

How Călin Georgescu and Far-Right Leaders Turn Conspiracy into Spectacle

Written by Mihaela-Georgiana Mihăilescu

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Far-right political leaders increasingly rely on conspiracy theories as the backbone of their campaigns, not just to rally their supporters but to create a captivating spectacle of misinformation, exploiting fears surrounding religion, LGBTQ+ rights, and public health to polarise societies and amplify their agendas. Călin Georgescu has emerged as a new case study of how these strategies are localised yet still echoing global far-right rhetoric. Georgescu's rhetoric taps into deeply rooted fears about national identity and cultural purity, often framing external forces as existential threats to Romania. While Trump evokes Christian nationalism to rally American evangelicals, Georgescu casts himself as the protector of Romania's Christian heritage. Similarly, Georgescu's anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-vaccine narratives mirror Bolsonaro's and Orbán's tactics, illustrating how far-right conspiracies are shared, rebranded, and weaponised across borders, unified by the same principles. However, in the face of such theatrics, memes are emerging as powerful tools of resistance, exposing the absurdity of these claims and undermining their polarising intent.

For Georgescu, the perceived attack on Christianity is central to his far-right agenda. He frequently warns that Romania's Christian identity is under threat from "globalist elites" and "secular forces" determined to eradicate traditional values. In one speech, he claimed that Romania's sovereignty was being eroded by the European Union's promotion of multiculturalism, which he framed as incompatible with the country's Christian roots. This rhetoric closely mirrors Viktor Orbán's concept of "Christian democracy," which he uses to justify anti-immigrant policies and resistance to EU liberalism. Orbán has famously declared, "We [Hungarians] are not a mixed race ... and we do not want to become a mixed race," a sentiment that aligns with Georgescu's veiled critiques of immigration and foreign influence.

Georgescu's rhetoric also draws comparisons to Donald Trump's alignment with Christian nationalism. Trump famously championed the defence of "Merry Christmas" as a cultural rallying cry, portraying secularism and immigration as existential threats to American Christian values. Like Trump, Georgescu frames himself as a defender of tradition against an encroaching, godless globalism. Both leaders invoke the so-called "Great Replacement" theory, a conspiracy that claims Christian populations are being systematically replaced by immigrants and non-Christian communities. Similarly, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil has warned that "Christian values" are under siege by progressive ideologies, invoking fears of moral decay to rally his evangelical base, echoing Trump's claims about "global elites" pulling the strings behind progressive movements. This conspiratorial rhetoric about Christianity not only consolidates their base but also justifies exclusionary policies – it masks systemic issues like inequality and corruption, diverting public attention toward manufactured cultural battles under the guise of protecting tradition and faith.

Călin Georgescu has echoed far-right rhetoric by framing LGBTQ+ rights as a foreign imposition threatening Romania's traditional values. He has described LGBTQ+ advocacy as a "cultural colonisation" driven by Western liberalism, portraying it as an attack on Romanian families and national identity. This mirrors Viktor Orbán's anti-LGBTQ+ policies in Hungary, where his government has banned content promoting homosexuality to minors and framed such actions as necessary to protect traditional families. Orbán's rhetoric about "defending children" has become a central theme in far-right campaigns, conflating LGBTQ+ rights with predatory behaviour—an insidious

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trope also leveraged by Georgescu. Similarly, Donald Trump railed against “woke” culture, using it as a catch-all term for progressive movements, including LGBTQ+ rights. During his presidency and candidature, he repeatedly attacked transgender protections and banned transgender individuals from serving in the military.

Jair Bolsonaro, on the other hand, has gone even further, referring to LGBTQ+ rights as a “gender ideology” designed to corrupt children and destroy family values. In one infamous speech, Bolsonaro declared, “But we can’t let this place [Brazil] become known as a gay tourism paradise.” Georgescu’s rhetoric aligns closely with Bolsonaro’s in its alarmist framing of LGBTQ+ rights as a threat to national sovereignty. Both leaders amplify baseless claims that LGBTQ+ activism seeks to indoctrinate children, creating moral panic to rally conservative voters.

The weaponisation of “woke” culture extends beyond LGBTQ+ rights, targeting broader progressive movements. In Romania, Georgescu frequently positions feminism, environmentalism, and multiculturalism as threats to societal stability, echoing Bolsonaro’s attacks on indigenous rights and Trump’s critiques of environmental regulations. It goes beyond portraying individuals against Georgescu as part of the LGBTQ+ community, using this rhetoric as derogatory and as an anti-nationalistic symbol. This broad-spectrum demonisation of progressivism is a calculated strategy to create a common enemy for far-right supporters, uniting them under a shared sense of cultural and moral decline.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided fertile ground for far-right conspiracy theories, and Georgescu seized this opportunity to promote his own brand of medical conspiracies. He has repeatedly referred to vaccines as tools of population control, claiming they are part of a globalist agenda to weaken national sovereignty. In one of his viral interviews, Georgescu extensively talked about his beliefs that COVID-19 is a hoax and that the pandemic was a test to see how far governments could control the population—a claim that echoes broader anti-vaccine rhetoric in global far-right movements.

Donald Trump famously downplayed the severity of COVID-19, referring to it as the “Chinese virus” and promoting unproven treatments like hydroxychloroquine. Similarly, Jair Bolsonaro dismissed COVID-19 as a “little flu” and actively opposed vaccination campaigns, framing them as government overreach. Viktor Orbán’s approach to COVID-19 conspiracy theories reveals another layer of strategic ambiguity. While Hungary initially adopted both Western and Russian vaccines, state-aligned media amplified doubts about vaccine efficacy, fuelling public mistrust. Georgescu employs a similar dual strategy, leveraging existing vaccine hesitancy in Romania—already one of the highest in Europe—to bolster his anti-globalist agenda.

These conspiracy theories about public health are deeply tied to mistrust of government institutions and science. Far-right leaders exploit this mistrust to position themselves as champions of individual freedom, casting public health measures as threats to personal autonomy. Georgescu’s rhetoric about “medical sovereignty” exemplifies this tactic, as does Trump’s framing of public health restrictions as attacks on US liberties.

Călin Georgescu, like his far-right counterparts, understands the power of spectacle. The more sensational the claim, the more media attention it garners—regardless of its factual accuracy. Donald Trump’s presidency was a masterclass in this strategy. His attacks on the media as the “enemy of the people,” his baseless claims about election fraud, and his inflammatory rhetoric about immigration all served to dominate headlines and rally his base. Jair Bolsonaro employs similar tactics, using outlandish statements to distract from scandals and policy failures. Georgescu’s adoption of TikTok as a platform for his conspiracy-laden rhetoric demonstrates how far-right leaders are adapting to the digital age, ensuring that his messages reach a wide audience, particularly younger voters and the Romanian diaspora. This approach mirrors the digital strategies of Trump and Bolsonaro, both of whom have relied on social media platforms to amplify their spectacles.

In the face of these theatrics, memes have emerged as a powerful tool for countering far-right conspiracies. Digital countercultures use humour and satire to deconstruct the absurdity of far-right claims, turning them into objects of ridicule rather than fear. For example, Georgescu’s claims about vaccine conspiracies have inspired Romanian meme creators to mock his pseudoscientific rhetoric, referencing his claim that Pepsi contains nano chips. Similarly, Trump’s “Stop the Steal” campaign was parodied extensively, with memes highlighting the irony of his baseless

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claims about election fraud. Bolsonaro's crocodile vaccine comment became an international meme, illustrating how humour can undermine even the most outlandish conspiratorial claims.

Although memes have been used extensively in far-right campaigns, they can also serve a dual purpose: they delegitimise far-right rhetoric and create a sense of community among those who oppose it. By distilling complex issues into shareable, humorous content, memes make it easier for individuals to engage with and challenge misinformation – it reduces fear and hostility, fostering critical thinking and resilience against extremist narratives.

The rise of Călin Georgescu in Romania exemplifies how far-right leaders use conspiracy theories to construct captivating spectacles of fear and division. Whether framing Christianity as under siege, demonising LGBTQ+ communities, or spreading anti-vaccine rhetoric, Georgescu's tactics mirror those of Trump, Bolsonaro and Orbán. These leaders weaponise cultural anxieties to consolidate power, often at the expense of truth and social cohesion. Yet, in the digital age, resistance is not futile – memes are proving to be potent tools for undermining far-right conspiracies, exposing their absurdity, and reclaiming the narrative. As the battle for public discourse intensifies, the role of creativity and digital culture in challenging misinformation will only grow more important.

About the author:

Mihaela-Georgiana Mihăilescu is a PhD researcher at the University of Bath focused on internet politics, with a particular interest in political memes and the role of meme creators in shaping public discourse. Her work explores the intersection of digital culture and political engagement, uncovering how memes serve as tools for influence, narrative-building, and fostering online communities.