

News and analysis

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The empire of conspiracy: the axiomatic role of antisemitism in the ideology of the Hungarian extreme right

By Peter Kreko

"ONGOING GENOCIDE", "Tracking the Rulers of the World", "White Europe is under ultimate threat", "Hungary: 100% Israel". These are some typical titles you can see on the front page of *Baridád* (Barricade) magazine, the official weekly of the ultranationalist Hungarian Jobbik party. Jobbik is a considerable political force that gained 17% of the list votes in the 2010 parliamentary elections and, heading towards the 2014 elections, still enjoys a similar level of support, with a core base of young, middle-class male voters.

This weekly, as well as a lot of other channels (especially websites) that are openly supporting the far-right party, explains everything going on in the world as sinister plots against innocent people: the economic crisis, Roma vs non Roma conflict, sensational murders, rising (or sometimes falling) real estate prices are all the consequence of the machinations of the "background power" behind the scenes. And who constitutes these sinister forces? The response fits the old schemes: the Jews, inside and outside Hungary. From the most archaic medieval-style conspiracy theories such as the

murders of young girls for ritual reasons, to the most modern forms such as the state of Israel intervening to the Hungarian domestic affairs through Israeli-Hungarian dual citizens in the political elite, these theories are articulated on an everyday level even by Jobbik politicians in the Hungarian Parliament.

The ideology of Jobbik and the organisations and opinion-leaders around them even combine anti-Roma prejudice that was the main driving force for their success with traditional, classic antisemitic conspiracy theories. In their view, Jews and Israel deliberately stoke the fire of Roma-non-Roma confrontation to realise their "colonising", "conquering" schemes. According to Jobbik's ideology, Jews are ultimately responsible for the Gypsy problem. Gypsies according to this logic are no more than the unconscious tool of a Jewish conspiracy aimed at subjugating Hungary. As a Jobbik MP, Mrs Lóránt Hegedüs, summarised it a few years ago: "The time has come to state it clearly: Israel is bent on conquering Hungary. This is a fact; as evidence, it is enough to look at the all but total monopoly of Israeli investments

and real estate developments. And the Gypsies are a kind of biological weapon in this strategy. They are used as a means against the Hungarians just as, to use a simple analogy, a snow plough is hitched to a truck."

Of course, these explanations are not unknown in Western Europe either. Some Islamist communities share similar theories. And even if they are less and less influential among the increasing ideological impact of anti-Muslim politics, some populist far-right forces still use these as ideological tools, such as the British National Party, when Nick Griffin asserts, for example, that the rival English Defence League is the product of a Zionist conspiracy. But in Hungary, these theories are no longer confined to the margins of political discourse.

The Hungarian public provides fertile ground. Research indicates the widespread popularity of conspiracy theories, which is at the same time the cause and the result of Jobbik's success. And it is not a temporary phenomenon: a lack of trust in political institutions, the press and the banks means theories that politicians and economic players are conspiring against the

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Ready for action: paramilitaries of Jobbik's now-banned Hungarian Guard

“people” (while the press, which is in the hands of those in power, hushes up such conspiracies) can easily take off.

According to a representative survey carried out by the Medián Institute based on the Political Capital Institute's questions, more than two-thirds of those asked agreed with the statement that “we never find out the truth from the media and the news, and everything important happens behind the scenes”, and half agreed that “during the crisis powerful financial circles joined forces to destroy Hungary's economy in an effort to colonise the country”. Eighty-eight per cent of respondents agreed with at least one of five conspiracy theories, while 23 per cent agreed with all five. According to other research in 2011, conducted by Tárki and analysed by the Political Capital Institute, 50% of Jobbik voters think that mass immigration

of Jews and Israelis can be expected in the future, compared to less than 30% of the overall population.

Research by András Kovács in Hungary indicates that openly antisemitic statements are appearing in opinion polls much more frequently nowadays than a few years ago. He attributes this tendency to the “Jobbik-impact”: because of the frequent presence of antisemitic public discourse at the highest political levels, citizens are no longer afraid to express their antisemitic views, breaking the former taboos.


Conspiracy stereotypes connected to Jews are not a new phenomenon but can be regarded partly as an archaic, collective legacy of the historic past of Europe. Conspiracy theories about Jews such as blood libel and well-poisoning sprang up in the Middle Ages, in a different form to the modern theories of today and

embedded in a different, magical-transcendent world view, but, of course, there is some continuity in these schemes. Antisemitism was pretty widespread in Europe overall before the Second World War.

The problem is that while in most Western European countries, after the Holocaust, the elaboration of these issues in public discourse, education and on the political level led to a decreasing psychological and political relevance of antisemitism, in countries of central eastern Europe where this topic was suppressed during the era of state socialism, these spectres can be easily resurrected and activated politically.

And such conspiracy theories serve as really useful tools for the far right for several reasons. First of all, they provide an ultimate, axiomatic explanation for the world's ills. Furthermore, they name the enemy, therefore helping to legitimise radical measures taken against them, as well as to maintain the collective self-esteem of the group and satisfy its narcissistic needs: if all the political forces are conspiring against Hungary and the Real Hungarians, it really must be the chosen people! And of course, these theories are comforting because they help to distinguish between good and evil, and project responsibility onto a named enemy, as well as providing an outlet for hostile feelings.

A worrying tendency, however, is that over the past few years we can observe that similar theories, sometimes in more subtle, but other times in their most manifest form, are gradually occupying the political mainstream as well. Conspiracy theorists such as László Bogár, who explains literally



every problem of the world through the background work of the “global financial/opinion empire”, is a frequent guest in the public media when it comes to explaining economic and social tendencies or speaking about the IMF. Béla Pokol, a political scientist whose favourite explanation scheme is the “Global order of domination”, has become a constitutional judge, delegated by governmental caucuses in parliament.

And the most shocking case: Ferenc Szaniszló – an openly racist and antisemitic journalist who thinks, for example, that the red sludge catastrophe in Hungary was the result of Nato following an order by the IMF and firing a rocket into the reserve, that Jörg Haider, the former leader of the Austrian Freedom Party and Governor of Carinthia, was killed by drones, and that the Carpathian Basin is the scene of an eternal fight between Good and Bad – received a state award for his journalistic work. This gesture led to a huge scandal both domestically and internationally with the result that the Minister asked Szaniszló to return the award. But even so, this case, alongside awards for a singer of an extreme right rock band and an archaeologist historian who is popular among the radical right for his theory on the Hungarian origin of Jesus Christ among other things, clearly reveals that the conspiracy world view that is dominant on the far-right cannot be labelled as marginal any more.

What can be the explanation? While it would be completely false to say that the governing conservative party Fidesz and

Jobbik have the same ideological approach, the world view of the “radical wing” of governmental forces and the “moderate wing” of Jobbik are not really far from each other. And the current political environment is just reducing the distance: the “freedom fight”, as the Prime Minister calls it, for national sovereignty that results in many conflicts between the Council of Europe, the EU and its member states, the US and the Hungarian government results in a situation where conspiracy theories about coordinated Western attacks against the nation play a central role in government rhetoric. And even if the governmental side never uses antisemitic theories to explain the situation, the “syntax” of these theories is pretty similar and results in a similar world view, the only difference being the protagonist of the story. Furthermore, there are some strong historical roots that can make society more receptive to such ideas: most of the Hungarian heroes are freedom fighters who were fighting for independence during Turkish/Habsburg/Russian domination.

The Hungarian example is a clear indication of how the current political environment, in the context of national history with its stereotypic antagonisms, can fuel conspiracy theorising. And this danger should not be underestimated. While conspiracy theories often seem innocently ridiculous at first sight, they pose a threat to democratic and social peace in different parts of Europe (and even elsewhere), and the 20th century clearly proved that conspiracy theories are capable of shaping history.



Economist, university professor and conspiracy theorist
László Bogár

To understand and challenge this rising threat, a group of think-tanks and institutions in Europe including the Political Capital Institute and Zachor Foundation in Hungary, Counterpoint UK, the Centre for Research on Prejudice in Poland, and IVO in Slovakia have an ongoing project called Deconspirator. The project, supported by Open Society Foundations and the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, aim to research conspiracy theories and find the best tools to combat them. Visit the website of the project: www.deconspirator.com.

Conspiracy theories are always sensitive and flourish in different political contexts.

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