REACT

REACT–survey on conspiracy theories and extremist belief

Manual for teachers

Project information

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Project acronym:	REACT
Project title:	Recognising Extremism and Conspiracy Theories
Project number:	KA220-NI-21-36-34412
National agency:	KMK-PAD
Project website:	www.react-education.eu
Project lead:	Dr. Wolfgang Beutel Institute of Didactic of Democracy Leibniz University of Hannover
Project management:	Alrun R. Vogt supported by Kristin Reimer
Authors:	REACT-Consortium
Date of Preparation:	2024
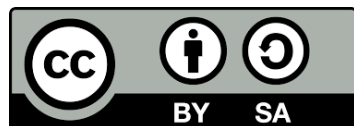
Consortium

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1. Introducing REACT

Conspiracy theories have long been a part of societal discourse. Recent crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia's war against Ukraine or a rising support for right-wing extremist parties in several European countries have increased public and academic attention to this topic. These developments affect schools and teachers, since young people are just as vulnerable to being exposed to conspiracy theories and extremist beliefs. While the social environment plays a large role in how people come into contact with conspiracy narratives or extremist beliefs, the effects of the media consumption of young people should not be underestimated.[1]

The Erasmus+ project *Recognising Extremism and Conspiracy Theories* (REACT) was created to support teachers in recognizing and dealing with conspiracy theories and extremist beliefs. To address this challenge a consortium consisting of one research partner and one school partner from four European countries, Austria, Bulgaria, Denmark and Germany, was created. The project has two central objectives: 1. The development of a survey to identify the presence of extremist beliefs and conspiracy theories, and 2. the development of a curriculum and teaching/learning materials.

This manual presents the first of the project objectives and serves as a guide to understand and implement the survey. This tool is supposed to help teachers evaluate what conspiracy theories students believe in and what topics to tackle in the classroom. This manual is structured into five parts: After a brief introduction of the topic as well as of the project (1.), the REACT-survey is presented (2.) and some advice regarding the implementation is given (3.). Finally, some results from implementing the survey at the partner schools are presented (4.) and an outlook towards the development of didactic materials is included in this manual.

1.1 Defining conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories can be defined as "attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots".[2] For believers nothing happens without reason and there is a secret elite coordinating world events. Conspiracy theories always construct a narrative of dividing the world into black and white and creating a narrative of "us", the believers, who know the "truth", vs. "them", either the unknowing or the elite. Their world view is often times very restricted and dogmatic, only accepting what they believe to be true.[3] Researchers have gone beyond the term conspiracy *theory* and suggest using the terms conspiracy *beliefs*, conspiracy *thinking*

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[1] MPFS (2022): JIMplus 2022 Fake News und Hatespeech.
https://www.mpfs.de/fileadmin/files/Studien/JIM/JIMplus_2022/JIMplus_Charts_2022_fuer_Website_pdf.pdf [10.10.2023]

[2] Douglas, K. M., Uscinski, J. E., Sutton, R. M., Cichoka, A., Nefes, T., Ang, C.S. & Deravi, V. (2019). Understanding Conspiracy Theories. *Advances in Political Psychology*, 40(1), 3-35.

[3] COMPACT Education Group (2020): Guide to Conspiracy Theories. https://conspiracytheories.eu/_wpx/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/COMPACT_Guide-2.pdf

or conspiracy *mindset* to explain the different complexities and nuances surrounding this topic.[4] In this project we chose the use the term conspiracy theory since it is the prevailing academic term.

While the reasons for believing in conspiracy theories and narratives range from psychological, epistemic, existential to social motives,[5] the dangers lie within what the belief can cause. Conspiracy theories pose a threat to our society, because they "polarise society and fuel violent extremism",[6] they "challenge established medical knowledge" and "can lead to political apathy or fuel populism".[7] In other words, conspiracy theories pose a challenge to our democratic society.

1.2 Belief in conspiracy theories among young Europeans

So far, no Europe-wide study has been conducted to investigate the beliefs of young Europeans towards conspiracy theories. However, some insights can be drawn from studies in different national contexts in particular with regards to the intensifying social media consumption among young people which exposes them to conspiracy theories and extremist beliefs.

A German study from 2021, with approximately one thousand participants aged between 12 and 19, it showed that 80 percent of the participants had encountered false information online. While the students felt confident in identifying false information, the majority struggled in identifying statements as false in practice.[8] Similar results were reported in Austria with young people mostly encountering false information online. However, there was a change in media consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic as people opted for television as their main source of news.[9] In an Austrian special national report on conspiracy theories during the COVID-19 pandemic, the results suggested that young people are more open to conspiracy narratives than any other age group.[10] While Bulgaria belongs to the countries with the highest average levels of belief in conspiracy theories worldwide, the studies usually exclude people below 18 years. A UNESCO-study on attitudes of Bulgarian teenagers during the COVID-19 pandemic showed that a high percentage of the respondents believed that the virus was a bioweapon and solely created to reduce the population. At the same time, however, the majority rejected the conspiracies that COVID-19 is connected

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[4] Douglas et. al. 2019: See Footnote 2

[5] Douglas et. al. 2019: See Footnote 2

[6] European Commission (n.d.): Identifying conspiracy theories. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation/identifying-conspiracy-theories_en [03.10.2023]

[7] COMPACT Education Group (2020): See Footnote 3

[8] MPFS (2022): JIMplus 2022 Fake News und Hatespeech. https://www.mpfs.de/fileadmin/files/Studien/JIM/JIMplus_2022/JIMplus_Charts_2022_fuer_Website_pdf.pdf [10.10.2023]

[9] Digitaler Kompass (2020): Corona Report: Jugend & Medien. https://www.digitalerkompass.at/corona-report-jugend-und-medien/ [17.10.2023]

[10] Bundestelle für Sektenfragen (2021): Das Phänomen der Verschwörungstheorien in Zeiten der Covid-19 Pandemie.

to 5G technology, pharmaceutical companies or a social experiment as a collective societal punishment.[11] In Denmark, there are currently no relevant studies or research papers on the topic of conspiracy theories among young people available, at least not in the English language. There are some studies which tackle the issue of rumours being spread among youth, however this does not allow for any conclusions to be drawn on whether they actually believe in these narratives.

2. The REACT-survey for schools

2.1 Developing the survey

The REACT-survey consists of the two modules "Belief in Conspiracy Theories" (module 1) and "Trust in institutions and organizations" (module 2). The structure of the survey and the selection of the scales are the result of a thorough development process that can be divided into four phases.

In the initial phase, the REACT-team defined the target group, conducted a needs analysis in each country and created the first draft. The survey's primary focus is on students aged 15 to 19, aiming to understand their extremist beliefs and conspiracy theories. To identify relevant areas of extremist beliefs and conspiracy-theoretical strands of argumentation regarding young people, each research partner prepared a national report in April 2022 and the survey topics were selected based on these findings.

The first draft of the survey included scales about the confrontation with conspiracy theories, conspiracy mentality, trust (e.g. into public institutions), trust in specific conspiracy theories (e.g. the Covid-19 pandemic), and political authoritarianism. These scales, and the majority of other scales and items that were added to the REACT-survey in later phases, are adapted versions of already established and well-proven scales.[12] However, as most of these scales are targeted at adults, we had to simplify the language to adapt them to the school context.

In the second phase, scales about political self-efficacy, self-perceived societal marginalization, and political extremism were added to the survey after the evaluation of the first draft by the REACT schools and research partners. In addition, items about the Russian war against Ukraine were added. To evaluate whether the questionnaire can be used in practice and whether it meets the needs of the schools, this step was followed by

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[11] UNICEF (2020): Summary of Results from a Study on the Subjective Perception and Reactions of Teenagers in the COVID-19 Lockdown. https://www.unicef.org/bulgaria/media/7866/file/BGR-teenagers-and-covid-19-eng.pdf.pdf [31.10.2023]

[12] e.g. items from Bruder et al. 2013; Jolley et al. 2021:
Bruder, M., Haffke, P., Neave, N., Nouripanah, N., & Imhoff, R. (2013). Measuring Individual Differences in Generic Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories Across Cultures: Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire. Frontiers in Psychology, 4. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00225
Jolley, D., Douglas, K. M., Skipper, Y., Thomas, E., & Cookson, D. (2021). Measuring adolescents' beliefs in conspiracy theories: Development and validation of the Adolescent Conspiracy Beliefs Questionnaire (ACBQ). British Journal of Developmental Psychology, 39(3), 499–520. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjdp.12368

the piloting of the questionnaire in December 2022 – March 2023 with a combined sample size of 136 students from all four countries.

In the third phase of the survey development, adaptations based on the qualitative and quantitative data gathered in the piloting were made. The complexity of the language was further reduced, the survey was changed into a modular structure, shortened significantly, and items about the Christian religion and a new scale for news access were added. Afterward, we tested the REACT-survey in a large implementation with a sample size of 344 students in all participating as well as in external schools in June – September 2023 (for further details see chapter 4.).

The results obtained in the large implementation led to final amendments in the fourth phase such as the exclusion of the news access scale. The final structure of the REACT survey reflects the multi-stage development process. The reliability and validity of each module is empirically tested, and each module represents a relevant area or a relevant topic in the field of conspiracy theories and extremism regarding young people in Austria, Bulgaria, Denmark and Germany.

2.2 Module 1: Belief in conspiracy theories

Module 1 is divided into four parts and comprises scales about conspiracy mentality (part 1), political authoritarianism and political extremism (part 2) and the attitude towards specific conspiracy theories (part 3 and 4). Part 1 and 2 constitute the main REACT-survey whereas part 3 and 4 are considered to be optional.

Part 1 (see page 6) can give educators an overview of the general attitudes of their students towards conspiracy theories and their tendency to believe conspiracy theories. These attitudes can be assessed with these scales. The items 1 to 5 focus on conspiracy mentality and are adapted versions of items of the scales from Bruder et al. (2013).[13] The REACT-team decided to use this scale since it has the advantage of measuring the tendency to believe general conspiracist beliefs independent from temporal and geographic developments. Therefore, this scale meets the demands of the REACT-survey, as the survey is designed to be implemented in different EU countries.

The other scales in part 1 focus on rather broad conspiracy theories. They cover all relevant areas identified in the needs analyses. Therefore, educators can use this scale to obtain a first impression of which topics could be relevant to discuss in class in the context of the specific learner group. The items that focus on the government and secret societies are adapted versions of the scale from Jolley et al. (2021).[14] The items focusing on large

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[13] Bruder, M., Haffke, P., Neave, N., Nouripanah, N., & Imhoff, R. (2013). Measuring Individual Differences in Generic Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories Across Cultures: Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire. Frontiers in Psychology, 4. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00225

[14] Jolley, D., Douglas, K. M., Skipper, Y., Thomas, E., & Cookson, D. (2021). Measuring adolescents' beliefs in conspiracy theories: Development and validation of the Adolescent Conspiracy Beliefs Questionnaire (ACBQ). British Journal of Developmental Psychology, 39(3), 499–520. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjdp.12368

businesses are inspired by Alemany Oliver (2022) and the items on climate change related conspiracy theories are based on Douglas & Sutton's (2015) research.[15] The items about media, the judicial system, and banks are self-developed but rely on research papers as well, for example by Douglas et al. (2019).[16]

Part 2 (see page 7) consists of two scales. The first scale measures political authoritarianism (items 1-6), and its items are based on scales by Beierlein et al. (2015) and Dono et al. (2018).[17] The second scale measures political extremism (items 7-11). The items are based on scales by Bertelsen (2018) as well as Ozer and Bertelsen (2018).[18] Part 2 also belongs to the main survey. These scales can help educators to identify extremist political beliefs and authoritarian tendencies among their students, allowing them to address and engage with these beliefs at an early stage. These scales are relatively short and enable a valid and reliable measurement of authoritarianism and extremism. Since the items also address rather broad ideas and topics, they are not subject to temporal, geographical, or cultures changes, which is another advantage.

We included these items since they were developed for an adolescent target group and in collaboration with educators. They are easy to understand and consider the potential emotional impact of conspiracy theories on young people.

[15] Alemany Oliver, M. (2022). Navigating Between the Plots: A Narratological and Ethical Analysis of Business-Related Conspiracy Theories (BrCTs). Journal of Business Ethics, 175(2), 265–288. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-020-04612-3

Douglas, K. M., & Sutton, R. M. (2015). Climate change: Why the conspiracy theories are dangerous. Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 71(2), 98–106. https://doi.org/10.1177/0096340215571908

[16] Douglas, K. M., Uscinski, J. E., Sutton, R. M., Cichocka, A., Nefes, T., Ang, C. S., & Deravi, F. (2019). Understanding Conspiracy Theories. Political Psychology, 40(S1), 3–35. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12568

Douglas et al. (2019) offer a comprehensive and interdisciplinary review of research on conspiracy theories.

[17] Beierlein, C., Asbrock, F., Kauff, M., & Schmidt, P. (2015). Kurzskala Autoritarismus (KSA-3). Zusammenstellung sozialwissenschaftlicher Items und Skalen (ZIS). https://doi.org/10.6102/ZIS228

Dono, M., Alzate, M., & Seoane, G. (2018). Development and validation of the Monopoly on Truth Scale. A measure of political extremism. Psicothema, 30.3, 330–336. https://doi.org/10.7334/psicothema2017.423

[18] Bertelsen, P. (2018): Mentoring in Anti-radicalisation. LGT: A Systematic Assessment, Intervention and Supervision Tool in Mentoring. In: Overland, G, Andersen, A., Førde, K. E., Grødum, K. and J. Salomonsen (eds.): Violent Extremism in the 21st Century. International Perspectives. Cambridge Scholars Publishing: Newcastle.

Ozer, S., & Bertelsen, P. (2018). Capturing violent radicalization: Developing and validating scales measuring central aspects of radicalization. Scandinavian Journal of Psychology, 59(6), 653-660. https://doi.org/10.1111/sjop.12484

Part 1 (main survey): Please rate how much you would agree with the following statements:	Fully disagree	Mostly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Mostly agree	Fully agree
Many very important things happen in the world, which the public is never informed about.					
Politicians usually do not tell us the true motives for their decisions.					
The government monitors all people in secret.					
Events which superficially seem to lack a connection are often the result of secret activities.					
Secret societies influence many political decisions.					
The government often knows about terrorist attacks and lets them happen.					
Secret societies control politicians and other leaders.					
The real truth about events is often kept secret from the public.					
The media does not tell us the truth about the events happening.					
The media is deceiving the truth about wars from the public.					
Large businesses that make a lot of money conspire with our current political leaders.					
Large businesses that make a lot of money conspire at the expenses of the general public.					
Large businesses secretly aim to destroy democracy.					
Banks secretly aim to destroy democracy.					
The judicial system does not serve the public good but a certain interest group.					
The judicial system is in the hands of a small influential group.					
Scientists are making climate change up for political reasons.					
Scientists are dramatizing climate change to get research funding.					
There is no global warming.					

Part 2 (main survey): Please rate how much you would agree with the following statements:	Fully disagree	Mostly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Mostly agree	Fully agree
Rules in society should be enforced without pity.					
We need strong leaders so that we can live safely in society.					
We should be grateful for leaders telling us exactly what to do.					
It is legitimate to resort to the use of force to defend the interests of the people.					
The improvement of society can justify an otherwise extreme action.					
When an idea is objectively good for the whole of society, it should be legitimate to impose it even against the will of some.					
It is necessary to totally change the economic system that is the basis of society.					
It is necessary to do away with the democratic form of government if we want to have a decent society.					
I, and those who think like me, in fact share nothing with the rest of the society.					
There is only one way to live the good and correct life.					
It is wrong to make compromises with what oneself stands for.					

Part 3 (see page 9) is optional and consists of one scale with items about group-specific conspiracy theories. The belief in group-specific conspiracy theories is important to assess because these conspiracy theories can lead to dangerous consequences for the groups concerned. While the items about the Catholic Church, Christians, and feminists are self-developed, the items about Muslims, refugees, and Jews are inspired by Dyrendal (2020).[19] The REACT-team chose to include items about the Catholic Church and Christians even though they do not have a high relevance in the public discourse because the qualitative data of the piloting pointed out that different religious groups should be included in this scale to avoid the impression that Muslims and Jews get singled out in the survey.

Part 4 (see page 10) is optional as well and is made up of items about current conspiracy theories. Part 4 can be implemented if educators want to get an insight into which current conspiracy theories prevail among their students. However, these specific theories can become outdated since they refer to concrete historical events, namely the Covid-19-pandemic and Russia's war against Ukraine. Nevertheless, we chose to include them due to their current high relevance. Educators can also use these items as a template or inspiration to develop items on current developments themselves. The items regarding the Covid-19 pandemic are inspired by Sternisko et al. (2021).[20] The items about the Russian war against Ukraine are taken from the CeMas-study.[21]

When educators decide to implement any of the scales that belong to module 1, it is important to know how to interpret the results. First of all, it should be emphasized that high approval ratings of specific items or scales alone should not be seen as worrying too much. Rather, high approval ratings (e.g. if more than 30% agree with an item) can be used as an indicator to adapt subsequent classroom discussions accordingly. For example, educators can use the forthcoming materials developed by the REACT-team or other materials to talk to the students about these topics and to do some initial educational work. At later stages, educators could implement the REACT-survey a second time to see if any changes are measurable. If certain beliefs turn out to be persistent or still have high approval ratings, further interventions can be made.

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[19] Dyrendal, A. (2020). Conspiracy Beliefs about Jews and Muslims in Norway. In C. Hoffmann & V. Moe (Hrsg.), The Shifting Boundaries of Prejudice (S. 187–210). Scandinavian University Press (Universitetsforlaget AS). https://doi.org/10.18261/978-82-15-03468-3-2019-07

[20] Sternisko, A., Cichocka, A., Cislak, A., & Van Bavel, J. J. (2021). National Narcissism predicts the Belief in and the Dissemination of Conspiracy Theories During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Evidence From 56 Countries. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 014616722110549. https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672211054947

[21] Lamberty Pia, Corinne Heuer und Josef Holnburger (2022): Belastungsprobe für die Demokratie: Pro-russische Verschwörungserzählungen und Glaube an Desinformation in der Gesellschaft, Research Paper, https://cemas.io/publikationen/belastungsprobe-fuer-die-demokratie/

Part 3 (optional): Please rate how much you would agree with the following statements:					
	Fully disagree	Mostly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Mostly agree	Fully agree
The Catholic Church has been involved in a long-term plot to gain control over the world's governments.					
Secret Christian groups seek to create a government based on biblical law.					
Christians are actively working to bring about the end of the world so that they can be taken up into heaven.					
Refugees come to Europe in order to replace the *Austrian/Danish/Bulgarian/German* population.					
Muslims lie about their religion in order to take over society.					
Muslims want to take over Europe.					
Feminism leads to fewer births which leads to mass immigration from Muslim countries.					
Jews have too much influence in the world.					
Jews are more likely to engage in conspiracy than others.					
Austrian/Danish/Bulgarian/German interests are controlled by Israel.					

Part 4 (optional): Please rate how much you would agree with the following statements:					
	Fully disagree	Mostly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Mostly agree	Fully agree
The Covid-19 pandemic was a media scheme.					
The Covid-19 pandemic only serves the scaremongering of the general public.					
The Covid-19 pandemic was not an accident, but was planned long ahead.					
The actions taken against the Covid-19 pandemic are used primarily to take away people's freedom rather than to protect vulnerable groups.					
With the war on Ukraine Putin takes action against a global elite that pulls the strings in the background.					
The war against Ukraine is artificially dramatized.					
The war in Ukraine was necessary for Russia in order to avoid an attack from NATO.					

2.3 Module 2: Trust in institutions and organisations

Trust is a complex and multi-layered concept. It can be described as a belief in the character of a person, the quality of an organization, or the truth of a statement.[22] The relationship between trust in institutions and democracy is a complex and reciprocal one, as the level of trust in institutions can significantly impact the functioning and stability of a democratic system. Paradoxically, democratic systems also inherently include distrust within their constitutional frameworks such as systems of checks and balances between key institutions.[23] The investigation of trust in institutions can be linked to questions of the legitimacy of a democratic system as well as to social cohesion in a society especially in times of global crisis and insecurities. Conspiracy theories can contribute to a general climate of societal distrust and suspicion. Studies conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic identified the belief in conspiracy theories as one factor that can lead to lower levels of trust in societal institutions.[24]

Module 2 of the REACT-survey explores the issue of trust in key societal institutions in democratic systems of which some can be part of specific conspiracy narratives (e.g. scientific institutes and conspiracy theories on climate change). In this survey, a sociological approach in which participants self-report the levels of trust and distrust in people, institutions and contexts in this survey is chosen to measure trust. Some items in the scale needed to be adapted to fit the specific institutions found in each country, such as the names of particular political parties. When this scale is implemented, it is important to keep in mind that other factors, next to the belief in conspiracy theories or extremist beliefs, can lower levels of trust, such of corruption or perceived biases. In any case, the results of this scale can be used to spark a discussion to reflect on how students relate to these institutions and on the impacts of these relationships on society at large.

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[22] Giddens, A. (1990). *The Consequences of Modernity*. Originating publisher, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CAM. Cambridge: Polity Press.

23 Warren, Mark (2017). 'Trust and Democracy',in Eric M. Uslaner (ed.), The Oxford Handbook of Social and Political Trust, Oxford Handbooks. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190274801.013.5

24 Mari, S., Gil de Zúñiga, H., Suerdem, A., Hanke, K., Brown, G., Vilar, R., Boer, D., & Bilewicz, M. (2022). Conspiracy Theories and Institutional Trust: Examining the Role of Uncertainty Avoidance and Active Social Media Use. *Political Psychology*, *43*(2), 277–296. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12754

Pummerer, L., Böhm, R., Lilleholt, L., Winter, K., Zettler, I., & Sassenberg, K. (2022). Conspiracy Theories and Their Societal Effects During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *13*(1), 49–59. https://doi.org/10.1177/19485506211000217

Module 2: Please rate your feelings of trust towards the following people and organizations:					
	Do not trust at all	Mostly distrust	Neither trust nor distrust	Mostly trust	Trust completely
Scientific research institutes (institutes like: Max-Planck Institute, NASA, universities)					
Government of *Austria/Bulgaria/ Denmark Germany*					
National representatives *(list all the political parties represented at the national level)*					
Political party 1					
Political party 2					
Political party 3					
Political party 4					
Political party 5					
Public Media broadcasters in *Austria/ Bulgaria/Denmark/ Germany (list examples)*					
Private Media broadcasters in *Austria/ Bulgaria/Denmark/ Germany (list examples)*					
Large Businesses					
The judicial system (e.g. decisions by courts) in *Austria/Bulgaria/ Denmark/ Germany*					
Election Outcome in *Austria/ Bulgaria/Denmark/ Germany*					
Police in *Austria/Bulgaria/ Denmark/ Germany*					
Military in *Austria/Bulgaria/ Denmark/ Germany*					

3. Implementing the REACT-survey

3.1 How to implement the survey

The REACT-survey aims to help teachers in a flexible way to find out more about what students think about conspiracy theories, extremist beliefs (module 1) and their trust in public institutions (module 2). The questionnaire can be conducted in a paper version provided in this manual or an online-based data collection platform can be used. Online questionnaires provide several advantages: increase the level of anonymity, accessibility from any device as well as automatic data processing and presentation in graphical and tabular form.

Given the age of the students and the fragile nature of their attention, it is necessary to design the questionnaire in such a way that it does not take more than 20 to30 minutes to complete. Experience from piloting shows that it should be possible to complete all modules including the optional scales in module 1 of the REACT-survey within 30 minutes.

The scales in the REACT-survey use a five-point Likert scale: *fully disagree*, *mostly disagree*, *neither agree nor disagree*, *mostly agree* and *fully agree.* Teachers can decide to add the options "I don't want to answer" or "I don't know" as possible answers. Without these additional options it is likely that students skip an item, if possible, or answer by choosing the median option of "neither agree or disagree" if they do not want to answer, do not understand an item or do not have a clear opinion regarding the issue. However, providing the additional options for answers can also provide students with an easy way out of engaging with a topic.

For research purposes we asked the students for some demographic data such as their age, gender, country of birth and their parents' country of birth. However, these questions are not included in the manual, since we do not recommend including them in a school setting. The smaller sample size and the personal knowledge a teacher might have about the students could decrease the anonymity to the point of non-existence.

The modules of the REACT-survey can be used separately or combined depending on the situation or teaching objectives. The different parts can also be used in its entirety or modularly as part of trainings, discussions and interactive formats related to civic education activities. Used as a monitoring instrument, the REACT-survey can be implemented at two different points in time. It can be implemented at the beginning of a teaching activity and again towards the end.

3.2 How to analyse and interpret the results

Before implementing the REACT-survey each teacher should consider what their objectives are for using the survey.

- Should the survey serve as a monitoring instrument?
- Are the results going to be used as a basis for a discussion with the students?
- How do you want to link the survey to your teaching?

The analysis will enable you to find out what your students' attitudes are towards conspiracy theories, statements related to extremist and authoritarian sentiments as well as their trust in societal institutions. During the process of interpreting the results it is necessary to be careful and to avoid overstating responses to individual items. Not the absolute numbers or percentages of students in agreement with particular statements which can give teachers an orientation, but the overall patterns and tendencies of (dis)agreements can give teachers an orientation. While agreement with Islamophobic and anti-Semitic statements (included in part 3 of module 1) should always raise a warning flag, students stated adherence to more extreme statements can sometimes be seen as an attempt to provoke their surroundings. There may be reason to address these kinds of perceptions in teaching, particularly if they are combined with an agreement to authoritarian or extremist beliefs (part 2 of module 1) or low levels of trust in societal institutions (module 2).

Some possible questions to help interpret the results:

- Are there topics to which students either strongly agree or disagree?
- Are there topics on which they are completely indifferent?
- Are there statements that they have heard before? Where did they encounter them?
- Are there issues that are controversial within the student group?

In a classroom discussion about the results the anonymity of the responses should be preserved and referring to the data as alarming or responses as wrong should be avoided. The results can be presented in summary form and discussed by reflecting on the statements, for example, by asking questions such as "Are you surprised by the results?" or "What do you think makes people agree with this statement?". The design and content of the survey can also be topics for discussion or criticism in a classroom. For example, teachers and students could reflect on any urge not to answer items honestly and discuss the limitations of the conclusions that might be drawn from the results.

Any reflection of the results should by linked to follow up activities, such as classes on critical media literacy, workshops on conspiracy theories or activities to foster active citizenship. The REACT-team will publish suggestions for teaching activities based on the survey (forthcoming in 2025).

3.3 How to change or write new items

The REACT-survey is structured into two modules and several parts, which aim to cover comprehensively the belief in various conspiracy theories extremist beliefs as well as trust in public institutions. The scales are designed to move from the general to the specific. However, they can be used in different combinations depending on the learning group. In addition to excluding entire scales, teachers may choose to exclude single items that they suspect may provoke negative reactions, that are not relevant, or that they suspect will not be properly understood. It is also possible to include new items that they have observed to be relevant to the learners they are working with, for example if new conspiracy theories develop. The items in module 2 involve trust in different public and political institutions or actors such as political actors. Similar items can be added to the list in the module. Adding items to module 1 can be more difficult, since most of them are phrased as conspiratorial statements. However, there are some guidelines that might help:[25]

1. Can you find recent research? You might not have to write your own items at all. Research might have already been done on the conspiracy theory you are interested in. You might find existing scales or items.
2. Make sure that you are interested in an actual conspiracy theory and not (alleged) conspiracies or theories that are simply yet unproven.
3. Look for scientific research on the conspiracy theory. This can help you identify key statements that best capture the conspiracy theory.

Once the specific statements you would like to add are identified, there are additional recommendations on how to phrase the new items:

- Consider the specifics of your group, in particular their language skills and contextual knowledge
- Avoid terminology or names they might not know
- Provide definitions of terms you use
- Be specific and avoid double meanings
- Avoid double negatives in the sentence
- Write one item for each thought (no "and" in the item)
- Avoid items that are too generic, e.g. that most people would (dis-)agree with
- Avoid long items and write short items if possible

If you are unsure if the new items, which you added, were understood in the way you anticipated, you could include this topic in the subsequent discussion by asking how the items were interpreted.

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[25] TEACH Consortium (2021). Manual for Managers of Adult Education Institutions. Assessing The Needs On Dealing With Conspiracy Theories. https://www.idd.uni-hannover.de/fileadmin/idd/Projekte/TEACH/TEACH_Manual_English.pdf

4. First results from the REACT-survey

4.1 Testing the survey in Austria

The survey testing in Austria was done in cooperation with our local partner school over the course of the month September 2023. There were 121 respondents aged 14 to 19 with a gender ratio of 34,71 percent identifying as female, 51,24 percent identifying as male and 3,31 percent identifying as non-binary or intersex. Out of the 121 respondents, only 78 participants completed the entire survey with a gender ratio of 39,74 percent identifying as female, 58,97 percent identifying as male and 1,28 percent identifying as non-binary or intersex. It is important to keep in mind that the respondents all come from similar socio-economic backgrounds. The results are therefore not representative for Austria and could vary drastically, depending on school type and where the survey is implemented.

The results showed that the respondents tend to disagree with conspiracy statements, especially the items containing conspiracy theories regarding climate change, religious groups (including Christian, Jewish or Muslim beliefs) or COVID-19. It is important to note that in conversations with the respondents regarding an earlier version of the survey many students said that they had never heard the conspiracy statements regarding conspiracies Jewish persons.

The majority of students, however, displayed a considerable distrust towards political institutions, especially the government and political parties. While they clearly advocated democracy, there is a gap between trust in democracy and democratically elected parties. This could be due to multiple reasons but is most likely due to the current political climate in Austria. With elections being one of the only ways to (institutionally) participate in our current democratic system it is important to strengthen the trust in democratic institutions even beyond political parties.

4.2 Testing the survey in Bulgaria

The survey was conducted between mid-May and the end of June 2023. It was carried out using an online-based questionnaire. A total of 332 students from different schools across the country opened the link and viewed the questionnaire, but only 132 responded. Of these, 34 percent (45) were boys and 66 percent (87) were girls. 96 percent (127) were born in Bulgaria, 4 percent (5) outside Bulgaria. 96 percent (127) respondents had both parents born in Bulgaria, 4 percent (5) - outside. Four respondents were 15 years old; 44 - 16 years old, 51 - 17 years old, 30 - 18 years old and three - 19 years old.

When answering the questions about trust in parties, media, institutions, it is noticeable that one third of respondents have no specific opinion. The highest levels of distrust are regarding the government and election results. Trust in parliamentary parties is very low.

Media and political manipulation, secret societies and global warming are the only topics about which less than 40 percent of young people on average are not neutral. 68 percent

believe that politicians manipulate, that the global truth is hidden from the public (58 percent) and that the world is controlled by secret societies (57 percent).

Conspiracy theories associated with specific groups like religious groups garner about 20 to 25 percent of believers. Here again, a large proportion does not have a clear opinion with over 40 percent choosing the middle of the scale for some of the claims. The lowest level of approval is for the antisemitic items.

4.3 Testing the survey in Denmark

The Danish partners digitalised the questionnaires using SurveyXact software and carried out two tests both at Flakkebjerg Efterskole. In test 1 the pilot questionnaire was used in a classroom on January 13th 2023. 22 students participated, 15 women, 6 men and 1 nonbinary. All students completed the form as there was no option of skipping questions, and teachers helped answering comprehension questions. Test 2 distributed the final and shorter version of the survey tool to 86 students in May 2023. 50 completed the form (now one could skip questions) of those were 29 women, 18 men and 3 nonbinary/other. In general students at Flakkebjerg Efterskole are atypical in the sense that they come from more resourceful and bookish homes than average Danish school children.

The high number of not completed forms in the second testing is an important result from Denmark, this table shows how many received, partly and fully filled out the questionnaire:
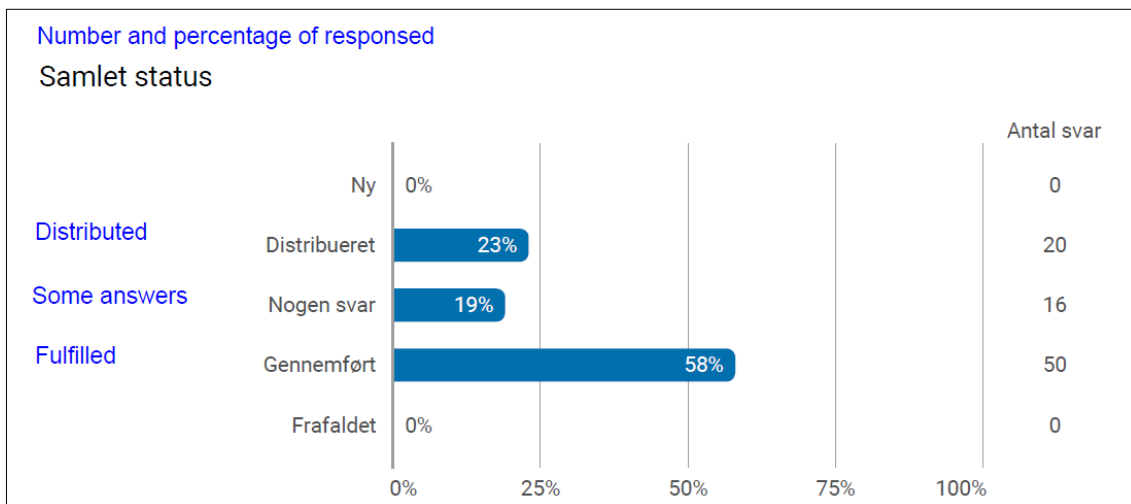
Other results from the second Danish testing show that ten students involved give the questionnaire the following feedback:

- The questions are not too difficult to understand.
- A majority find it relevant to use the form in Danish schools.
- Conspiracy theories is an important topic that students should be taught about, and the questionnaire may be able to promote conversation and understanding.

4.4 Testing the survey in Germany

107 students participated in the final implementation from one school in Hanover in June 2023. 84 students completed the entire survey, 23 partially filled in the survey – their data is not included in the analysis. Five groups participated in the survey, three form grade 10, one from grade 11 and one grade 12 advanced class. The piloting had been implemented in two 11th grade groups. The age of the participants ranged from 15 to 19 with the average age of 16.9 years which is overall similar to the piloting. Slightly more male students participated (45 male, 39 female students) which is a less even distribution compared to the pilot. 69 students responded that they are born in Germany (15 not born in Germany) and 35 indicated that at least one parent was not born in Germany. It is important to note that the results cannot be generalized and are likely to change depending on the school or region.

There was no particularly strong agreement with either the items regarding conspiracy theories or extremist beliefs. Most items in the first part of module 1 show a normal distribution aside the items regarding climate change to which there is overall strong disagreement. However, there is a notable difference in the response patterns regarding the items about public information and media which received higher agreement compared to all other items. In the second part of module 1 there is strong disagreement with both the group specific and the current items. Regarding the scales about authoritarianism and extremism in part 2 of module 1 there are also mostly normal distributions with some items shifting slightly more either towards more agreement or disagreement. The item about a need for strong leadership shows the highest agreement in this part of the survey.

5. Outlook

The REACT-survey can serve as a starting point for learning about conspiracy theories and extremist beliefs. In the second phase of the REACT-project the project partners will develop and test didactic materials to address the specific pedagogical challenges and issues that conspiracy theories raise such as how conspiracy narratives work or how to foster critical media literacy with regards to conspiracy theories and extremis beliefs. All didactic materials will be published in the forthcoming REACT-Handbook (expected at the end of 2024).