

Conspiracy theories and right-wing populists are growing in strength, but we could still win this fight

Article by **Bartosz Józefiak**

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The growing strength of right-wing populism can be seen all over Europe. In some countries populists have already taken over governments, in others, they are close to achieving this goal. There are many complicated reasons for their successes, but one of the most important is the popularity of conspiracy theories. We could see this very clearly in the time of the pandemic. With the growing power of social media in western societies, journalists and experts lost control over production and gathering the news. We have a growing problem with understanding what is a fact, and what is an ordinary lie, nowadays called „fake - news“. This situation has very serious political consequences, as we live in a society where fewer people believe in the concept of „truth“. Does that mean, that civic society lost this battle? Not at all. We are still able to protect ourselves, although it's not an easy task, and this fight has a certain price. These are the conclusions of the conference „Under Pressure“ organized by Goethe-Institut in Dresden.

Old wine in new bottles

On the 7th and 8th of October several dozen journalists, scientists, experts, activists, and citizens interested in the topic of conspiracy theories meet in Dresden. Participants came from the Czech Republic, Poland, and Germany, they worked in different fields, and all of them have unique perspectives on the topic of fake news in public life.

For Jens-Christian Wagner, the chairman of Buchenwald and Mittelbau-Dora Memorials Foundation in Germany we are witnessing strange situation: enemies of democracy use democratic arguments to spread their narrative. They are using the idea of freedom of speech to show conspiracy theories about the world government run by Bill Gates, George Soros, and Klaus Schwab. They are talking about personal freedom to protest against restrictions during the time of the pandemic. They invert concepts, accusing their opponents of attacking democracy. Whoever stands against their fake news is an oppressor fighting against freedom of speech. They see themselves as victims, using inappropriate historical references, even wearing armbands with the star of David, suggesting that they are the victims of discrimination just as were Jews in the time of the Third Reich. With this kind of narrative, their democratic protests became something more, part of the rebel alliance, a fight against the "healthcare dictatorship", while in fact they are part of an old antisemitic tradition, well-known from the time of "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion".

These conspiracy theories are old wine in new bottles – said Jens- Christian Wagner. It does not make them less dangerous, though. They stimulate hatred, attack science, they give political fuel to parties like AFD. Jens- Christian Wagner thinks that something went wrong with history lessons – but not the ones concerning dates and names. In Germany, there's a problem with understanding deeper historical processes. It is essential for all of us to understand what happened with German democracy over 90 years ago, and what we could do to stop history from repeating itself.

One of the guests at the conference „Under Pressure“ was Katarina Nocun, co-author (with Pia Lamberty) of two important books: „Fake Facts“ and „True Facts“. In her keynote, Katarina focused on answering the question: what should we do, if someone close to us started to believe in conspiracy theories?



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Katarina is convinced, that the family and friends have the power to stop the process of radicalization. The biggest chance for that is at the beginning of his road, before „conspiracy believer” became too radical. We could try to alter their viewpoint by asking about the sources of their information and trying to understand the reason for their beliefs. In case of someone more radicalized, we must be patient. This kind of intervention has more to do with a marathon, not a short walk. We are not going to win with the irony and laughing off their convictions. It's better if we have a decent, calm, but assertive discussion about the topic, using phrases like „I disagree” and „I don't think this is a reliable source”. It's better to talk than to lose connection with conspiracy theories believer, although convincing him might be a long and bumpy road.

Dangerous Fake news

One of the guests of conference „Under Pressure” was a victim of fake - news campaign. Dr. Olga Richterová is a member of the Pirate party and vice-president of the Chamber of Deputies in the Czech Parliament. She was slandered on the internet after the post on the Facebook page of the Pirate party informing, that she wants to give free apartments to thousands of migrants from Africa. In truth, the Facebook page and this post were fake, Richterová never said this, but this doesn't stop the haters. This lie was actively spread by Nela Lisková, an activist who sympathizes with Donetsk People's Republic. Dr. Olga Richterová received many messages with hate speech. Some people were calling her „scum”, others wished her to get raped. She was afraid for herself and her children.

Richterová is working in politics on the street level. She does not travel in a limo - in fact, she doesn't even have a car. Voters could meet her on the streets of Prague, in trams, or in her office. If someone wanted to make an attempt on her life, it would be more than easy. But Richterová does not give up. On every occasion she straightened up lies, she sued Nela Lisková and won in court after four years. Of course, Lisková was convinced, that attacking her was a way to reduce freedom of speech.

For Richterová it's quite the opposite: fake news are dangerous for democracy, not the truth. Her winning in court shows that truth still could win, but this could be a pyrrhic victory. Richterová will probably never forget her fear and trauma caused by a simple internet lie.

Media in polarised society

How We could get out of this circle of misinformation? With help from professional media. In my keynote I tried to show good job of Polish journalists. At the beginning of the Russian invasion on Ukraine mainstream media - from left to right- was very accurate in informing about the real situation on the border. At the same time, journalists refused to spread hatred. When millions of Poles tried to help migrants from Ukraine, the nationalist party Konfederacja was trying to convince people, that our government is „giving privileges” to Ukrainians. Not a single media outlet was transmitting their conference. It was an unprecedented protest and act of solidarity of journalists, who normally fight each other. The narrative of Konfederacja could not get through. Their protests in Polish cities gathered almost no participants.

But in societies so polarised as Poland fighting for truth is extremely difficult. We could see this in the autumn of 2021 when Alexander Lukashenko transported thousands of migrants from the middle east to the Polish - Belarusian border. Polish government started a smear campaign against migrants, calling them thieves, criminals, terrorists, and even pedophiles and zoophiles. Government-owned and right-wing media helped with spreading this narrative. Mainstream media was not able to balance this narrative in the eyes of the public. Most citizens were in favor of government policy towards migrants.



There is another role for journalists in facing conspiracy theories. Good, honest reportage could help us understand, who and why is vulnerable to such narratives. It's crucial to understand this if we would to counter-react to right-wing populism.

Keep faith in people

Key topics of the conference „Under pressure” were discussed in unofficial conversations, also in workshops. In one such workshop we have the opportunity to talk to activists from the Czech movement „Milion Chvílek pro Demokracie“. The organizers of massive protests against the government of prime minister Andrej Babiš showed us examples of activism giving good results. For Jiří Jakub Zévl from „Milion Chvílek” movement, the key to success is... having faith in people. Letting them organize their protests in their hometowns. They have to take initiative. If citizens have a feeling, that this is also their fight, then You are on a good road to win.

On workshops about the role of independent media we were talking together with dr Piotr Kocyba from Chemnitz University and David Stulik from European Values Center for Security Policy. We agreed that political pressure on media is growing in every country in central Europe. In Hungary there are almost no independent media at all, in Czech and Poland politicians are still trying to take control over some of them. On the other hand, media are under constant financial problems and journalists have to deal with the corporate management of their newsrooms. But even in this circumstances journalists are still able to look after politicians and do solid, investigative work. I'm sure that strong mainstream media in Poland stopped the right-wing government from gaining full political power. They gave voters freedom of choice.

In other workshops activists from the Czech Republic, Poland and Germany were discussing different ways of helping refugees. NGOs and culture organization workers were trying to establish, how important is good education for stopping right-wing populism.

Hope is still here

In almost every discussion we could find two motives. First one: Russian agents are responsible for a lot of misinformation spreading around Europe these days. It's an important conclusion, especially in the time of war in Ukraine. All of us have to be aware of this threat. Russian propaganda will do anything to make us believe in their narrative and stop European countries from helping Ukraine.

Second conclusion: many people who believe in conspiracy theories and are prone to nationalist ideas are the ones who have been victims of globalization and the modern-day economy. The growing inequality, fear for their future, unstable economical situation, losing jobs – these are circumstances which pushed people into the dark world of conspiracy myths. If we want to prevent ourselves from fake news and hate speech, we have to take care of the most vulnerable parts of our societies. If we do not, their fear will be taken over by forces of hate.

Civil societies have many tools to fight conspiracy theories. Our countries are full of passionate people doing a great job, fighting a good cause. This was the most optimistic conclusion that I gathered from the conference „Under Pressure”. The fact, that so few of our citizens believed in the Russian story about the war in Ukraine, that we are still so united against this threat – that's

another reason for optimism. This time Russian propaganda failed. Lies do not always win. We should stick to that.

