



Brussels, 30 October 2015

COST 033/15

DECISION

Subject: **Memorandum of Understanding for the implementation of the COST Action “Comparative Analysis of Conspiracy Theories” (COMPACT) CA15101**

The COST Member Countries and/or the COST Cooperating State will find attached the Memorandum of Understanding for the COST Action Comparative Analysis of Conspiracy Theories approved by the Committee of Senior Officials through written procedure on 30 October 2015.



COST is supported by
the EU Framework Programme
Horizon 2020

COST Association, International not-for-profit
organisation/Association internationale sans but lucratif
Register of legal Entities Brussels: 0829090573

COST Association
Avenue Louise 149 | 1050 Brussels, Belgium
t: +32 (0)2 533 3800 | f: +32 (0)2 533 3890
office@cost.eu | www.cost.eu

MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

For the implementation of a COST Action designated as

COST Action CA15101 COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES (COMPACT)

The COST Member Countries and/or the COST Cooperating State, accepting the present Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) wish to undertake joint activities of mutual interest and declare their common intention to participate in the COST Action (the Action), referred to above and described in the Technical Annex of this MoU.

The Action will be carried out in accordance with the set of COST Implementation Rules approved by the Committee of Senior Officials (CSO), or any new document amending or replacing them:

- a. "Rules for Participation in and Implementation of COST Activities" (COST 132/14);
- b. "COST Action Proposal Submission, Evaluation, Selection and Approval" (COST 133/14);
- c. "COST Action Management, Monitoring and Final Assessment" (COST 134/14);
- d. "COST International Cooperation and Specific Organisations Participation" (COST 135/14).

The main aim and objective of the Action is to generate the thorough comprehension of the history, politics, sociology, rhetoric and psychology of conspiracy theories needed to counter their often harmful effects on democratic values. Conspiracy theories have so far not at all been studied as comprehensively as their manifest importance demands. This will be achieved through the specific objectives detailed in the Technical Annex.

The economic dimension of the activities carried out under the Action has been estimated, on the basis of information available during the planning of the Action, at EUR 124 million in 2015.

The MoU will enter into force once at least five (5) COST Member Countries and/or COST Cooperating State have accepted it, and the corresponding Management Committee Members have been appointed, as described in the CSO Decision COST 134/14.

The COST Action will start from the date of the first Management Committee meeting and shall be implemented for a period of four (4) years, unless an extension is approved by the CSO following the procedure described in the CSO Decision COST 134/14.

OVERVIEW

Summary

Conspiracy theories play an increasingly visible role in the political life in Europe, not least because the EU itself is often viewed as a vast conspiracy. Although sometimes seen as harmless entertainment, conspiracy theories can contribute to extremism within particular regions, as well as fuelling tensions between nations. They can erode trust in democratic institutions and the media. Despite the increasing prominence of conspiracy theories in the age of the internet, there has been little systematic research on where they come from, how they work and what can be done about them. The aim of this Action is to develop an interdisciplinary and international network to provide a comprehensive understanding of conspiracy theories.

Existing research has tended to concentrate on specific national traditions, and is often confined to the perspective of a single discipline. In contrast this Action will adopt a comparative approach, investigating the causes, manifestations and effects of conspiracy theories in different regions and times, and drawing on insights from history, politics, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies and psychology. The Action will pursue the inquiry in three broad areas: the manifestations and modes of transmission of conspiracy theory in different historical and cultural contexts; the variety of actors and audiences involved in the production and consumption of conspiracy theories; and the psychological and cultural causes and political consequences of belief in conspiracy. Working closely with stakeholders, this Action will build a better understanding of conspiracy theories in order to develop an effective response to them.

Areas of Expertise Relevant for the Action • Psychology: Social psychology • Sociology: Anthropology, ethnology, cultural studies • Political Science: Violence, conflict and conflict resolution • Media and communications: Media and communications, social aspects of information science and surveillance, socio-cultural communication • History and Archeology: Modern and contemporary history	Keywords • conspiracy theory • racism • anti-semitism • populism • cultural narratives
---	---

Specific Objectives

To achieve the main objective described in this MoU, the following specific objectives shall be accomplished:

Research Coordination

- The Action aims at putting a spotlight on research in conspiracy theory by coordinating disparate studies into a coherent field of inquiry. While there is an increasing body of work on the topic, conspiracy theory studies is not yet such a recognised field.
- The Action aims at moving beyond restricting disciplinary approaches by creating dialogue and collaboration between scholars employing different methodologies. The Action will collate a large body of empirical and theoretical insights to produce a much richer and more robust account than has been possible to date.
- With English as the common working language, this Action will advance knowledge by enabling scholars to integrate findings that they have so far been unaware of because the research was conducted in an unfamiliar language.
- By bringing together scholars whose individual research focuses on different aspects of the topic (manifestations in different countries, time periods etc.), the Action aims at producing a comparative

analysis of conspiracy theories that answers overarching and important questions that scholarship so far has not or only unsatisfactorily tackled.

- The Action aims at constructing new research questions and projects of transnational and transdisciplinary nature. Moreover, it is to be expected that these projects will move beyond the scope covered by the Action and, for example, address conspiracy theories in Africa and Asia.
- The Action aims at equipping the major stakeholders with robust knowledge and strategies to understand and counter accusations of conspiracy directed against them or others. It thus will reach out and collaborate with scientists, politicians, journalists, NGOs and educators.

Capacity Building

- The Action aims at sustaining the collaboration of its members beyond its lifetime. This will be achieved by establishing close working relationships and promoting the formation of international and transdisciplinary research teams that formulate new research programmes and apply for national and international funding to conduct the research.
- The Action will also help to train a new generation of scholars in this area of inquiry: by actively involving ECIs; by prioritising STSMs for ECIs at established centres of excellence; by offering placements with stakeholder organisations; and by organising two summer schools for MA and PhD students.
- The measures taken to involve stakeholders will lead to close working relationships between academics and non-academics that will continue after the end of the Action.
- The grant-holding university will provide funds to maintain the project website after the end of the Action. The bibliography will be regularly updated, as will be the database of experts who participated in the Action. Stakeholders will thus be able to identify and contact experts for the foreseeable future.

DESCRIPTION OF THE COST ACTION

1. S&T EXCELLENCE

1.1. Challenge

1.1.1. Description of the Challenge (Main Aim)

Conspiracy theories – the belief that events are secretly manipulated behind the scenes by powerful forces – have a long history, and exist in all modern societies. However, their significance is increasing today, especially within Europe. They are not confined to the political margins as the product of a pathological mind-set; instead opinion polls confirm that the majority of citizens in Europe and the U.S. now believe in one or more conspiracy theories. Some conspiracy theories may be harmless entertainment or a sign of healthy scepticism, but others are dangerous because they fuel racism, nationalism or terrorism. They can lead to political disengagement, distrust of the media, and, in the case of climate change and vaccination programmes, loss of faith in medical and scientific authorities. Yet conspiracy theories have not been studied as comprehensively as their manifest importance demands. Moreover, the limited amount of existing research is fragmented along disciplinary, national and linguistic lines. Only an international and interdisciplinary joint venture will lead to the thorough comprehension of the history, politics, sociology, rhetoric and psychology of conspiracy theories needed to counter their often harmful effects on democratic values. The aim of this COST Action is therefore to provide a comparative analysis of conspiracy theory (in terms of its different causes, manifestations and effects across countries, cultures, time periods, political systems, media regimes etc.), and to develop recommendations and strategies for stakeholders confronted with it.

1.1.2. Relevance and timeliness

Conspiracy theories have in recent years become a pressing issue in Europe. They may be more popular and influential in some countries than in others, but they circulate in all of them at the level of populist politics (e.g., UKIP in Britain, Pegida in Germany, ANELL in Greece), among elites (e.g. Erdogan, Orban, Putin), in grassroots campaigns (e.g. vaccination scare stories, climate change denial, the 9/11 Truth Movement), and in popular culture (e.g. TV, film and fictional narratives). The issue of conspiracy theories must be addressed and tackled on a European level because the most problematic ones are inextricably tied to problems that affect not only individual member states but the European Union as a whole: conspiracy-minded Russian nationalism stoking the crisis in Ukraine; the war on terror and the rise of Islamist extremism within and at the borders of Europe; the resurgence of Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and neo-fascism; and the recent economic crisis. In fact, not only do a significant number of people in various European countries perceive their European and non-European neighbours through the lens of conspiracy theory, but the European Union itself is seen by an increasing number of people as a sinister organisation pursuing dark and secret goals (e.g., a 2015 poll in the UK found that 52% believe that EU officials are planning to take over all law-making powers). Conspiracist misperceptions threaten the project of European integration, undermine trust in civil society and representational politics, and promote populism, demagoguery and sometimes even violence – the most notorious recent example being Anders Breivik. And while scholars debate whether the rise of the Internet has furthered the spread of conspiracy theories or only made them more visible, their enormous presence online is cause for concern for an increasing number of journalists and activists.

Research on conspiracy theories has reached a critical mass that makes a collaborative project like this Action both possible and desirable. While many aspects remain underresearched, more and more disciplines within the social sciences and humanities have begun to develop scientific knowledge about conspiracy theories over the past two decades. However, existing studies usually

focus on a specific conspiracy theory, or a single country, culture or time period. Moreover, they overwhelmingly provide only one discipline's perspective and do not integrate research published in other languages. Thus, the knowledge produced by these studies is clearly limited, but it has paved the way for a joint research project that answers pressing questions by synthesizing the research done on different aspects in different disciplines and different countries.

1.2. Objectives

1.2.1. Research Coordination Objectives

1. The Action aims at putting a spotlight on research in conspiracy theory by coordinating disparate studies into a coherent field of inquiry. While there is an increasing body of work on the topic, conspiracy theory studies is not yet such a recognised field.
2. The Action aims at moving beyond restricting disciplinary approaches by creating dialogue and collaboration between scholars employing different methodologies, for example, quantitative and qualitative approaches, discourse analysis, opinion surveys, psychological experiments, content analysis or hermeneutics. In particular the aim is to integrate empirical and analytical approaches drawn from across the arts, humanities and social sciences. The Action will collate a large body of empirical and theoretical insights to produce a much richer and more robust account than has been possible to date. With English as the common working language of COST Actions, this Action will advance knowledge by enabling scholars to integrate findings that they have so far been unaware of because the research was conducted in an unfamiliar language.
3. By bringing together scholars whose individual research focuses on different aspects of the topic (manifestations and effects in different regions, countries, time periods etc.), the Action aims at producing a comparative analysis of conspiracy theories that answers overarching and important questions that scholarship so far has not or only unsatisfactorily tackled: for example, which aspects of conspiracy theories are constant and which ones are variable, how are they affected by different political systems, media regimes and national traditions, and how do their causes and consequences vary according to place, time and psychological disposition?
4. As a logical consequence of this comparative approach, the Action aims at constructing new research questions and projects. On the one hand, these projects will involve teams of researchers and thus be of a transnational and transdisciplinary nature. On the other, it is to be expected that while the participants of the Action are currently working on Europe and its near neighbours, the former Soviet empire, the Middle East and the Americas, new projects will also address conspiracy theories in Africa and Asia.
5. Finally, the Action aims at equipping the major stakeholders with robust knowledge and strategies to understand and counter accusations of conspiracy directed against them or others. It thus will reach out and collaborate with scientists engaged in the public communication of science, politicians trying to counter conspiracy accusations, journalists who report on such suspicions or are targets themselves, NGOs engaged in combating racial and ethnic hatred, and educators tasked with raising digitally literate and responsible citizens who do not fall prey to the temptations of conspiracy theories.

1.2.2. Capacity-building Objectives

1. The Action aims at sustaining the collaboration of its members beyond its lifetime. This will be achieved by establishing close working relationships and promoting the formation of international and transdisciplinary research teams that formulate new research programmes and apply for national and international funding to conduct the research.
2. The Action will also help to train a new generation of scholars in this area of inquiry: by actively involving ECIs in its organisation and management; by prioritising STSMs for ECIs and PhD students at established centres of excellence; by offering placements with stakeholder organisations; and by organising two summer schools for MA and PhD students.

3. The measures to involve stakeholders will lead to close working relationships between academics and non-academics that will continue after the end of the Action.
4. The grant-holding university has committed to providing funds to maintain the Action website after the end of the Action. The bibliography of scholarship in the field will be regularly updated, as will be the database of experts who participated in the Action. Stakeholders will thus be able to identify and contact experts for the foreseeable future.

1.3. Progress beyond the state-of-the-art and Innovation Potential

1.3.1. Description of the state-of-the-art

Research on conspiracy theories, with a focus primarily on the U.S., began in earnest in the 1960s (Hofstadter 1964, Bailyn 1967), based on the assumption that they were a sign of paranoid thinking that was confined to the political fringes. Since then, but especially over the past two decades, a growing number of disciplines have engaged the topic. Whereas early scholarship either dismissed conspiracy theories as pathological (Moscovici 1987) or celebrated them as counter-knowledge (Fiske 1994), a more nuanced and objective understanding has emerged since the late 1990s. Analytical and political philosophers have tried to define criteria to distinguish between exposures of real conspiracies and unwarranted suspicions (Coady 2006). Psychologists have attempted to identify groups and personality types particularly likely to believe in conspiracy theories (Swami and Coles 2010, Bilewicz et al. 2015). They have also begun to conduct a range of small-scale experiments to test the validity of their hypotheses (Wood et al. 2012). Political scientists now use opinion polls to track contemporary and historical patterns of belief in conspiracies, although there is very little data on countries other than the U.S. and Western Europe (Räikkä 2010, Uscinski and Parent 2014). Sociologists have started to investigate the status of the knowledge that conspiracy theories produce, the relationship to scapegoating (Taguieff 2005), the formation of counter-publics around conspiracy theories, and how new media, such as the Internet, facilitate their distribution and thus the construction of conspiracy communities (Anton et al. 2013). Scholars from communication studies have made a start on exploring the rhetoric of conspiracy theories (Danblon and Nicolas 2010), while folklorists have studied the transmission of conspiracy memes (Campion-Vincent 2005). Historians have worked on tracing the historical origins of conspiracy theorising and examined its impact on processes of social exclusion and political decision-making in the past, although most of this work has focused on the U.S. and Western Europe (Cubitt 1993, Richards 2000, Goldberg 2001). Literary critics have investigated conspiracy scenarios and tropes in various national literatures (Horn 2007, Wisnicki 2008, Pagán 2012), while scholars from the field of cultural studies do the same for film, television and non-fictional texts, and examine their impact on their audiences' view of the world, although, once again, these studies have tended to be confined primarily to American texts (Melley 1999, Knight 2000, Fenster 2008).

While these studies have greatly increased knowledge about conspiracy theories, there are still significant gaps and problems that have not yet been addressed. As most studies, even in the field of history, focus on the twentieth century, we still know very little about the origins and history of conspiracy theorizing, or about the continuities and changes within one national culture over a longer period. This goes even for those countries like France, Germany or the U.S. where substantial research has been done on earlier periods (Campbell et al. 2007, Klausnitzer 2007, Butter 2014). But there is, for example, no scholarly monograph on conspiracy theories in contemporary Germany. It is an even bigger problem with regard to other areas. There is one study of conspiracy theories in contemporary Croatia (Blanuša 2011) but there is none of that country in the past or the former Yugoslavia as a whole. With regard to the Arab world, by contrast, although there is some work on the contemporary period (Pipes 1996, Gray 2010), there is virtually none on earlier centuries. For some countries and regions, there has been scarcely any research into their particular forms of conspiracy culture. The ever increasing number of such theories about the EU itself has received no

attention so far. What is more, the crucial questions of how central categories of identity such as race, class, age or ethnicity are related to belief in conspiracy theories have hardly been tackled so far. This gap is especially pressing with regard to gender and sexuality, since at least in the present most conspiracy theorists seem to be men. Little is also known about the connection between conspiracy theory and violence; in particular, researchers have not investigated in which contexts conspiracy theories are more likely to lead to violence. In cases where a significant amount of work has been done on analysing particular conspiracist traditions, there is often little empirical information about the identity of believers and the nature of their beliefs. Conversely, empirical scientific studies of the popularity and psychology of conspiracy theories are often lacking in an understanding of historical and cultural contexts. Scholars have also only just begun to understand that the status of conspiracy theories differs vastly across cultures and times. And although some studies (e.g. Sunstein and Vermeule 2009, Bartlett and Miller 2010) have begun to address the question of effective responses to the dangers of conspiracy theories, this work is still undeveloped and has not yet involved potential stakeholders.

However, the most pressing desideratum is to overcome the fragmentation of contemporary research. Scholars usually conduct their research within the confines of one discipline or language or region, and they tend to only take into account what other researchers from their discipline have done and disregard research in other fields. Thus, there is no cross-disciplinary dialogue on contradictory findings and differing methodologies. What is more, even those who draw on the findings of different disciplines are usually only aware of work published in the two or three languages they know. Hence, scholars tend to reinvent the wheel instead of truly advancing knowledge. Due to the narrow perspectives of individual researchers, scholarship on conspiracy theory has not yet been able to answer various overarching questions, and provide meaningful comparisons between the case studies. But whereas a decade ago there was a real lack of any scientific research, there is now a sufficient basis to make a networking effort like this Action both desirable and feasible.

1.3.2. Progress beyond the state-of-the-art

This COST Action will progress beyond the current state-of-the-art by synthesizing existing research and thus enabling scholars involved in the Action to jointly tackle the overarching questions left unanswered so far. It will avoid the tendency simply to pathologise conspiracy theorists, and instead provide conceptual templates for understanding the changing appeal and function of the imagination of conspiracy based on detailed research into different historical periods, geographic regions, political regimes, media ecologies, and cultural forms in which it arises. The network will (1) produce an unprecedented overview of the continuities and adaptations in conspiracy thinking from the early modern period to the present; (2) make meaningful comparisons – while remaining sensitive to specific local traditions – about the varying functions of conspiracy theories in different political, social, cultural and media contexts with a special focus on Europe and its near neighbours, but also in comparison with the United States and the Middle East; (3) connect sophisticated analytical approaches to a range of robust new empirical studies; and (4) re-connect conspiracy theories to broader intellectual and cultural developments such as, for example, processes of secularisation and re-religionisation.

At the end of its collaborative work the Action will have produced a much clearer understanding of whether conspiracy theories are an anthropological constant or whether they are context-bound; of who believes in conspiracy theories at a specific moment in history and for what reasons and to what effects; of the connections between different categories of identity, especially gender and sexuality, and conspiracy theory in different times and places; of how conspiracy theories are transmitted through time and space and how they are modified during that process; of how the rise of different media affects conspiracy theorising; and of the contexts in which conspiracy theories are particularly harmful and the ways in which these effects can be alleviated. In contrast to the unsubstantiated

generalisations about conspiracy theories that often circulate in the media and governments, this Action will reach evidence-based conclusions. In sum, the Action will generate a much clearer understanding of where conspiracy theories come from, who believes in them, and what role they play in contemporary politics, especially in the EU.

1.3.3. Innovation in tackling the challenge

This Action is innovative because it approaches conspiracy theories for the first time in an interdisciplinary, comparative, holistic and policy-oriented fashion, and paves the way for transnational and transdisciplinary projects:

1. By bringing scholars from all over Europe and from a broad variety of disciplines together it will overcome the disciplinary and linguistic divides outlined above and foster a truly *interdisciplinary approach* to the topic. A self-reflexive awareness of other methodologies and the results they yield will enrich the existing research of individuals within the team, as well as generate new collaborative research projects.
2. Awareness of the content of work done on other regions, cultures and times will sharpen individual researchers' perspective on their own objects of study. But the network as a whole will promote a genuinely *comparative perspective* on a much broader scale. Only by working together will the scholars involved be able to address overarching questions about the nature, forms, reasons for and effects of conspiracy theories across times, places and cultures.
3. The network will foster a *holistic approach* to the phenomenon. Due to disciplinary restrictions existing research focuses on either those who consume conspiracy theories or on those who produce them, or on the narratives in which such theories are projected, or on the origins or effects of conspiracy theorising but it never considers all of these aspects in combination. This, however, is exactly what the network will do. Its different WGs focus on aspects that require input from several disciplines. Moreover, the Work Plan has been designed to facilitate a maximum of exchange and cross-fertilisation between WGs. Once again, then, it is the network as a whole that assumes a holistic approach rather than the individual researchers.
4. As the Action enters its latter phases, teams of researchers will form to tackle the new research questions they have formulated and to apply for funding (where necessary) to answer them. These future projects will be *transnational* in scope and *transdisciplinary* in method and thus push the innovation another step further.
5. This is the first Action on the topic that *develops recommendations* for stakeholders and systematically involves them throughout. The idea is not to conduct research first and think about impact later. On the contrary, by involving stakeholders on a continuous basis from the first stage of the Action onward, they will co-produce the research agenda, ensuring that the network's findings can be employed to counter the harmful effects of conspiracy theory, defuse fears of conspiracy and educate young people about the pitfalls of conspiracy theorising.

1.4. Added value of networking

1.4.1. In relation to the Challenge

This Action will constitute by far the most inclusive effort so far to study conspiracy theory. The project of moving the study of conspiracy theory beyond the confines of current research could not be achieved by a single researcher or a small team. Only a large network of scholars from different disciplines and countries can adopt the interdisciplinary and comparative approach necessary to answer the big questions unanswered so far. While each scholar involved in the Action will be able to relate their findings to research done on other times, places and cultures, the perspective of the network as a whole will surpass that of each member.

1.4.2. In relation to existing efforts at European and/or international level

There is no existing comparable effort at European level or beyond that focuses on conspiracy theories. There is a joint research project in the UK, but it involves only a handful of scholars, a couple of disciplines and is far more limited in scope. The scholars responsible for this project will be involved in the Action. In addition, there is a Hungarian-based project involving several NGOs that studies the relationship between conspiracy theory and political violence. But it is also far more limited in terms of size, scope and interdisciplinarity than the one outlined here. These scholars are also to be included in this Action.

This Action complements various past and current research programmes. The most important one is Cost Action IS1308 (Populist Political Communication in Europe) because populist discourse sometimes relies on conspiracy theories. Also important is IS1205 (Social Psychological Dynamics of Historical Representations in the Enlarged European Union) as it engages popular narratives about the past and their effects and thus also touches on conspiracy theory. As these other Actions will still be running when this Action begins, their MCs will be contacted to discuss ways to maximise cross-fertilisation. Since one focus of this Action is the effect of the internet on the spread of conspiracy theory it will draw on the findings of COST Actions IS1404 (Evolution of Reading in the Age of Digitisation), ISO906 (Transforming Audiences, Transforming Societies) and 298 (Cultures of Participation – Media Practices, Politics and Literacy). Because of this Action's interest in the role of conspiracy theories for the formation of identity and processes of exclusion and inclusion as well as their connection to questions of nationalism, religion and immigration, the Action will also draw on research carried out in COST Action A30 (Media, Nationalism and European Identities), FP7 EURISLAM and FP7 EUMARGINS.

2. IMPACT

2.1. Expected Impact

2.1.1. Short-term and long-term scientific, technological, and/or socioeconomic impacts

This COST Action is designed to produce impact in seven areas:

1. Academic Research

First, the scholars participating in the Action will benefit from the intensive exchange of ideas, in particular by learning about the insights and approaches of other disciplines, and by developing comparative knowledge of other regions and historical periods. The Action will also challenge the current presumption of American exceptionalism in the field of inquiry by demonstrating the range of research being conducted on and in Europe. The research agenda on the subject will be greatly advanced by the new projects that will emerge out of the network. The Action will also provide significant intellectual and career enhancement for ECIs and PhD students. Second, the research generated by the Action will advance scientific understanding of conspiracy theories in a way that would otherwise be impossible, and the insights that are produced will be of importance to scholars working in a wide range of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences.

2. Public Engagement with Science

The findings of the Action will also be of benefit to scientists outside the humanities and social sciences. An understanding of how conspiracy theories work, and how to combat them, will be of great benefit to scientists who are engaged in efforts to communicate their work to the public in the face of sceptical, conspiracist opposition (e.g. those working on climate change, vaccination programmes or AIDS prevention).

3. Policy Makers

Conspiracy theories have the potential to cause great harm to vulnerable communities and civil society. They can also erode trust in governments and institutions. In other situations, however, they can also serve to promote a healthy scepticism among the public. One vital task, then, is determining a sensible balance between trust and suspicion. Likewise, although greater governmental transparency has been proposed as one solution to the problem of conspiracy-minded distrust, it needs to be carefully balanced against competing demands for security in the face of increased threats from terrorism. Understanding how conspiracy theories arise, how they are transmitted, why people believe in them, and the effects they produce is therefore vital to promoting peaceful societies and international relations. A specific focus of this Action will therefore be to consider the policy implications of research into conspiracy theories, and to develop effective recommendations and training resources for European policy makers, think tanks, diplomats and intelligence agencies whose work comes up against conspiracy rumours. The Action will work closely with policy-makers to consider what can and should be done about conspiracism, with a particular focus on how conspiracy theories (a) fuel political tensions between nations and populations within Europe; (b) promote hate crimes directed against minorities; (c) contribute to political opposition within Europe to the project of the EU itself; (d) escalate geopolitical tensions within particular countries (e.g. Russia) and regions (e.g. the Middle East).

4. NGOs

This COST Action will work in partnership with various NGOs and Third Sector organisations to develop useful knowledge on how to promote democratic transparency, reduce radicalisation and extremism, and defuse conspiracy-fuelled hatred directed against minority groups. A number of NGOs from across Europe (including political think tanks, scientific institutions involved in documenting climate change, and civil society organisations concerned with vulnerable minorities) have already confirmed their participation in the Action, and the Action participants have also received expressions of interest from various others. The Engagement Subcommittee will make it a priority to strengthen and expand these ties.

5. Education

Education is key to reducing the potential influence of harmful conspiracy theories. The Action will therefore collaborate with school teachers to design and produce teaching resources for high schools that will inform children about conspiracy theories through a focus on digital literacy, helping them to identify the patterns of thinking and recycled narratives that underpin the circulation of conspiracy theories, particularly in the age of the Internet and New Media. The Action will also produce a set of sample syllabuses for use in university-level education.

6. Journalism

Like politicians, journalists suffer from the decline in trust of authorities and rise of cynicism that conspiracy theories create. The Action will produce recommendations concerning when and how journalists should respond to conspiracist misinformation among the public, and how they can help counter erroneous versions of events. However, some journalism has also been guilty of fuelling conspiracy panics (and unwarranted panics about particular conspiracy theories), and the Action will develop advice on how the media can avoid contributing to conspiracist scapegoating. Members of the Action will work with existing individual contacts in the media, as well as inviting national professional press associations to participate.

7. Corporate Reputation

Businesses and institutions can quickly become the object of conspiratorial rumours. While these suspicions are sometimes justified, in many cases they are not, and to date there has been very little research on how organisations can tackle the damage to their corporate reputation that conspiracy theories can cause. This COST Action will invite representatives from the communication

departments of large institutions (e.g. banks, the EU itself), as well as researchers from business schools who work on corporate reputation, to develop a set of recommendations and resources on coping with unwarranted conspiracist attacks.

2.2. Measures to Maximise Impact

2.2.1. Plan for involving the most relevant stakeholders

1. Many of the Action participants already collaborate with specific partner organisations and will intensify this collaboration under the auspices of the Action. Many have also served as experts on conspiracy theory for different media outlets in Europe and the U.S. in the past. They will use these contacts to involve journalists in the Action.
2. This Action has been designed in consultation with a range of relevant stakeholders from the categories identified in 2.1, including NGOs, foreign policy think tanks, and prominent journalists in several countries (working for publications such as *The Times* [UK], *Welt am Sonntag* [Germany] and *slate.fr* [France]). These stakeholders have expressed support for the project.
3. The Action will establish an Engagement Subcommittee to take the lead in identifying and reaching out to external partner organisations. Impact will be a standing item for all MC and WG meetings.
4. Beginning with a stakeholder workshop in Brussels in Year 1, the stakeholders will be actively involved in the Action. Representatives from each stakeholder category will be invited to participate in the Working Group meetings throughout the Action, to refine the research agenda and ensure that it speaks to their needs, as well as to help develop proposals for new collaborative projects.
5. Stakeholders will also be involved in the production of some of the Action deliverables, including the recommendations for policy-makers, the guidelines for journalists, and the education pack for schools.
6. Preliminary drafts of these deliverables will be made available on the Action website. Stakeholders beyond those regularly attending the WG meetings will be made aware of this through an e-newsletter and invited to comment on them so that they can be further shaped according to their needs.
7. The Action will also promote collaboration with stakeholders by creating STSMs for members to conduct short placements with partner organisations.
8. In Year 4 the Action will organise a Training School specifically for stakeholders, which will focus on the detailed recommendations on how to tackle conspiracy theories produced by the research team. As well as learning from the Action researchers, the participants in the Training School will benefit from sharing ideas with colleagues from related fields (e.g. journalists and scientists engaged in public dissemination of knowledge; policy makers and NGOs).

2.2.2. Dissemination and/or Exploitation Plan

One member of the MC will chair a Dissemination Subcommittee. It will work closely with the Engagement Subcommittee. The dissemination plan involves the following modes and audiences:

1. Website and Newsletter

The Action will set up a website that will serve as both an information resource for its members and a public-facing portal. The website will enable the stakeholders identified above (especially journalists), as well as the wider public, to access a range of working papers, bibliographies, as well as other media such as op-eds, interviews and podcasts by Action members. The website will also make accessible the additional outputs of the Action, such as the database of experts available for interview and comment. The Action will also produce a regular e-newsletter to keep participants and other interested parties informed of progress.

2. Academic Publications

The scientific work of the Action will be disseminated beyond the direct participants first through working papers, reports and multimedia recordings of some of the Working Group proceedings on the Action website, and then through individual scholarly publications in leading peer-reviewed journals, as well as special issues and monographs (following the policy of Open Access as far as is feasible). The Action will also organise panels dedicated to research on conspiracy theories at major international conferences organised by professional discipline associations, to promote research on conspiracy theories in the wider academic community. Finally, the Action will produce a definitive handbook on conspiracy theories to be written by Action members that will provide a comprehensive summary of the state of the art in the field.

3. Policy Makers, NGOs, Corporations

In addition to relevant stakeholders participating in the WGs, the Training School in Year 4 and STSMs in the form of placements with stakeholder organisations will also help disseminate the research findings of the Action. Moreover, a digest of recommendations ('How to Deal with Conspiracy Theories') will be produced by the Action, and made available on the website. There will be different versions tailored to the specific needs of policy makers, NGOs and corporations.

4. Journalists

The Action will establish on its website a database of experts on conspiracy theories that will make it easier for journalists to find relevant commentators. In collaboration with individual journalists and national press associations, the Action will produce a short set of guidelines for journalists on how to report on conspiracy theories and a comprehensive guide on the history, forms and functions of conspiracy theories. Both documents will be available for download on the Action website.

5. Education

Working with educators, the Action will produce a teaching resource pack for secondary schools and sample syllabuses for university courses. These materials will be made available through the Action website, and through national and European education ministries. They will serve to disseminate knowledge about conspiracy theories among young people, which will help defuse the potential harm they can create. The database of experts will also enable high schools and universities in each member country to identify local participants in the Action willing to give talks.

2.3. Potential for Innovation versus Risk Level

2.3.1. Potential for scientific, technological and/or socioeconomic innovation breakthroughs

By coordinating research efforts and generating new comparative and eventually transnational studies, the Action holds considerable potential for pushing forward research into conspiracy theories, as well as for contributing to the wellbeing of European society through promoting more effective policy-making and greater public knowledge about this topic. The risk level is minimal, as the Action includes the main acknowledged scientific experts in the field, and has been prepared in consultation with relevant stakeholders.

3. IMPLEMENTATION **Description of the Work Plan**

3.1.1. Description of Working Groups – Objectives, Tasks, Milestones and Deliverables

The overarching research questions will be broken down into three manageable components tackled by three WGs. The WG sessions will always take place as part of the main Action meetings. This is crucial for the success of the project because the holistic approach of the Action depends on regular dialogue between the WGs. Thus, while the WGs have been designed to tackle discrete parts of the

overall research programme, the network as a whole aims at maximising interchange. Accordingly, several times during each Action Meeting the WGs will come together for plenary roundtables during which the individual WGs will report back to the whole team. Such cross-fertilisation will also be enhanced by the circulation of progress reports and working papers via the e-newsletter and website, allowing all participants to keep in touch with research being conducted in other WGs. STSMs will be a priority in Years 2 and 3, first to enable ECIs and PhD students to spend time at recognised centres of excellence in the field so that they can more easily be integrated into emerging collaborative research projects, and second to allow selected Action members to conduct short placements with relevant stakeholder organisations.

The Action's activities are grouped into four broad tasks that apply to the work of all three WGs:

Task 1: Surveying the field and refining the research agenda (Year 1)

Objective: to refine the research questions and scientific agenda of the Action, in the light of discussion with the full range of members, invited experts and stakeholders.

(a) The Action Participants will review the existing literature in the field, and produce brief summary reports for circulation. Some of these reports will summarise work in particular nations and regions (especially work not yet published in English), while others will provide a brief outline of the methodological assumptions and paradigms developed by particular disciplines.

(b) The Engagement Subcommittee will identify and reach out to additional relevant stakeholders. Between the two WG meetings it will host a workshop to which representatives from all relevant stakeholder groups will be invited. Since the Action highlights the European dimension of conspiracy theories, this workshop will take place in Brussels.

(c) The Dissemination Subcommittee will finalise its plans, including designing the website.

Deliverables: stakeholder workshop; reports; comprehensive bibliography based on them; website.

Milestones: major international conference including a range of other scientists and stakeholders at the end of Year 1, to inform them of the Action's work and to involve them in shaping emerging research projects. At the same time, the website will go online.

Task 2: Integrating findings and developing comparative knowledge (Years 2 and 3)

Objective: to implement the research agenda, focusing on the research questions and themes identified for each WG below.

(a) This will include a mixture of participants pursuing their own individual research activities, as well as collective work on the main research questions by taking a comparative approach. In addition to individual publications, the results will be collected in one volume planned and edited by the Dissemination Subcommittee.

(b) At the end of Years 2 and 3 the Action will hold Training Schools, which will take the form of week-long intensive summer schools for MA and PhD students, as well as other interested researchers who want to improve their knowledge about the different disciplinary approaches and range of topics that conspiracy theory research includes. In this phase of the Action STSMs will be used to further promote cross-disciplinary and cross-national exchange, and to give ECIs the chance to do research at established centres of excellence in the field.

(c) Stakeholders will continue to be invited to the WG meetings to ensure that the research agenda remains relevant to its potential audiences.

Deliverables: individual publications; a plan for the edited volume including the commissioning of articles; securing a publisher's contract; drafts and final version of the articles and the volume as a whole; two Training Schools; STSMs.

Milestones: a draft of the volume to be discussed by the MC after 30 months; and the finished manuscript by the end of Year 3 to be approved by the MC.

Task 3: Developing new research projects (Years 3 and 4)

Objective: to develop transnational and transdisciplinary research projects and to apply for funding where this is necessary.

(a) As the comprehensive comparisons of research findings progress, Action Participants will begin to develop new research projects that will be transnational and transdisciplinary.

(b) In some cases, researchers will be able to do this research right away; in other cases Action Participants will prepare collaborative grant applications for national and international funding bodies, enabling them, for example, to commission new empirical studies (such as opinion polls and internet data-scraping) or to finance PhDs and post-docs to conduct the research.

(c) As representatives of the relevant stakeholder groups will always be included in the WG meetings, they will help shape the new research projects and thus ensure their relevance.

Deliverables: new research questions and projects; joint applications for funding.

Milestone: the MC/WG meeting at the end of Year 3 will critically survey the development of new projects and, if necessary, discuss measures to further them.

Task 4: Preparing and disseminating the information material for stakeholders (Year 4)

Objective: to maximise the impact with stakeholders and the wider public.

(a) The Action will draft, discuss and make available through its website the teaching resources pack, sample syllabi, the database of experts, and recommendations for policy makers and journalists. As throughout, stakeholder representatives will be involved in this process.

(b) The Action will organise a final Conference, aimed at disseminating findings to researchers outside the Action and the wider public.

(c) This event will be connected to a Training School designed specifically for stakeholders.

Deliverables: teaching resources pack; sample syllabuses; database of experts; recommendations.

Milestones: drafts of these materials will be discussed at the MC meeting after 42 months; publication of the final versions at the end of year 4; Action Conference; Training School.

WG 1: Manifestations and Media

(a) What counts when and where as a conspiracy theory?

This WG will produce a typology of the manifestations of conspiracy theory in different historical and cultural contexts, in order to reach conclusions on the definition of a conspiracy theory. Little is known about the history of the term itself, and the political consequences of the designation of conspiracy theory as an identifiable object of inquiry: does conspiracy theory only become an identifiable epistemological category when it comes to be thought of as a social problem? There is also a lack of research on the concept of 'conspiracy' and its relation to cognate terms, both in English and other languages, and to changing legal definitions of conspiracy. This WG will therefore examine how notions of what counts as a conspiracy – and therefore what counts as a conspiracy theory – have changed over time and in different cultural and political contexts.

(b) How do the style, content and function of conspiracy theories vary over time and place?

WG 1 will investigate how conspiracy theory relates to other phenomena such as rumour, urban legend and religious belief, and whether it is becoming more or less legitimised as a form of knowledge. It will consider whether the structure, content and function of conspiracy theories have remained constant over time, and whether they take on a different guise in varying political systems and media regimes. WG 1 will anatomise the images, metaphors and narrative structures that contribute to conspiracy theories, and whether these remain constant or vary over time and as they are translated from one cultural context to another. How, for example, do conspiracist accounts of the EU differ according to the national context, and what do they have in common? WG 1 will also determine what difference the embodiment of conspiracy theories in fictional or non-fictional genres makes, and the relationship between conspiracy theories that originate among elites and those that emerge from popular entertainment culture.

(c) How are conspiracy theories transmitted? What difference does the Internet make?

WG 1 will advance research on the different genres in which conspiracies have been imagined (e.g. plays, novels, pamphlets, sermons). It will develop an approach that is comparative in period and place to consider how conspiracy ideas have been enabled by the development of different media, including sermons, books, newspapers, radio, film and television, all the way through to contemporary digital forms of communication such as websites, blogs and social media. In particular, the WG will focus on the question of what difference new media technologies make to the creation and dissemination of conspiracist ideas and social networks of belief. It will also consider the extent to which the very architecture of the Internet shapes contemporary conspiracy culture: does the ease of creating associative links and weaving together existing documents push conspiracy theories to ever more complex and integrative forms?

WG 2: Actors and Audiences

(a) Who produces conspiracy theories, and who consumes them?

WG 2 will focus on the identity of conspiracy theorists, about whom we still know surprisingly little. This WG will conduct a comparative analysis of the actors and audiences involved in the production and consumption of conspiracy theories in different regional and historical contexts, with a particular focus on Europe, its near neighbours, and the Middle East. Investigating who believes in conspiracy theories and why, WG 2 will consider variables of identity such as gender, class, age, education, ethnicity, religion and political stance. The aim is to produce a comprehensive picture of the role of conspiracy theories in the life of individual believers and to understand the comparative importance of the phenomenon in different political systems and media ecologies. The WG will consider both the role of elites in promoting particular conspiracist stories, and the way that they are taken up, adapted and resisted at the grassroots level, as well as the role that socialisation plays in forming conspiracy beliefs. In addition, it will investigate the contexts in which conspiracy theories are used as propaganda by people who do not believe them, and if this cynicism affects their make-up and effectiveness. The commodification of conspiracy theories will also be investigated, and whether this makes a difference to their visibility or to the way they are regarded by their potential audiences.

(b) What role do gender and sexuality play in conspiracy theory belief?

The popular perception is that conspiracy theorists are predominantly men, although there is very little empirical evidence to back up this assumption. WG 2 will investigate whether and why conspiracy theories appeal mainly to men, and what difference this makes to understanding how they work, and to devising strategies for combating potential harms they might produce. Most conspiracies are imagined to be the result of men plotting with other men, but what difference does it make when women are imagined as conspirators, or when plotting men are feminised? And what is conspiracy theory's relationship to recurring anxieties about masculinity? This WG will also analyse the extent to which popular explanations of the attractions of conspiracy thinking (seduction, persuasion, influence, brainwashing) rely on sexualised metaphors, and how these change over time and in different national and cultural contexts.

WG 3: Causes and Consequences

(a) Why do people believe in conspiracy theories?

WG 3 will examine existing explanations in different disciplines of the nature of conspiracy belief, and seek to develop a synthetic model that combines empirical psychological data with attention to the specifics of cultural and historical variation. If we resist the temptation to ascribe the turn to conspiracy explanations to immutable personality types or essential cultural differences, then we are obliged to examine how identifiable psychological dispositions are enabled or hindered by different political systems, media traditions and regimes of transparency. Do conspiracy theories tend to thrive more in authoritarian political systems (such as Russia and parts of the Middle East) in which the flow of information is tightly controlled, producing a corresponding distrust of official narratives? Or, conversely, do they flourish in more democratic and transparent contexts such as the EU in which the political reality fails to live up to an unrealistic utopian faith in transparency, egalitarianism and

the rights of sovereign individualism? WG 3 will also explore the status of conspiracy theories as forms of vernacular epistemology in relation to other forms of popular belief (such as New Age mysticism), and more generally the relationship between the rise of conspiracy theory and secularisation: are conspiracy theories a form of neo-Providentialism?

(b) What are the consequences of popular belief in conspiracy theories?

WG 3 will advance research on the question of when belief in conspiracy theories is beneficial or harmful, and the reasons for the variation in effects over time and in different contexts. Are there contexts in which conspiracy theories are vital to the functioning of a healthy democracy, or do they always undermine it? How have conspiracy theories helped forge national identity in positive ways, and how have they contributed to hate-mongering and scapegoating? When, where and in what forms do they lead to violence, criminal behaviour and the radicalisation of terrorists, and when, where and in what forms are they mainly harmless entertainment and/or delegitimised forms of knowledge? What difference does it make if conspiracy theories are directed from below at governments, or when those in power use conspiracy rhetoric to target minorities? What difference does it make when elite opinion makers and politicians use conspiracist rhetoric? This WG will analyse the effects of popular conspiracism on: political participation – especially in the EU itself; trust in the media; social movements and cooperation; extremist groups and xenophobia; elite opinion formation; international relations and security; scientific and medical authority; and damage to corporate reputation. Policy makers are beginning to ask how conspiracy theories spread, and which methods of tackling them are most likely to be effective, but to date there has been little research on these vital questions. The WG will conduct a systematic analysis of possible solutions such as greater government and corporate transparency, improved secondary and tertiary education on the nature of conspiracy theories, and confronting misinformation head on.

3.1.2. GANTT Diagram

Year	1		2		3		4	
Months	1-6	7-12	13-18	19-24	25-30	31-36	37-42	43-48
Task 1								
Task 2								
Task 3								
Task 4								
MC Meeting								
WG Meeting								
Stakeholder Workshop								
Action Conference								

Year	1		2		3		4	
Months	1-6	7-12	13-18	19-24	25-30	31-36	37-42	43-48
Training Schools								
STSM								
Progress Reports								
Dissemination								
Website								

3.1.3. Risk and Contingency Plans

The potential risks of this Action are that it fails to develop a comprehensive analysis of the topic because each discipline remains separate; that it fails to generate new research projects; and that it fails to deliver useful recommendations. As for the first risk, the group of Action participants has been carefully chosen to cover a wide range of disciplines, methodologies, and areas of interest, and the WGs have been designed to ensure a mix of disciplines in each. In the contingency that particular researchers are no longer able to participate, the Action can nevertheless achieve its goals because each sub-field is represented by several researchers. The second area of risk is slightly higher because the formation of new research groups and joint projects (Task 3) will rely in part on securing additional national and EU funding. However, the majority of the Action participants already have a good track record of grant capture and project management, and can already draw on existing research funding and resources (including institutional research leave). As for the third area of risk, the Action envisages no significant problems with drafting effective recommendations for the major stakeholders as they will be involved in the Action from the beginning.

3.2 Management structures and procedures

A Management Committee, consisting of two representatives from each participating Member Country and headed by a Chair and a Vice Chair, will be responsible for the coordination of the Action. It will meet twice a year to determine the details of the research programme, monitor its progress, select the local organisers of WG meetings and other events, coordinate annual reports, make budget decisions, evaluate new applicants and decide on STSM applications. At its initial meeting MC members will also decide which WG they want to join. (Action Participants will do the same via email in the weeks after the first MC meeting.) The WGs will then elect a Chair and a Vice Chair who will be responsible for the fine-tuning and implementation of the research agenda described above. One of them should be an ECI in order to involve younger scholars actively in the running of the Action. In addition, either Chair or Vice Chair should be from an ITC in order to foster inclusiveness on this level too.

At the same meeting the MC will set up subcommittees for STSMs & Conference Grants, Dissemination and Stakeholder Engagement, each consisting of two representatives from each of the three WGs, with women, ECIs and scholars from ITCs equally represented. The STSMs & Conference Grants Subcommittee will review the STSM applications and recommend to the MC which ones should be funded. It will do the same for the distribution of an annual sum that the Action will set aside to enable ECIs and PhD students to attend international conferences beyond the Action meetings. The Dissemination Subcommittee will fine-tune the dissemination plan outlined above and compile the regular e-newsletter. It will also be responsible for the design of the Action website and oversee the production of the edited volume. The Engagement Subcommittee will actively reach out to the various groups of stakeholders identified above, invite specific stakeholders to Action events, design the Training School at the end of Year 4 according to their needs, and put together the database of experts for the Action website.

The daily administration of the Action will be the responsibility of a Core Group. It will consist of the MC Chair and Vice Chair, the Chairs and Vice Chairs of the WGs and one representative each from the three subcommittees. The Core Group will prepare the MC meetings and draft their agenda. Its members will be in regular contact via email, phone or skype. To ensure gender equality, half of its members should be female. Moreover, one member of the Core Group will be appointed as representative for gender equality as well as ECI and ITC involvement. S/he will participate in the STSMs & Conference Grants Subcommittee to ensure fair treatment there.

3.3 Network as a whole

The group of researchers is well equipped to conduct the Action. The Action participants come from 30 COST Member Countries – 16 of which are Inclusiveness Target Countries – and the Cooperating State Israel. They are therefore in a good position to conduct the comparative analysis the Action aims at – especially since almost all Eastern and Southern European countries, where conspiracy theories appear to be particularly salient and influential at the moment, are represented in the Action. Moreover, the research of the Action members covers an even larger area as some of them work on the Middle East and the United States. Nevertheless, if the application is successful, the MC will take active steps, such as systematically scanning online profiles and contacting the respective National Contact Points, in order to involve all COST Member Countries in the Action.

Moreover, scholars from a Near Neighbour Country (Russia) and two International Partner Countries (U.S., Australia) are involved. This involvement is to the mutual benefit of all participants. In Russia, conspiracy theories, about the West in general and the EU in particular, are especially prominent which is why they must be addressed by this Action and why scholars working there will benefit from the Action. The same goes for the U.S. where conspiracy theories about the EU are also very salient. Moreover, many conspiracy theories circulating in Europe have originated in the U.S. Finally, a considerable amount of research has been done on American conspiracy theories. The scholar from Australia is an expert in the field who will provide valuable input and benefit from the Action's findings in return.

The group of Action participants is also highly interdisciplinary. They come from the following disciplines: American Studies, Anthropology, Cultural Studies, Communication Studies, Ethnology, German Studies, History, Islamic Studies, Media Studies, Political Science, Psychology, Romance Studies, Semiotics, Sociology, and a range of Area Studies programmes. Importantly, the Action participants are evenly divided across the disciplines. This will ease the interdisciplinary dialogue, reflection on methodology and development of joint transdisciplinary research projects the Action aims at as no single discipline can impose its views on the others.

This Action will bring together three different types of scholars: 1) acknowledged experts who have extensively published on the topic already; 2) upcoming scholars, ECIs or doctoral students, who have done some work on the topic or who are just beginning to do so; and 3) a group of experienced scholars whose main focus is on concepts that conspiracy theory is closely related to such as nationalism or racism. Since many of the established experts have a lot of experience in advising younger scholars, this combination will ensure that ECIs and PhD students benefit considerably from the Action. Overall, the percentage of doctoral students, ECIs or scholars just past this phase involved in the Action is high because conspiracy theory is a relatively new field of inquiry that has only recently come into the focus of some disciplines and therefore particularly appeals to younger researchers. Among the Action participants are 42% women. Given that conspiracy theory research was in the past almost exclusively done by male scholars, the Action progresses beyond the state-of-the-art in this regard as well. Moreover, the MC will discuss measures to achieve complete gender equality.