're-sovereignisation' in the form of 'haunting national sovereignty', which characterises right-wing authoritarian rhetoric (Bargetz 2023). Such is embedded in a more general contemporary call for re-sovereignisation, which is not confined to authoritarian populism but which it particularly capitalises on (Bargetz 2023).

In both cases, the threat is immediate and existential and creates a sense of absolute urgency. Süselbeck (2020), in his analysis of antisemitic conspiracism in rap videos and popular culture in social media, speaks of *inverse invectivity*. This means, in the end, it always comes down to a 'point of a liberating collective explosion of violence, a pogrom out of self-defence or a desperate decisive struggle against a secret world power' (Süselbeck 2020, 371). This is preceded by an ambivalent move to exaggerate

⁷ In German: 'Nur wenn wir unsere Männlichkeit wiederentdecken ... werden wir wehrhaft'.

⁸ The term 'masculinism' refers to an ideologization of a specific form of masculinity, both in value preferences and views on society and in 'symbolic orders' (Kreisky and Löffler 2009, 77). It focuses on constructions, not on social or biological masculinity (Kreisky and Löffler 2009). This means that masculinity is not bound to the biological category of 'man'; thus, women can also represent it.

the power and invincibility of the invisible enemy in an absurd way and, at the same time, the enemy's blatant devaluation and degradation ([Süselbeck 2020](#)). The time dimension plays out as a notion of absolute urgency to act in self-defence, often allegedly in a state of emergency, justifying even the most brutal reactions.

The examples given illustrate the different dimensions of how fringe and far-right conspiracist claims resonate with structural features of authoritarian populism and how structural features of authoritarian populism are taken to the extreme here. Conspiracy theories fortify the friend-enemy logic as follows: 1) in the notion of existential threat, to the point of being an immediate physical threat (as in Examples 2 and 3); 2) all examples signify a delegitimisation and denigration of the alleged enemies: elites and minorities 'behind' the elites alike as well as political opponents in general; and 3) by creating a sense of urgency, the delegitimization of 'elites' and 'others' is even more emphasised and, at the same time, violence is potentially legitimised as a necessary act of existential self-defence. Any kind of doubt, questioning or critical discussion in the sense of democratic discourse is also categorised as dangerous.

3. THE INTERSECTIONAL DIMENSION OF ANTIDEMOCRATIC FEATURES

The examples show that the threatening other ('above' as well as 'below') and the we-constructions exhibit an intersectional pattern. The threat is represented by LGBTIQ* people, Islam, feminists, refugees and migrants in general, with the Jew(s) acting as string-pullers behind it all. It often turns out, like in the example of Soros' fist, that behind the danger from 'above', the allegedly suppressive elites are often actually minorities, which means that the delineation of the enemy above and the enemy below is often blurred, and both may be even identical. As theorizing of intersectionality in the past decades has analysed and illustrated ([Crenshaw 1989](#); [Hill Collins 2019](#); [Knapp 2005](#), to name only a few), power structures as well as movements that challenge existing power structures cannot be fully understood without the inter-wovenness of all these categories being considered.

It is also crucial for the analysis of the antidemocratic impetus of conspiracism to consider the intersectional structure of the efforts to delegitimise specific (minority) groups as part of the citizenry and demos. The examples of the *Great Replacement* conspiracism and its aforementioned variants additionally point to the intrinsic and highly visible interrelatedness of antisemitism and (anti-Muslim) racism, which is still often neglected or only selectively addressed and under-theorised in intersectionality theory and research ([Bischof 2022, 62](#); [Meyer 2017](#); [Stögner 2022](#)). This problem originates not least in the subsumption of antisemitism under racism or its conception as racism, respectively, which results in a failure to conceptualise the differences between them. Hence, it also is necessary to clarify the relationship between racism and antisemitism. To do so, however, we must define antisemitism as a form of racism, but we must not see it as a form of racism *only* ([Stögner 2022](#)). In other words, analysing its structural differences as well as its similarities proves crucial. The most striking difference here is that antisemitism, in contrast to racism, does not fit into binary categories of belonging but instead precisely contradicts them ([Bischof 2022, 63](#)). For example, racism typically draws on a hierarchical binary of *white* and *black/not white*, and the latter is ascribed inferiority and subjugation. In contrast, antisemitism and its stereotypes ascribe Jews inferiority and superiority at

the same time (Stögner 2022). As with regards belonging to a ‘national we’ or demos, Jewish people are viewed, in antisemitic patterns of exclusion, as not belonging to either side; they are viewed as disloyal and thus not a legitimate part of the ‘national we’ and as a disloyal part of the other nation(s) as well. This, for example, manifests itself in the quote about (Jewish) ‘emigrants, who are stripping off their citizenship like a snakes’ skin’ (Stüber, quoted in Bischof 2018, 684) and thus subvert the binary friend–enemy distinction of nations per se, posing an existential threat to the order of nations in principle. Racist narratives and categorizations in turn see the ‘other’ within the binary as inferior ‘enemies’. In some cases, racism and antisemitism prove to be inseparably connected. For example, a case study about altering we/demos-constructions and their intrinsic essentialist mechanisms of *walling* (Wendy Brown) within processes of neoliberal transformation found that both the racist and the antisemitic manifestations play a pivotal role (Bischof 2022, 42ff). Understanding this process of economic, political and cultural transformation in a comprehensive way means to consider both, the walling against a ‘globalist elite’ as well as against a ‘Muslim security threat’ (Bischof 2022, 44). Both mechanisms are gendered; the ‘unmanly’ or effeminate trans- and anti-national ‘globalist elite’ victimises the honourable, authentic and manly people in the antisemitic framing (Bischof 2022, 50), whilst, in the (anti-Muslim) racist thrust, a threatening, violent masculinity is usually foregrounded. This identification of Jewishness with ambivalence and the inability to take sides produces contradictions like being superior and inferior at the same time (for example, inferior in a physical sense and superior in terms of mind and power, Stögner 2022), suppressing from above (like a villain from above, such as Soros as an ‘enslaver’) and undermining from below (Soros as the villain supporting internal enemies such as LGBTIQ* people). It is exactly these contradictions that feed ideas of conspiracy and mendacity (Stögner 2022), which manifest themselves in age-old antisemitic conspiracy narratives. The Soros and *Great Replacement* conspiracism fits very well into this line of analysis. A more encompassing view and empirical examination on the intersectional structure of the *Great Replacement* conspiracism would be necessary to test it and could contribute to further develop its theorizing.

I suggest to draw a basic distinction between two types of intersecting axes, i.e. one displaying a binary pattern, another displaying an anti-binary pattern, in order to understand its effects better. Thus, the following questions should be addressed in intersectionality theory and research: Are conspiracy narratives always connected to antisemitism at a certain point? Are, in some cases, such as the *Eurabia* conspiracy narrative, Muslims also viewed as powerful and ‘superior’ in a certain way? Do other mechanisms of stereotyping and exclusion, such as transphobia, function in a similar way to antisemitism, i.e. trans-people being ascribed a specific threat through exceeding binary gender categories and destroying ‘natural’ and common-sense gender norms?

There is another aspect of the *Great Replacement* et al. narratives, which might be useful to consider for the intersectional analysis of conspiracy narratives in political communication and strategy. This feature, which might be termed as ‘strategic intersectionality’, allows for certain enemies, in certain contexts, to be pushed into the limelight and others hidden, depending on what the situation demands.⁹ This means

⁹ This strategy is not new but has historical antecedents, which also show how the far right (ab)uses the values and ideas of liberal democracy against itself. It would be worth looking at this phenomenon in more detail, which unfortunately I cannot do in the context of this article. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

for processes of ‘mainstreaming’, that, in contexts where antisemitism is unacceptable or ‘taboo’, the racist thrust of the *Great Replacement* narrative is foregrounded; in contexts where an attack on gender equality is not opportune, e.g. (anti-Muslim) racism and perhaps homophobia is foregrounded. Strategic intersectionality in this sense means that the *Great Replacement* conspiracism as a flexible political strategy (Ekman 2022, 2) gains even greater flexibility by highlighting or hiding the villains depending on the specific needs and acceptance of the targeted audience in case.

4. HOW CONSPIRACY NARRATIVES TRANSLATE ACROSS DIFFERENT POLITICAL SPECTRUMS – CONSPIRACY CLAIMS IN MAINSTREAMING FAR-RIGHT IDEAS AND IN PROCESSES OF RADICALISATION

There is considerable evidence that conspiracy narratives play an important role in processes of mainstreaming or normalisation of extremist ideas on the one hand and in radicalisation processes of extremists and terrorists on the other. Much of the scholarly literature in this field suggests that political conspiracy narratives such as the *Great Replacement et al.* (but also, for example, QAnon conspiracy narratives), are often drivers of antidemocratic radicalisation (Davis 2024; Davey and Ebner 2019; Ebner 2023; Farinelli 2021; Lamberty and Knäble 2020; Littvay 2022; Rottweiler and Gill 2020; Vegetti and Littvay 2022). In their representative study for Germany, Rottweiler and Gill (2020) found that people who ‘hold a conspiracy mentality, which is characterised by a mindset or general propensity to endorse conspiracy theories, show stronger intentions to engage in violent extremism’ (Rottweiler and Gill 2020, 20). Numerous terrorist attacks like Hanau, Halle, Christchurch, El Paso, Pittsburgh and Poway have been carried out by right-wing extremists, whose manifestos explicitly referred to *Great Replacement* or *white genocide* conspiracism (Rottweiler and Gill 2020, 2). The authors also draw on several other sources, including intelligence bulletins and research literature, which confirm that conspiracy theories play a pivotal role in terrorism. They also show how conspiratorial thinking is at the heart of jihadist and Neo-Nazi propaganda (Rottweiler and Gill 2020). Looking at some of the terrorists’ manifestos, the gender and intersectional dimension becomes visible once again. The Hanau synagogue attacker drew from antisemitic as well as racist and sexist conspiracy narratives (Jasser, Kelly and Rothermel 2020). Building on a strongly antisemitic world view, he further saw feminism as the culprit for a declining birth rate, leading to mass immigration (Lamberty and Rees 2021, 284). In a similar vein, Breivik, who killed 77 people in a shooting in the 2011 Utøya massacre, merged anti-Muslim, sexist and antisemitic elements of conspiracy myths in his manifesto and wanted to prevent Europe from committing ‘cultural suicide’ (Bergmann 2018, 36).

There is also abundant evidence that conspiracy beliefs are no longer confined to an extremist and violent political spectrum. As several country studies show, conspiracy narratives play an important role in the political rhetoric of authoritarian populists in power in an increasing number of European and American nation states, overseen by leaders such as Victor Orban in Hungary, Robert Fico in Slovakia, several PiS politicians in Poland, Trump in the USA and Bolsonaro in Brazil (Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Morelock and Narita 2022; Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019; Plenta 2020). The respective conspiracist claims pedalled by these leaders about Soros, a *replacement*, the *deep state*, etc. are being normalised in conservative right-wing discourse and

media coverage (Ekman 2022). Thus, e.g. the *Great Replacement* narrative is one of the most important ones in European and USA far-right discourses (Önnerfors and Krouwel 2021); it has been used as a flexible political strategy in the case of Hungary and Slovakia (Ekman 2022, 2; Plenta 2020) for years, and it is increasingly present in the rhetoric and policy plans of European right-wing populist parties, i.e. in Germany, Italy and Austria. This leads to a situation when elements of conspiracy narratives are used, recontextualised and reframed by ‘respectable’ and established actors (Ekman 2022, 13), as Mattias Ekman observes in his case studies on the mainstreaming of *Great Replacement* conspiracy claims in online spaces and Swedish media and their affective traits as well.

A glimpse at developments in several European countries confirms that this trend has continued in recent times. For example, the remigration-claim, which is directly linked to the *Great Replacement* narrative, is gaining momentum, as shown in AfD activities (Bornmann 2024) involving the Identitarians in the spring of 2024, when a conference was held that envisaged the remigration (‘Rückführung’) of migrants in Germany, even those who had already obtained German citizenship (Bornmann 2024). The Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni of Fratelli d’Italia has repeatedly talked about ‘ethnic replacement’ (Vohra 2023), and the leading candidate of the Austrian Freedom Party in the European Parliament elections, Harald Vilimsky, even calls for a ‘Commissioner for Remigration’ in his election campaign (Purger 2024). The term ‘replacement’ (‘Bevölkerungsaustausch’ in German) has also become part of the standard repertoire of the Austrian Freedom Party. It is used in extra-parliamentary communication, e.g. by the *Freiheitliche Jugend* (youth organisation of the Freedom Party) in Upper Austria, who run the website *bevoelkerungsaustausch.at*. It serves as a good example of the birth-rate panic disseminated in *Great Replacement* conspiracism. The website provides a live ticker that shows how much time is allegedly left until the so-called tipping point (Freiheitliche Jugend Oberösterreich 2022) and thus gives the impression of heading for disaster if countermeasures are not taken immediately. But the term ‘replacement’ is not only used in extra-parliamentary communication but also openly deployed in parliamentary debate by Freedom Party MPs.¹⁰ Gender also plays an important role here, with reproduction being portrayed as the core problem, and the feminism and LGBTIQ* movements also being depicted as the culprits for the decline in birth rates and ‘destroying’ family values.

All in all, we can observe that conspiracy narratives may translate extremist content into populist narratives used by established actors on the one hand, and, on the other, the process can also go the other way, in the sense that it radicalises, taking the antidemocratic features of authoritarian populism to the extreme and exacerbating its antidemocratic impetus. Julia Ebner (2023) found in her online investigations that there has been a striking spread and mainstreaming of extremist thoughts over many years, including conspiracy theories such as *Great Replacement* and QAnon since 2015 (Ebner 2023, 281–82; 286). She observes that this process was accompanied by the development of strong international networks and alternative media systems (Ebner 2023, 282), and she notes that the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic also played a central role, as it offered right-wing extremists the opportunity to address and integrate new target groups (Ebner 2023, 283). Due to this, conspiracy narratives gradually entered public discourse and shifted the ‘overtone window’, i.e.

10 Since 2016, the term ‘replacement’ (‘Bevölkerungsaustausch’ in German) has been used four times in the Austrian Parliament by Freedom Party MPs Christian Hafenecker, Susanne Fürst and Heinz Christian Strache.

the boundaries of the 'sayable', paving the way for 'mass adoption of extremist ideas' (Ebner 2023, 282), thus fuelling radicalisation.

The thesis that the shared structural characteristics of existential threat and delegitimization (as developed above) are key in this might help us to understand better why these processes of 'mainstreaming' and radicalisation via conspiracy claims work so well in many cases. It may well be exactly that this structural congruence of antidemocratic features in conspiracism and authoritarian populism create a kind of double track, facilitating both characteristics, particularly under the conditions of transnational online spread, which in turn proves to be salient for the impact of conspiracy narratives. Many studies have shown that radical as well as mainstream references to conspiracy narratives draw heavily from the online sphere, with online communication and its logics being the factor crucial in its spread (Davis 2021; Ebner 2023; Ekman 2022; Soriano and Gaw 2022). Online spaces' openness and interactivity and the speed of communication provide for high 'spreadability'; at the same time, online spaces function as spaces of legitimation for conspiracism and effectively support their affective traits (Ekman 2022, 6–7), frequently on a global scale.

5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This article focusses on the political use of conspiracy narratives. It started with a democratic theory perspective on common structural features of authoritarian populism and (fringe/far right) conspiracism and then presented and analysed several illustrative examples of the *Great Replacement* (and similar) narratives. It did so against the backdrop of theoretical considerations, which take the anti-pluralist and anti-equality notion as salient for the antidemocratic and authoritarian thrust in populism. As key features of authoritarian populism, the depiction of an existential threat as a friend–enemy logic has been identified and transforms 'others' (in the sense of elites and minorities alike) into an existential threat, either in a physical or a cultural sense. This process is intersectional at its core, as exemplified by the image of Soros' suppressing fist, which threatens Europe's cultural existence by both enslaving and undermining it at the same time. This implicitly leads to the delegitimization of 'others' (Jews, Muslims, LGBTIQ* people, feminists, political opponents and elites in general) as political subjects with whom (democratic) negotiation and debate is not possible. Thus, according to the argument pursued here and analysis of illustrative examples, existential threats from and delegitimization of others are the key structural features in authoritarian populism that demonstrate its antidemocratic thrust. First, these features are taken to the extreme in conspiracism found in fringe and far-right (online) communication; second, they are gendered and exhibit an intersectional pattern that shows how antisemitism and (anti-Muslim) racism are intrinsically interwoven. It would be important for further research to consider this interwovenness and, at the same time, the structural differences. I suggest to capture the latter by means of distinguishing between binary and non-binary patterns of exclusion. In addition, the notion of strategic intersectionality can be seen as a useful tool in far-right and populist communication of conspiracy narratives, taking into consideration context-specific and audience-specific demands and preferences. The sense of (absolute) urgency, which features in far-right and fringe conspiracism, takes the antidemocratic features in authoritarian populism to the extreme and lends even more weight to the rejection of any idea of democratic negotiations and potentially legitimises violence. As the empirical examples presented here have only illustrative value and

serve to develop these theses, for more generalizable confirmation of the underlying assumptions and considerations, a more systematic analysis on a larger database would be necessary. However, pursuing this perspective on shared antidemocratic features further can contribute to a better understanding of how conspiracy narratives translate so easily from far right/fringe platforms and discourse into the mainstream, as well as the other way around, in the process of radicalisation. Both processes are currently highly relevant vis-a-vis processes of democratic change, as the scholarly literature and political developments in several European countries show. Pursuing this perspective, its focus on the pattern of posing an existential threat, emanating from others as enemies and calling for their political delegitimation, may also contribute to a better understanding of the mechanisms of polarisation, particularly the often-underlying willingness to use violence and/or violent fantasies. Empirically and more systematically investigating how, in which contexts and to what extent the coincidence of these narrative characteristics – existential threat, delegitimation of others and notion of urgency – plays a role promises insights that are relevant in several respects: It may foster a better understanding of the link between authoritarian populism and conspiracism, which also manifests in processes of mainstreaming of extremist ideas, in processes of radicalization and in societal polarization. At the same time, this could also be helpful for practitioners to raise awareness of specifically anti-democratic narrative structures and promote alternative and counter-narratives.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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