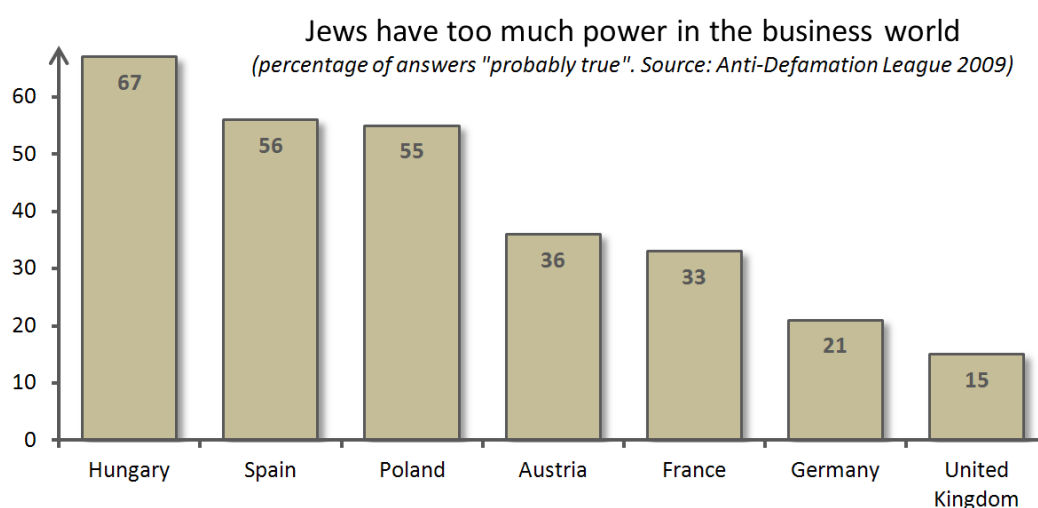


Conference Summary

The 2008 global financial crisis breathed new life into anti-Semitic conspiracy theories – a phenomenon that has deep roots in Western culture, but has been known to subside from time to time. Economic hardship has driven people to seek out a familiar scapegoat: It has given new teeth to classic political anti-Semitism, which builds upon old stereotypes, and has sharpened anti-Semitic speech, both coded and open. The theory that Jews are profiting from the economic crisis has gained widespread acceptance in Europe. Such ideas are even gaining traction in countries that have negligible Jewish populations, such as Italy and Spain. Research suggests that anti-Jewish sentiment has been strengthening in Hungary over the past few years.

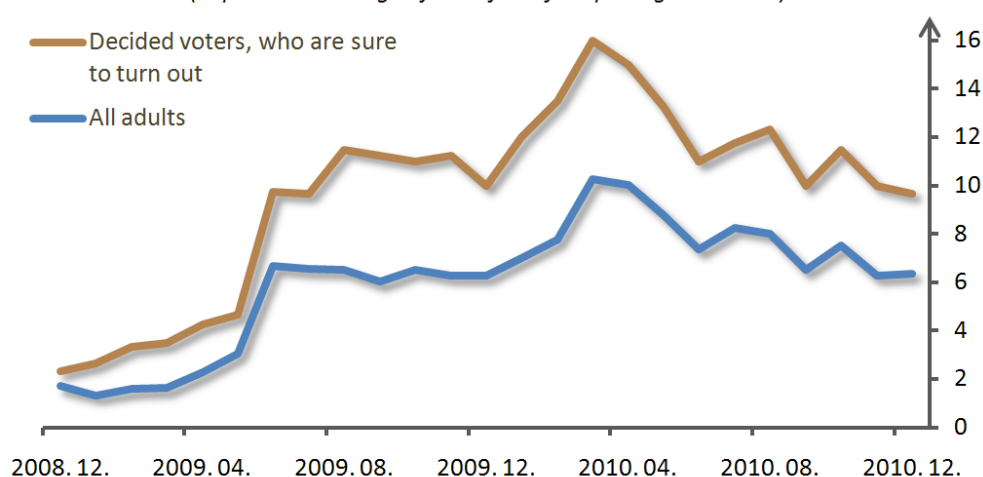
The conference on anti-Semitism and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, hosted by Central European University on December 15, 2010, brought together the leading Hungarian experts on the topic. Panelists used different approaches to explain the “timelessness” of anti-Semitic prejudice and conspiracy theories, as well as the current increase of these tendencies.



The following paragraphs summarize the speakers' points.

Krisztián Szabados, managing director of Political Capital, delivered an opening address in which he expressed regret that such a conference was necessary in this day and age. The sad fact is, anti-Semitic conspiracy theories are enjoying something of a renaissance. Radical right-wing movements (especially in Europe's eastern half) are not only articulating these theories, but strengthening them. Political Capital has been researching and monitoring extremist political trends for many years. In 2007, the institute was one of the first to call attention to the long-term risks inherent in the *Magyar Gárda* (Hungarian Guard)'s anti-Gypsy rhetoric; in 2008 and 2009, Political Capital wrote and published the *Láttelelet* ("Diagnosis") study on right-wing radicalism in Hungary, commissioned by the Hungarian Anti-Racist Foundation. In 2010, Political Capital released the Demand for Right-Wing Extremism (DEREX) Index, the first-ever comparative scientific measurement of social demand for chauvinistic, authoritarian right-wing ideologies. DEREKX showed that Hungarians' predisposition to right-wing ideals has been on an upward trend since 2002. This means the ultra-right Jobbik party's 2007 breakthrough was not just the result of clever politicking and was not simply the "fruit" of the economic crisis. The roots of the problem run much deeper: "It remains in demand," Szabados said.

Support for Jobbik in the past years
(In percent. Average of data from four polling institutes.)



Péter Krekó, research director at Political Capital and assistant professor at Budapest’s Eötvös Loránd (ELTE) University addressed the fact that a majority of Hungarians believe their lives are being directed by secret groups of people who operate behind the scenes, according to a 2009 study conducted in cooperation with the Medián polling agency. For example, 51% of respondents agreed with the assertion that “Secret processes direct the economy and determine prices,” and 50% agreed with the statement that “Powerful financial circles got together during the economic crisis and decided to demolish Hungary’s economy so they could turn the country into a colony.” At the same time, international researchers indicate that conspiracy theories are hardly unique to Hungary. Conspiracy ideas are attractive because they offer soothing explanations for unexpected, shocking, inexplicable events; they allow people to blame “the devil they know.” Since Hungarians generally view political institutions, financial organizations and the press with suspicion (see the table below), there is fertile ground for speculation that politicians and businesspeople are conspiring against “the people” and the press, which is controlled by these powerful groups naturally does nothing to bring these secret arrangements to light. The only major Hungarian political group that takes advantage of this opportunity is the ultra-right Jobbik party. After a strong showing in the April 2010 elections, Jobbik has found itself at a political dead end. The party is now trying to improve its dwindling popularity by focusing on the old-new enemy, the Jews, using anti-Semitic gambits to try to mobilize supporters. Political anti-Semitism has become increasingly prominent in Jobbik’s rhetoric, even at the expense of the anti-Roma bigotry that served as its ticket to popularity. Jobbik politicians are making deliberately provocative statements in public in an effort to rekindle the public’s fading interest in the party. This tactic is dubious: The Hungarian Justice and Life Party (MIÉP) demonstrated that a successful, strong party cannot build a platform on anti-Semitism alone.

Trust in the Media in Autumn 2009 (in percent, changes from Spring 2008 are in parenthesis)			
	Tend to trust	Tend not to trust	Don't know, no answer
Bulgaria	44 (0)	44 (+1)	12 (-1)
Czech Republic	58 (+2)	41 (-1)	1 (-1)
Poland	42 (0)	47 (-1)	11 (+1)
Hungary	26 (-1)	68 (+5)	6 (-4)
Romania	47 (-16)	44 (+13)	9 (+3)
Slovakia	55 (-1)	44 (+2)	1 (-1)
EU27	42 (-2)	52 (+2)	6 (0)

Source: Standard Eurobarometer 72, Autumn 2009

Journalist László Tamás Papp spoke on “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” an anti-Semitic tract from the 1920s, calling it “the Holy Grail of Paranoia.” “Protocols” became an international bestseller in the conspiracy-theory category after World War I, when paranoia was on the rise across much of Europe. “Protocols” was probably more influential than any other publication of its genre; generations of con Spiro-phobes cut their teeth on it. Perhaps no other modern work has made such a splash in political circles, either. “Protocols” was a runaway success because it mapped out the conspiracy-theory mindset more effectively than any other work. It became the theoretical framework for all kinds of paranoiacs, even those who were not anti-Semitic -- indeed, even for people who were openly friendly to Jews or were totally indifferent to the “Jewish question.” *Horribile dictu*: Protocols frequently provides the psychological mold for Jewish, Israeli and philo-Semite conspiracy theorists, albeit in an unintentional and unconscious manner. The book’s ideas do not divide philo-Semites from anti-Semites, but paranoiacs from people who espouse common sense. Most of the book’s fans do not care whether it is authentic or a forgery. Their argument is: It doesn’t matter whether the information is authentic, all that matters is the content. Even if “Protocols” is a forgery, history proves that its arguments are accurate.

Éva Standeisky, historian and staff member at the 1956 Institute, said anti-Semitism was present throughout the Kádár era, both among the common people and the political elite. The Kádár regime was different from the other countries in the Soviet camp because it was reluctant to use anti-Jewish attitudes as a political weapon in public. The main reason for this was the 1956 Revolution. At the same time, Hungary’s communist elite, encouraged by the anti-Semitic tactics they witnessed in Moscow, used coded anti-Semitic language to keep down Jewish rivals within the party.



Snapshot taken at the conference. Participants appearing from left to right: Krisztián Szabados, Péter Krekó, László Tamás Papp, Éva Standeisky, László Karsai

László Karsai, professor of history at the University of Szeged, focused on his debate with Hungarian “historians” who deny the Holocaust. (The “debate” took place on the ultra-right kuruc.info web portal.) Karsai asked: Why do certain people try to deny the fact that Nazis and their supporters murdered and liquidated nearly 6 million Jews during World War II? The answer lies in the fact that Holocaust deniers do not live in the realm of reality; their worldview is defined by anti-Semitism. Karsai cited numerous examples attesting to the fact that “historians” who study World War II without acknowledging the truth behind Nazism and the Holocaust use flawed arguments and ignore a broad body of fact. In his experience, people who deny the Holocaust are also devoted fans of Nazi Germany; they employ concepts – very similar to the ones that led to the extermination of Jews in the 1940s – to support their theory of a “Holocaust Industry:” international Jewry invented or exaggerated the Holocaust so they could have an easier time achieving their goals. The essence of their argument is: Jews have massive, overbearing influence and unlimited power to shape people’s consciousness.

András Kovács, sociologist and professor at Central European University, used empirical data to demonstrate that anti-Semitic conspiracy theories are widespread across Hungary. According to studies conducted over the past 15 years, some 15% of Hungarians can be considered hardcore anti-Semites. Most of these extremists support the idea of a Jewish conspiracy for global domination. Belief in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories is stronger than average among Hungarian men, residents of Budapest, university-educated Hungarians and high-income earners: In other words, anti-Jewish views are quite common among certain sections of Hungary's elite.

This phenomenon was present in 2006 and helps to explain the politicization of anti-Semitism in the ensuing years. History demonstrates that anti-Semitism can become a successful political ideology when a new standard-bearer enters the political arena – a political force that can exploit pre-existing anti-Jewish prejudices, use them to “explain the world,” and offer people a solution to their problems: breaking “Jewish power.”

Studies show that openness to anti-Semitic conspiracy theories is often linked to xenophobia and distrust in public institutions, but there is only a weak connection with people's religiosity. This indicates that people who have lost their social bearings are inclined to explain their problems and difficulties by pointing to a tightly knit group of outside antagonists. However, belief in a global Jewish conspiracy is not necessarily accompanied by hatred of individual Jews: Rather, anti-Semitism is a galvanizing force for “political anti-Semites” who believe Jews have too much control over politics. Anti-Semitic conspiracy theories play an important function in strengthening group identity, and often manifest themselves as a collective reaction to a perceived threat – especially during election campaigns.



Snapshot taken at the conference. Participants appearing from left to right: András Kovács, András Dezső, Viktor Karády

András Dezső, journalist and editor at hvg.hu, spoke about the challenges that different conspiracy theories and hoaxes pose for members of the media. Until recently, conspiracy theories and hoaxes started locally and spread slowly; they usually did not expand beyond a specific micro-community. But in the age of the Internet, conspiracy theories have become a global phenomenon that can spread like wildfire. Moreover, the fast-based nature of media competition makes it increasingly difficult for editors to determine the accuracy of information. Since the traditional press has lost its monopoly on distributing information and practically anyone can become a publisher, the market for “tall tales,” conspiracy theories and well-planned hoaxes is wide open. Communications is not the only industry that is susceptible to such abuse: New technology has made it easier to falsify evidence that is necessary to support conspiracy theories and scams. Journalists must therefore handle history-related stories with the utmost care, especially those concerning the Holocaust and communist-era agents. In most cases, the classic tools of journalism are no longer appropriate for verifying information; this has become the task of historians. The press has a massive responsibility, since denials of conspiracy theories – like denials of impending disasters – can actually serve to spread the rumors when they are reported in newspapers, TV and radio.

Mónika Kovács, psychologist, Vice Dean for External Relations and Academic Affairs at ELTE University, gave a presentation that focused on the dilemma of looking at the past and remembering the Holocaust. Memorializing victims of the Holocaust not only a moral imperative; it is important because it teaches students about human rights, acceptance of others, and the importance of determinative democratic values that can prevent Holocausts. At the same time, we must understand that making people feel guilty about the past does not necessarily increase sympathy for the victims of past atrocities. Collective memory is always prejudiced in favor of the people who are doing the remembering; they are inclined to turn a blind eye to the sins of people who “belong” to them and do not want to feel guilty about their deeds. For example, German researchers discovered that grandchildren of Germans who were alive during World War II understand a great deal about Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, but frequently do not connect these events with their grandparents. They often describe their grandparents as heroes who struggled against the regime, even when the grandparents themselves openly talk about the not-so-heroic roles they played.

In 2006, a representative public-opinion survey probed the link between people’s views on the past and underlying societal attitudes. When it came to memories of the Holocaust, researchers identified three opinion groups: Holocaust deniers; people who wanted to forget the Holocaust and move on; and people who insist that the Holocaust must be remembered. Holocaust deniers expressed no guilt about the past; at the same time, they acknowledged that Holocaust denial is front for anti-Semitic attitudes. The truth is, these people do not deny the Holocaust, but rather the moral consequences it portends. The second group, people who want to “move on,” usually expressed a strong sense of identity with their own group – nationalism – and therefore felt threatened by Holocaust history. These people prefer to focus on the future, not the past, or try to push responsibility for the Holocaust onto other groups, such as the occupying armies. The third group, people who insist on coming to terms with the past, professed a weaker sense of identity with their own groups, and therefore felt less threatened by coming to terms with the past. Unlike the first two groups, these people reject anti-Semitism, and this helps determine their relationship with their pasts. While anti-Semitism is what inspires Holocaust deniers to reject history, it can also be a consequence of the “move on” group’s refusal to confront the past.

Viktor Karády, social historian and professor at Central European University, spoke on the relationship between nation-state building and anti-Semitism. He noted that when people began building nation-states in the 17th century, the majority of European Jews lived in segregation. This was primarily a result of religious differences (anti-Judaism), but Jews were also viewed as potential enemies on a societal level. For this reason, they were only allowed to earn a living in professions that were typically off-limits to Christians. When nation-states came into currency, the Jews’ plight and their possible societal integration became an important question in several respects: They represented “otherness” at a time when nations were trying effort to achieve uniformity. Different parts of Europe took different approaches to solving this paradox: Western European Jews experienced a successful “emancipation” in the second half of the 19th century, but in the eastern part of the continent, the process achieved only mixed results. Integration was generally peaceful and productive in the Balkans, but discrimination remained strong in countries such as Romania and Russia. Hungary’s case was unique: The architects of the Hungarian nation-state were a minority in their own country, and therefore viewed Jews as allies against other, hostile minorities.

Attila Novák, historian and editor of *Szombat (Saturday)*, spoke on Shlomo Sand, one of Israel's newest postmodern historians. He said Sand himself was stunned when his book, "The Invention of the Jewish People," received an overwhelmingly positive reception among right-wing extremists when it was published in Hebrew in 2008. (The book has since been translated into numerous other languages.) Parts of Sand's work are debatable from a historical perspective, but it is worth examining the reasons behind the book's relative success and popularity among extremists; some people have even compared Sand to the notorious Holocaust-relativists and deniers. Sand begins with the political thesis that Israel needs to be a state for all its citizens, not just for the Jewish ones. He then proposes that "Zionist" historians and politicians "created" a past for the Jewish people in order to build special historical bonds with the Holy Land that would support Jewish territorial claims. This "created" past now allows them to shut out Muslim and Christian Arabs, as well as non-Jewish Westerners. Average readers cannot determine the true value of a sensational but scientific-looking book, even if it had been slammed in the media. "Invention" got good-sounding reviews in the international academic and media markets, and its author was himself a Jew: This generated the illusion that anyone who reads the book will become party to some kind of "hidden truth." The book certainly cannot be described as anti-Semitic; at the same time, its (false) scientific appearance provided ammunition to people who think they can solve one of the world's burning historical-political conflicts by liquidating one of the actors – Israel. Attempts to silence the past will certainly lead to future destruction.



Snapshot taken at the conference. Participants appearing from left to right: András Kovács, András Dezső, Mónika Kovács, Attila Novák