Political Potential of Conspiracy Theories

A Study of Poland and Slovenia

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(editors)

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INTRODUCTION

Agnieszka TURSKA-KAWA[1]

In the 21st century, the world has entered an era of what is referred to as 'polycrisis' (Albert, 2024; Zeitlin and Nicoli, 2019), a period in which multiple major crises occur simultaneously or in rapid succession, reinforcing one another. However, it is not only about the sum of difficult events, but about their *systemic coupling* – each one exacerbates the next, and together they create a complex, unstable constellation of challenges that weaken the foundations underlying the international order, democratic systems, public trust, as well as the individual sense of security.

In the years 2008–2009, the world plunged into a financial crisis that not only shook the global economy but also undermined faith in the neoliberal economic paradigm. It led to growing social inequality, a sense of exclusion, and distrust of institutions, which in subsequent years provided fertile ground for the rise of populist sentiment. Soon afterwards, Europe and other regions of the world had to face a migration crisis, fuelled by armed conflicts, destabilisation of Middle Eastern and African countries, and global inequalities. The influx of refugees clearly demonstrated the weakness of international solidarity and became one of the main themes used by nationalist and anti-liberal forces. Subsequently, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed inefficiencies in the healthcare system, among other areas, but also revealed the challenges individual countries encountered in terms of coordinating emergency measures. The growing effects of global warming and the need for energy transition began to affect not only economies and the daily lives of citizens but also international relations. Russia's aggression against Ukraine radically altered the balance of power in Europe and brought back geopolitical tensions that had seemed to have become a thing of the past for many decades. That conflict has redefined relations between the West and the authoritarian world, pointing to a deep

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divergence of values and interests between democratic societies and autocracies such as Russia, China, and Iran. In parallel, we have seen a regression of democracy in many countries: eroding the rule of law, limiting media freedom, or marginalising independent institutions.

These are merely a few examples, but they show quite clearly that in such a complex and volatile situation, it is difficult to treat individual crises separately. Their co-occurrence, interactions and mutual intensification are precisely the factors that create a state of complex relations that threaten the stability of societies, while the ensuing disruptions of taken-for-granted certainties feed a growing sense of insecurity and threat. The rising tide of uncertainty is a wellspring of distrust among individuals who are increasingly frustrated about key aspects of systemic societal functioning, evident in economic malperformance, inefficient health systems, deteriorating public infrastructures in transportation, energy supplies, schools, crime prevention and – since recently – even military defence. Policy failures feeding individual feelings of dissatisfaction on a mass-scale become a natural source of institutional distrust.

When the world appears chaotic and official narratives seem to fail to offer satisfactory explanations, many people start seeking alternative solutions to recover the lost anchor of security (Turska-Kawa and Galica, 2024). This is precisely the kind of stories conspiracy theories provide: they suggest the existence of hidden, sinister forces that allegedly control events from behind the scenes and are responsible for all negative social, economic, or political phenomena. The government and global corporations continue to be accused of conspiracies most frequently; however, any group perceived as influential could be charged with conspiracy (Douglas et al., 2019). In a situation where it is difficult to find answers to fundamental questions related to the sense of security, narratives about hidden goals pursued by big agents are easier to accept. By providing quick explanations for events that generate negative feelings, conspiracy theories channel problematic emotions, giving the individual an illusory sense of calm.

Research shows that conspiracy theories flourish when individuals lose their sense of control over the processes unfolding in their environments (Madalina, 2015). For individuals with a particular psychological profile (Pilch et al., 2023), remaining in an uncertain situation with limited prospects of explanation for a long time makes them more susceptible to conspiracy theories (van Mulukom et al., 2022). Conspiracy theories offer simple explanations of difficult situations,

combined with the revelation of the supposedly hidden forces that intentionally generate and control the related suffering. These ideological elements provide reassurance and emotional relief nourished by the sense that the conspiracy believer belongs to the few chosen ones who understand how the world truly works (e.g. Adam-Troian et al., 2021; Gligorić et al., 2021).

One could venture the thesis that conspiracy theories – in the new, special conditions of uncertainty and above-average access to the Internet – have generated a particular type of political subjectivity. The foundation is provided by the specific psychological profile of the individual. Research also proves that conspiracy beliefs develop more often in individuals with scarce political knowledge (Gemenis, 2021; Golec de Zavala and Federico, 2018; Min, 2021), political helplessness (Tonković et al., 2021), political deprivation (Baier and Manzoni, 2020), perceived anomia (Baier and Manzoni, 2020; Majima and Nakamura, 2020), and low interest in politics (Mondak, 2020). One might therefore believe that these are not people who have so far developed subjectivity and who feel that they have a stable place in the political system. Following conspiracy theories has become a particular remedy for a weaker psychological condition, generated, in their view, by political decisions. This makes such persons join in discussions, even though they had previously been distant from the political sphere. Thus, conspiracy theories can in themselves constitute a trigger of individual empowerment processes, as they quickly and effectively meet the individual's needs, including in particular control of coping with the uncertainty generated by the difficult situation encountered. It can be assumed that, for some people, politics was not an important point of focus before the conspiracy belief system developed in their cognitive field. However, conspiracy theories – as a particular political narrative – quickly boosted the individual's shaken mental condition, shaping their political subjectivity.

Such theories are reinforced by echo chambers, generating online conspiracy theory communities (especially on social media) and enabling the creation of a new kind of identity (Turska-Kawa and Pilch, 2025). On the one hand, they make it possible to create a certain imagined community of people united by their views and experiences (Anderson, 1983). The specific nature of this imagined notion allows the individual to shape it according to their needs. On the other hand, the widespread stigmatisation of conspiracy theory supporters helps to define this community and actually strengthens it through feedback. Conspiracy beliefs, understood as 'stigmatised knowledge', can lead to minority status, which in turn perpetuates a sense of belonging (Lowe, 2020). The fact

that these spaces are socially shut off from casual viewers further reinforces the feeling of uniqueness of their members. It also seals the boundaries of the views and opinions spread within them. False information, designed for minority audiences, is especially ubiquitous on social media, fostering collective credulity (Mari et al., 2022).

Research so far has clearly proven that conspiracy theories have a negative impact on societies and institutions of the democratic order. Conspiracy beliefs can undermine public support for government policies (van Prooijen and Douglas, 2018) and reduce key predictors of voluntary compliance with the law (Imhoff and Bruder, 2014) and trust in government and institutions (Wahl et al., 2010). Importantly, they can also undermine preventive health-related behaviours. For example, belief in HIV conspiracy theories combines with negative attitudes towards HIV medications (Bird and Bogart, 2005; Gillman et al., 2013), and belief in anti-vaccine conspiracy theories combines with a lower inclination to vaccinate one's children (Jolley and Douglas, 2014). Conspiracy theories break down social cohesion and hamper effective responses to crises. They contribute to the radicalisation of attitudes, social polarisation and marginalisation of scientific knowledge.

The increasingly strong permeation of public space with conspiracy theories encourages exploration of the phenomenon, integrating output from different disciplines: political sciences, psychology, economics, sociology, and communication science. The studies presented in the multi-authored book contribute to the understanding of how conspiracy theories affect political trust, public perceptions of politics and public policies, as well as voting behaviour. We address the subject matter of this book through the nexus of citizen, media, and institutions. These three aspects intersect, reinforcing the system of conspiratorial beliefs and the impact they have on those around them. We defined the area through several questions that set the direction of empirical explorations for researchers from Poland and Slovenia: *How do conspiracy theories affect political processes and political institutions in general? How do they affect public trust in political institutions? What role does social media play in the spread of such theories? How do financial and economic conditions affect trust in conspiracy theories?* We did not always find the answers to these questions, and we raised more in many places, thus encouraging further reflection on the readers' part.

With a sharp focus on Slovenian and Polish case studies, the book offers a comparative approach to the analysis of socio-political dynamics under the influence

of conspiracy theories, especially after major global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russo-Ukrainian war. The choice of Poland and Slovenia stems from their different political and social references, considering the size and social structure of the two countries. Poland is the largest, and Slovenia the smallest among the post-communist countries in Central Europe. Poland is a country with a homogeneous ethnic structure, whereas the role of national minorities is much greater in Slovenia. Finally, due to its geographic location, Poland seems to be to a much larger extent an object of interest of Russia, which treats movements based on conspiracy theories as a tool to destabilise countries internally, and informally supports such movements (Snip, 2020). Such a distinction makes it possible to look at the subject matter addressed in our research from the point of view of different social and cultural contexts.

This volume contains seven articles containing analyses of the issue of conspiracy theories and beliefs from the perspective of different disciplines, based on different data sets (national surveys, European Social Surveys, own media exploration).

Tine Šteger, in the chapter 'Conspiracy Theories in Slovenia during and after the Pandemic', investigates the content and prevalence of COVID-19 conspiracy theories by covering some of the latest trends in Slovenia, and occasionally in the broader context of Central and Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans. Specifically, the objective was to examine the dominant themes of conspiracy theories related to COVID-19 that circulated in Slovenia and the broader region both during and after the pandemic.

Agnieszka Turska-Kawa and Patrycja Bełtowska, in the study 'Economic Security and Conspiracy Thinking: a Cross-Cultural European Perspective', examine whether economic factors influence belief in intergroup conspiracy theories, considering the crucial importance of economic security for a sense of control and stability. The study highlights the diverse role of socio-economic factors, with household income and financial difficulties appearing to be more important factors influencing support for conspiracy theories than broader inequalities or deprivation indicators.

In the third chapter 'Conspiracy Theories and (Dis)Trust in Political Institutions' Miro Haček analyses trends in the levels of (dis)trust in key political institutions in some Central and Eastern European countries and in Slovenia, with an emphasis on the wave of conspiracy theories which spread extensively during and

after the global coronavirus pandemic. The author connects those findings with the results of empirical research among followers and sympathisers of conspiracy theorist profiles on Slovenian social media sites, mostly Facebook, and with the results of the representative national survey implemented in late 2024 to ascertain the levels of embeddedness of conspiracy theories in Slovenia and to discover the profile of an average Slovenian conspiracy theories follower and their attitude towards mainstream politics.

Agata Olszanecka-Marmola and Maciej Marmola in their study "Conspiracy Stereotypes in Times of War: The Impact of Party Identification on Belief in Anti-Ukrainian Conspiracies in Poland" show that supporters of parties promoting anti-Ukrainian rhetoric are significantly more likely to endorse stereotypes. They show that identification with the far-right Confederation correlates more strongly with support for anti-Ukrainian conspiracies than national identification, populism, right-wing authoritarianism, religiosity, or ideology. Stronger associations are observed only for xenophobia, paranoid ideation, collective narcissism, and belief in unique in-group victimhood. references

Miro Haček, Simona Kukovič and Tine Šteger, in the chapter 'The Slovenian Conspiracy Theorist: an Analysis of the National Survey Results', present the results of a national survey conducted in Slovenia, with the central aim of answering the main research question: Who is the person that can be labelled a conspiracy theorist in the Slovenian societal context? The analysis shows that belief in conspiracy theories varies most strongly by education, religion, and age rather than gender or urban–rural differences.

In the sixth chapter "Virality Without Adhesion: How Tie Strength Shapes the Spread of Conspiracy Theories on X" Paweł Matuszewski and Michał Rams-Ługowski investigate the role of social tie strength in the diffusion of political conspiracy theories on the social media platform X (formerly Twitter). By analysing 74 million interactions related to Polish politics between April 2021 and October 2022, the research aims to identify the relationship between tie strength and the spread of conspiracy narratives compared to other political content. The results show – among others – that conspiracy theories are broadcast rather than debated on X, with limited engagement from strong and moderate ties. Furthermore, the presence of conspiracy narratives in political discourse, despite temporary surges, remained constant, suggesting that the diffusion process is limited.

Kornelia Batko in the chapter "Synthetic Realities: Ai-Generated Deepfakes and Conspiracy Theories as a Challenge to Trust in Modern Democracies" discusses how these technology-based manipulations support the spread of conspiracy theories, exacerbating social tensions, undermining public trust in democratic institutions, and disrupting political discourse. The chapter emphasized the need to develop proactive strategies to limit the spread of AI-powered conspiracy theories to protect trust in democracy and social resilience.

The book is a result of work by researchers from Poland and Slovenia as part of the project OPUS LAP, implemented in 2022–2025 and financed by the National Science Centre, Poland (no. 2020/39/I/HS5/00176) and the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (no. N5-0222).

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CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN SLOVENIA DURING AND AFTER THE PANDEMIC

Tine ŠTEGER[1]

Although the tradition of conspiracy theories in Europe is rich, conspiracy theories remain a relatively underexplored phenomenon. The absence of a research tradition concerning conspiracy theories is apparent in the context of Slovenia, with only a few very recent research endeavours in this field, mostly stimulated by the latest pandemic. Historically, conspiracy theories emerged in response to various events that individuals were unable to fully comprehend but were primarily regionally confined and isolated within specific social contexts, especially until the advent of the Internet. After the development of the Internet, especially the social media landscape, alternative explanations for significant social events – based on the notion that malevolent forces, in the form of individuals or groups seeking to deliberately harm the general population – began to acquire a global reach. This phenomenon became particularly pronounced with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the first global health emergency in times of fully flourished social media, as numerous conspiracy theories about the health crisis swiftly transcended regional boundaries. As we found out, conspiracy theories related to COVID-19 – ranging from claims about the virus's artificial origin, denial of its existence, vaccine-related fears, 5G technologies, to the 'Great Reset' – were widely endorsed in Slovenia, with some of the highest belief rates in Europe.

Key words: conspiracy theories; Europe; Slovenia; pandemic; COVID-19.

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Introduction

The emergence of COVID-19 in China at the end of 2019, initially perceived as just another distant health emergency of geographically limited scope, quickly transformed into a global health crisis. Simultaneously, sensational narratives, rumours, and fake news emerged, along with conspiracy theories (Radomirović Maček, 2023), each offering clear and simple explanations for an event that modern history had never witnessed before. The reality at the onset of the pandemic was vividly described by the Director-General of the World Health Organization, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, who stated that the world was not only facing a pandemic but also an infodemic (Birchall and Knight, 2023), a mass of misinformation often manifesting as fake news and conspiracy theories (Rachwol, 2023). The emergence of conspiracy theories in similar situations is by no means a new phenomenon (Douglas 2021), as it fits the historic trends of increased presence in times of social crises, characterised by uncertainty, fears and concerns, and is further enhanced by the lack of timely and sufficiently clear official explanations (van Prooijen and Douglas, 2017). Notwithstanding, the COVID-19 pandemic period has provided an exceptional starting point for beginning to uncover the trajectory of conspiracy theories in Slovenia and in the broader context of Central and Eastern Europe (Šteger, 2024). Conspiracy theories circulating during these challenging times were not entirely new but often adapted versions of already familiar narratives, with previously known conspirators woven into the new circumstances (Rachwol, 2023).

The next section seeks to investigate the content and prevalence of COVID-19 conspiracy theories by covering some of the latest trends in Slovenia, and occasionally in the broader context of Central and Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans. Specifically, the objective was to examine the dominant themes of conspiracy theories related to COVID-19 that circulated in Slovenia and the broader region both during and after the pandemic. To assess the prevalence of such theories during the pandemic, we conducted a comprehensive literature review of existing studies addressing the content and prevalence of COVID-19-related conspiracy theories in Central and Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans. A dedicated questionnaire was included as part of the Slovenian Public Opinion Survey 2024/1 to investigate the prevalence of COVID-19 conspiracy theories in the post-pandemic period.

Conspiracy Theories

Conspiracy theories have a long history (Butter, 2014) and are widely considered to be pervasive (Goertzel, 1994), if not omnipresent (Bale, 2007). They can be understood as attempts to explain significant events, situations, or crises – as well as their consequences – not as outcomes of coincidence, mistake, or complex social processes, but as the deliberate actions of a covert group of powerful actors, typically perceived as hostile to the public (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009). As Šteger, Fir, and Wojtasik (2025) observe, conspiracy theories are not limited to alternative explanations of past and present events and crises; they also reflect visions about future realities, with the belief that the future is determined by hidden powers, usually hostile towards ordinary people.

Conspiracy theories rarely appear individually; instead, they connect various individual conspiracy claims into overarching *superconspiracies* (Birchall and Knight, 2023) often based on pre-existing conspiracy narratives. As such, they represent an interplay between history and present reality (Šteger, 2024). As argued by Byford (2014), conspiracy theories could be understood as a dynamic set of arguments, images, and interpretations that are continuously used, adjusted, discussed, and applied to new situations in the process of everyday sense-making practices, particularly popular during impactful societal crises, characterised by uncertainty, fears, and concerns (van Prooijen and Douglas, 2017).

Unprecedented technological advancement, with the popularisation of the World Wide Web as an instrument of communication, both in political and social terms (Wojtasik, 2024) has indeed contributed to a faster and therefore more dangerous and less controllable spread of information countering traditional epistemic authorities, such as governments, scientific experts, and media outlets (Rachwol, 2023). It is worth emphasising that this is particularly relevant for the dissemination of information containing elements of conspiracy claims, which generally spread faster and reach a wider audience than information containing scientifically verified and provable facts (Sharma, Yadav, Yadav and Keith, 2017), especially within networks of like-minded individuals, the so-called echo chambers (Stano, 2020).

Conspiracy Theories During and After the Covid-19 Pandemic – Slovenia in the Spotlight

As noted by Birchall and Knight (2023) in their book Conspiracy Theories in the Time of COVID-19, conspiracy theories about COVID-19 began to circulate almost immediately after the first reports of a new infectious virus in China. As we will demonstrate in detail, various conspiracy theories emerged – often as derivates of preexisting ones – and circulated widely during the pandemic. Countries in Central and Eastern Europe or in the Western Balkans were not immune to this phenomenon. On the contrary, some – Slovenia in particular – exhibited high levels of endorsement of various conspiracy theories, which continue to persist among the population after the pandemic as well.

As we argue, this dynamic is linked to (at least) five contextual factors. First, the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic – spanning the initial days, weeks, and in some contexts, months – were especially challenging. During this period, public demand for timely and accurate information was high, while the availability of reliable information was low. Inconsistencies and contradictions in governmental communication – both in Slovenia and elsewhere – further contributed to public confusion. Such a reality, when the need for information was high and the availability of (credible) information was low, fuelled the search for alternative information in part of the population. Much of that alternative information fit the definition of conspiracy theories. Second, the lack of transparency at the onset of what turned out to be a pandemic, particularly in the actions and communication of authorities in China, further shrouded the initial moments of the emergence of the virus in uncertainty and suspicion (Birchall and Knight, 2023). The absence of timely and credible information not only delayed international recognition of the crisis but also undermined trust in global health governance mechanisms, including the World Health Organization. Third, the unprecedented technological advancement in recent decades, with the popularisation of the World Wide Web and social media networks as an instrument of communication, both in political and social terms (Wojtasik, 2024), has indeed contributed to the faster and therefore more dangerous and less controllable spread of information that challenges traditional epistemic authorities, such as governments, scientific experts, and media outlets (Rachwol, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic was the

first global emergency to unfold in an era dominated by social media, with its own paths of functioning, which played a significant role in the rapid spread of misinformation, including fake news and conspiracy theories, during as well as after the pandemic (Birchall and Knight, 2023). Fourth, the COVID-19 pandemic has shaken public trust in institutions, particularly in Slovenia. As found by Kukovič (2022) in their analysis of trends between 2019 and 2021, trust in political parties in Slovenia fell by 7 per cent, in parliament by 11 per cent, and in government by 12 per cent. It is important to add that trust in institutions in many countries in Central and Eastern Europe, in Slovenia in particular, was already significantly below the average in the European Union before the pandemic (Haček, Kukovič and Brezovšek, 2013). This environment of low trust created a fertile environment for various conspiracy theories to gain new followers and public visibility (Kużelewska and Tomaszuk, 2022; see also Haček, 2024). Fifth, some researchers suggest that there is a common tendency among people in Central and Eastern Europe to exhibit a degree of scepticism regarding the actual origins of viruses (Kukovič, Pope, Dewell-Gentry and Haček, 2024), which provided an ideal basis for the further development of doubts and conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 virus. As we argue, the combination of (at least) five contextual factors, together with individual factors, triggered by the crisis, represented perfect conditions for the proliferation of conspiracy theories about COVID-19 during and after the pandemic in countries of Central and Eastern Europe, and in Slovenia in particular.

What follows is a systematic analysis of available qualitative and quantitative data about the conspiracy theories in and about COVID-19 in Slovenia and occasionally in the broader perspective of Central and Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans. We grouped different conspiracy narratives into five thematic groups. The proposed thematic groups analysis and typology was not meant to provide an exhaustive count of all the different statements that constitute each thematic group but to build a comprehensive categorisation framework of COVID-19-related conspiracy theories for the purpose of our study.

Origin(s) of the Virus

Conspiracy theories about the (actual) origin(s) of the virus appeared on social networks immediately after the first news about the new infectious virus in China. As was found in our previous research, the spectrum of conspiracy theories about the (actual) origin(s) of the virus circulating in Slovenia as well as in other

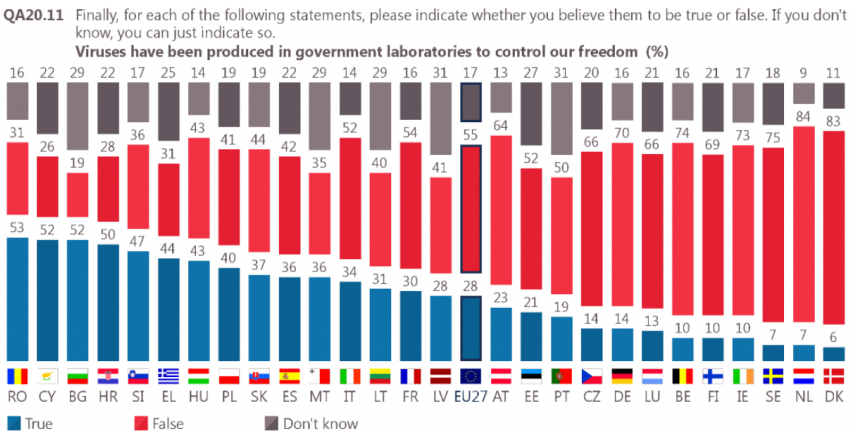
countries of Central and Eastern Europe ranged from relatively plausible explanations, such as the accidental release of the virus from a laboratory in Wuhan, to more far-fetched ideas suggesting that the virus was artificially created as a biological weapon, genetic treatment, or military experiment by some government or organisation, and was intentionally released from a laboratory (Šteger, 2024). A special set of questions regarding the perceived influence of the emergence and course of the COVID-19 pandemic was included in the Slovenian Public Opinion Survey at the onset of the pandemic. According to the data collected in April and May 2020, nearly half of the Slovenian population (47.6%) believed that the outbreak of the virus was influenced by a leak from a military laboratory. Additionally, 35.1% believed that COVID-19 was the result of deliberate and concealed efforts of some government or organisation (CJMMK, 2020) which is significantly above the average in Europe (27.6%) (European Social Survey, 2023). On the other hand, 16.9% of the population in Austria, 28.1% of the population in Czechia, and 25.4% of the population in Poland believed in such claims, while the proportion of the population believing that COVID-19 was the result of deliberate and concealed efforts of some government or organisation was particularly high in Slovakia (37.4%), Croatia (39.0%), Serbia (38.5%) and North Macedonia (53.5%) as well (European Social Survey, 2023).

As the immediate crisis of the pandemic gradually receded, it is generally assumed that belief in pandemic-related conspiracy theories was also slowly declining, as we may suggest based on findings from Poland (Oleksy, Wnuk, Gambin and Lys, 2021) and Croatia (Blanuša, Tonković and Vranić, 2022). According to the most recent Slovenian Public Opinion Survey, conducted between late October 2024 and early February 2025, such alternative beliefs about the (actual) origin(s) of the virus remain notably persistent. This is, surprisingly, even more prevalent than during the onset of the crisis. Approximately one-third of the population (35.6%) still believes that COVID-19 was the result of deliberate and concealed efforts of some government or organisation, an increase of 0.5% since 2020, while a relatively high proportion of respondents (41.7%) still believes that the virus was intentionally created in, and released from, a laboratory (CJMMK, 2025).

The conspiracy narratives discussed above tap into considerable preexisting scepticism about the actual origins of the viruses among the population in Central and Eastern Europe, which is particularly pronounced in countries of the former Yugoslavia, including Slovenia. As found by Special Eurobarometer 516, almost half (or exactly 47%) of the population in Slovenia believed that 'viruses have been produced in governmental laboratories to control people's freedom'. On the

other hand, in Montenegro, this percentage stands at 71%, North Macedonia at 60%, Croatia at 50%, Hungary at 43%, Poland at 40%, and Slovakia at 37%. Meanwhile, the average percentage of people in the European Union who believe in such theories regarding the origin(s) of viruses stands at 28%. In Austria, 23% of the population believes in such an explanation, while in Czechia, 14% of the population holds this belief (European Commission, 2021).

Table 1: Viruses have been produced in government laboratories to control our freedom



Source: European Commission (2021).

While various conspiracy theories about the true origins of the virus blame governments, others blame other powerful actors – some of those well-known from conspiracy theories already circulating in the past. Certain conspiracy theories accuse specific countries, most commonly China or the United States (Butter, 2023), while others implicate influential groups or individuals, such as global elite(s) or Bill Gates. A common assumption underlying these conspiracy theories is that the alleged culprits are typically portrayed as foreign enemies trying to harm a specific nation or groups in the society. The supposed motivations behind intentionally spreading such a virus range from desires for economic and political dominance (Turza, 2023), through weakening certain countries, to aspirations for depopulation (Blanuša, Tonković and Vranić, 2022) or population control (Rachwol, 2023), which are among the most frequent ones (Grbeša Zenzerović and Vučkovič, 2022), including among the population in Slovenia, as can be concluded based on the data from Special Eurobarometer 516 (European Commission, 2021).

A comparison between conspiracy theories concerning the (actual) origin(s) of the virus and those circulating in regions beyond Central and Eastern Europe reveals substantial similarities in content (see COVID Conspiracy Theories in Global Perspective for a detailed comparative insight). However, local variations occasionally emerge, often shaped by historical geopolitical tensions and region-specific narratives regarding the alleged culprits. The spread of conspiracy theories about the true origin of the SARS-CoV-2 virus is (still) further fuelled by the still-present lack of consensus regarding the (actual) causes of the virus. While a report by an international group of scientists reported by the World Health Organization in March 2021 concluded that a laboratory incident was 'extremely unlikely' (United Nations, 2021), the topic is still subject to controversy (CBS, 2025), which encourages further speculation about the actual origin(s) of the virus until the present times.

Virus as a Hoax

At the same time, conspiracy theories suggesting that the virus does not exist, is a hoax, or is part of a planned manipulation have emerged. Due to the lack of quantitative data from Slovenia, we rely on surveys conducted in other Central and Eastern European countries. A significant part of the population in Poland, approximately a quarter (between 31.9% and 26.3%, depending on the survey wave), expressed that they would not be surprised if it turns out that COVID-19 does not actually exist, based on data from 2020 (Oleksy, Wnuk, Gambin and Lys, 2021). A similar percentage of the population in Slovakia, 39%, along with 36% in Czechia, and 21% in Hungary, believes that COVID-19 is fake and created for the purpose of manipulating the population, according to the data from the same year (GLOBSEC, 2020). Given the global nature of conspiracy theories and the susceptibility to conspiracy theories, which is generally higher in Slovenia than in Poland, Slovakia, Czechia or Hungary – across various surveys (e.g. European Social Survey, 2020; Special Eurobarometer 516), independently of the questions asked – it is reasonable to assume that a significant portion of the population in Slovenia also believes in such conspiracy claims.

Such conspiracy theories are often accompanied by the idea that the danger of the virus is greatly exaggerated and that real health issues are caused by external factors, including intentional poisoning through chemtrails, 5G radiation, COVID-19 virus testing or vaccinations (Radomirović Maček, 2023). It is not

surprising that people who believed that the virus is a hoax or no worse than the regular flu reported engaging less frequently in infection- and transmission-reducing behaviours (Imhoff and Lamberty, 2020). In Slovenia, such conspiracy claims – along with anti-vaccination narratives, which we discuss in detail in the next section – have been promoted by various groups, who often justified their beliefs with appeals to common sense and natural immunity. One of the most active groups in Slovenia, a newly established political party, gained visibility with online campaign(s), mostly over social media; its supporters later constituted an important part of the crowd during the anti-measures and anti-government protests in Slovenia. Expanding on the idea of common sense – while rejecting expert knowledge – has been a part of their political identity building, particularly as they were already preparing for the upcoming parliamentary elections (Radomirović Maček, 2023). It is reasonable to argue that they were using populist discourse, intertwined with elements of conspiracy theories, while advocating for values such as human agency, human rights, and the autonomy of 'us', the ordinary people, in opposition to 'them'. However, they were unable to surpass the parliamentary threshold (set at 4% of valid votes) and secure seats in the National Parliament. Nonetheless, they were successful in obtaining seats on local councils across various municipalities in the elections held a few months later.

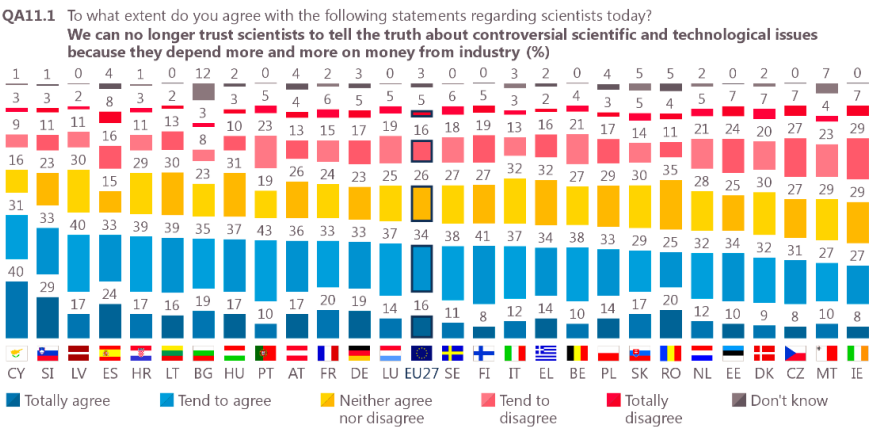
Anti-Vax Conspiracy Theories

As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded – accompanied by various governmental responses and measures to curb the spread of infection – conspiracy theories circulating among the population quickly followed. Conspiracy theories related to COVID-19 vaccination emerged early in the pandemic, but they began to circulate far more widely as COVID-19 vaccines started to roll out (Birchall and Knight, 2023), together with vaccination campaigns and the introduction of immunity certificates (Turza, 2023).

Suspicions regarding the safety and associated risks of vaccines have a long history, starting in – if not before – the era of smallpox vaccination in the eighteenth century (Birchall and Knight, 2023). Modern vaccination resistance gained traction in the late twentieth century, particularly following the later-retracted Wakefield study (Wakefield et al., 1998) which falsely suggested a link between MMR vaccination and autism. Around two decades later, vaccination-related conspiracy theories in times of pandemics gained much greater visibility than

ever before. Conspiracy theories about COVID-19 vaccines, both during and after the pandemic, have not focused on the virus per se but rather on the alleged dangers associated with vaccinating the population and the supposed hidden agenda behind it. Those theories were mostly built upon pre-existing beliefs about the hidden dangers of vaccines, likely intensified by the rapid development and deployment of the COVID-19 vaccine(s). According to the Slovenian Public Opinion Survey 2024/1, 30.7% of the Slovenian population believes that vaccine safety data are often fabricated (SJM, 2024), raising serious concerns about public trust in science and scientists, alongside the previously stated low levels of trust in institutions. According to the Special Eurobarometer 516, Europeans express mixed feelings about the credibility of scientists. However, public sentiment in Slovenia is notably more one-sided: 62% of respondents believe that 'We can no longer trust scientists to tell the truth about controversial scientific and technological issues because they depend more and more on money from industry' (European Commission, 2021).

Table 2: We can no longer trust scientists to tell the truth about controversial scientific and technological issues because they depend more and more on money from industry.



Source: European Commission (2021).

It is not surprising that conspiracy theories about vaccinations – particularly those expressing strong doubts about the profit-oriented actors behind them – have been among the most visible, particularly among the population in Slovenia, where scepticism towards vaccine development and science in general is highly pronounced. Many of those conspiracy theories revolve around the idea that the

virus was intentionally developed by Big Pharma or powerful individuals like Bill Gates and/or Mark Zuckerberg in the shadows, primarily to profit from the sale of the vaccines (and endless booster shots). This is a common finding of various qualitative studies analysing the vaccination conspiracy theories prevalent in various countries in Central and Eastern Europe (Blanuša, Tonković and Vranić, 2022), including Slovenia (Radomirović Maček, 2023) and is consistent with findings about vaccination conspiracy theories during the COVID-19 pandemic in other parts of the world, such as the United States, the United Kingdom (Birchall and Knight, 2023) and countries in the Baltic (Madisson and Ventsel, 2023). Other variants of conspiracy theories depict the vaccination as a scientific experiment without consent, an (involuntary) form of genetic treatment, a crime against humanity, or even genocide. Some narratives suggest that the vaccines could negatively affect women's fertility or even sterilise women, allegedly with the intention of reducing population growth or even depopulation (Šteger, 2024). Conspiracy theories about the dangers of COVID-19 vaccines have become intertwined with numerous other conspiracy theories, as will be shown in the next section on 5G conspiracy theories.

5G Conspiracy Theories

Narratives linking the recent development and introduction of 5G networks with the emergence of COVID-19 have been visible since the outset of the pandemic (Wasim, Vidal-Alaball, Downing and López Seguí, 2020). The assertion that Wuhan, the initial epicentre of the COVID-19 outbreak, was among the first cities to deploy 5G technology has been cited by some as evidence of a supposed connection, despite a lack of scientific support (Birchall and Knight, 2023). Various conspiracy theories suggest that 5G radiation weakens the immune system, thereby increasing the susceptibility to COVID-19 infection (Radomirović Maček and Babič, 2022), or assert that COVID-19 is spreading (far more rapidly) with the assistance of 5G networks (Butter, 2023). According to the recent data from Slovenia, approximately 7.2% of the population believes that the introduction of 5G networks is responsible for the spread of COVID-19 (CJMMK, 2025), while in Croatia, between 3% and 10% of the population believes that the coronavirus spreads faster in the presence of 5G networks, depending on the questionnaire used (Banai, Banai and Mikloušič, 2022; Tonković, Dumančić, Jelić and Čorkalo Biruški, 2021). Conspiracy theories about 5G have often been interwoven with conspiracy theories about vaccination and alleged microchip

implantation (Charvatova and Just, 2024). According to some, the purpose of vaccination is to insert microchips into people, which are later activated through the 5G network – especially to monitor and control behaviour (Šteger, 2024). Conspiracy theories related to 5G networks often include traditional culprits, with the founder of the tech giant Microsoft, Bill Gates, being a particularly frequent target. Similar theories were circulating in other countries in Central and Eastern Europe (GLOBSEC, 2020) and various other parts of the world (Birchall and Knight, 2023); however, the belief in 5G conspiracy theories is comparably low compared to other conspiracy beliefs about COVID-19 (Fotakis and Simou, 2023). Even though conspiracy theories centred around 5G were among the less prevalent ones, they nevertheless contributed to incidents such as the burning of 5G towers in various parts of the world (Wasim, Vidal-Alaball, Downing and López Seguí, 2020). However, no such incidents have been reported in Slovenia, the broader Central and Eastern European region or the Western Balkans, with the exception of Poland (Kużelewska and Tomaszuk, 2022).

The increasing technologisation and digitalisation of the human body – and of everyday life more broadly – may be among the factors contributing to the emergence and circulation of such narratives. As Birchall and Knight (2023) suggest, these conspiracy theories tap into understandable concerns about the adverse impacts of new technologies, as well as fears related to mind control experiments, surveillance, bodily control, and the perceived insatiable capitalists who, in pursuit of maximal profit, promote the use of dangerous electromagnetic technologies. In the context of Slovenia, the belief that evidence regarding the dangers of 5G radiation is being concealed from the public is notably present, with nearly one-fourth of the population (25.3%) subscribing to this idea (CJMMK, 2025).

The Great Reset in COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories

Among the extensive corpus of conspiracy theories that have circulated during and after the COVID-19 pandemic – including in Central and Eastern European countries – were narratives centred on the so-called Great Reset conspiracy theory. This theory alleges a plan orchestrated by Klaus Schwab, founder and executive chairman of the World Economic Forum (WEF). The term Great Reset originally referred to the WEF's initiative aimed at sustainably rebuilding the global economy in the aftermath of the pandemic. However, due to its origin and

association with prominent figures such as Schwab, the concept gained significant traction among proponents of conspiracy theories. The Great Reset conspiracy theory posits that global elites and international organisations, including the WEF, intend to exploit the pandemic – and other global crises – as a pretext to implement radical societal and economic transformations. The purported objective of these changes is to consolidate control by supranational elites while weakening the autonomy of individual states and their governments (Wojtasik and Šteger, 2024). Various conspiracy theories present during and after the pandemic assumed that COVID-19 was, whether considered real or a hoax, purposely created by the global elite as part of a frightening master plan for total domination (Birchal and Knight, 2023). In this context, protective masks came to symbolise a form of silencing or a 'muzzle' for many individuals inclined towards conspiracy thinking. Claims that the COVID-19 pandemic was a planned operation by elites with the purpose of population control are believed by 29% of people in Slovakia, 28% in Czechia, 27% in Poland and Hungary, and 10% in Austria, according to a GLOBSEC 2020 survey. As vaccines were introduced, ideas about microchip implantation supplemented such claims, recognising (forced) vaccination (and alleged microchip implantation) as a perfect tool for the population control (Charvatova and Just, 2024), together with the lockdowns occurring all around the world in order to stop the spread of the new virus (or, in the eyes of conspiracy theorists, to impose the New World Order).

Local Variations

The nature of conspiracy theories in Central and Eastern European countries is shaped by their individual characteristics, distinct historical experiences, and the significant political developments within each nation. In Central and Eastern European countries, various local versions of conspiracy theories have emerged among the populations, combining local specificities with global conspiracy theories. As such, some scholars characterise conspiracy theories as a form of *glocalisation* – the intersection of global and local dynamics (Butter and Knight, 2023). A defining feature of these local adaptations is the identification of domestic figures as the primary culprits, which differs from the conspiracy theories prevalent in other parts of the region. In many cases, national health experts were frequently implicated. In Slovenia, for example, conspiracy narratives portrayed various public health experts – such as Milan Krek, then head of the National Institute of Public Health (NIJZ); Bojana Beović, the initial head of the COVID-19 task

force; and infectious disease specialist Mateja Logar – as participants in a so-called #plandemic. Furthermore, leading political figures during the pandemic, including Prime Minister Janez Janša, and Jelko Kacin, who served first as the government spokesperson for COVID-19 and later as the national coordinator for mass vaccination, were often accused of being aware of a hidden agenda behind the pandemic and complicit in a global medical experiment.

Discussion

Through the analysis of prevalent conspiracy theories and their dissemination, it is possible to identify which social issues, tensions, and problems these theories address at a given historical moment (Radomirović Maček, 2023). Conspiracy theories during and after the pandemic often highlighted broader societal concerns, such as a lack of transparency and fears surrounding the pursuit of vested interests by powerful (global) actors. They frequently express strong concerns about the profit-driven nature of the pharmaceutical industry – or, more broadly, the capitalist system – where the pursuit of maximum economic gain often takes precedence, possibly even at the cost of population health and/or freedom.

The lack of transparency was especially evident at the beginning of the pandemic, notably in the communication of Chinese authorities, but also among other actors such as the World Health Organization (Birchall and Knight, 2023) and in the acts of the European Commission. Despite its explicit commitment to promoting transparency, the European Commission did not always contribute to transparent governance. Contracts for vaccine procurement between the European Commission and pharmaceutical manufacturers remain classified. This secrecy does little to foster trust in institutions; on the contrary, it may fuel the continued circulation of conspiracy theories suggesting that the COVID-19 pandemic was orchestrated by major pharmaceutical companies seeking enormous profits – with the European Commission, as part of the so-called 'them', allegedly complicit in these efforts alongside its member states. This case represents a significant example of how transparency is not only a normative ideal but also a practical necessity, especially in challenging times, such as the recent pandemic.

Conclusion

As we can observe, conspiracy theories about COVID-19 appeared on social networks immediately after the first news about the new infectious virus in China. These narratives continued to evolve and adapt throughout the course of the pandemic in response to changing circumstances. In Slovenia, such narratives have been promoted by various, primarily online groups, and a handful of political parties, which often justified their beliefs with appeals to common sense and natural immunity. One of the political parties in Slovenia relies on populist discourse, intertwined with elements of conspiracy theories, however, with limited reach. In the elections for the National Parliament (held during the summer of 2022), they were unable to surpass the parliamentary threshold, but they were successful in securing seats on local councils across various municipalities in the elections held a few months later. It shows a rather limited but growing political potential of (online) groups and political parties gathering around conspiracy discourse, which deserves special attention in future research, especially in countries with a vibrant conspiracy culture, such as Slovenia.

Based on an analysis of numerous quantitative and qualitative studies on COVID-19-related conspiracy theories, we found that the main thematic characteristics of these theories, which ranged from theories about the true origin of the virus, claims that the virus does not exist, dangers of vaccination, dangers of 5G networks, and The Great Reset conspiracy theories, have been mostly thematically similar in Slovenia, other countries in Central and Eastern Europe and in the rest of the world. Different conspiracy theories often intersect and combine with one another to form what are commonly referred to as *superconspiracies* (Birchal and Knight, 2023). However, various local versions of conspiracy theories have emerged among the population, combining local specificities with global conspiracy theories, mostly highlighting national health experts and politicians as those actively involved in the hidden agenda behind what conspiracy circles refer to as the #plandemic. For those who examine conspiracy theories from a historical perspective, many of the versions that circulated during the COVID-19 pandemic are well known. Many of these originated in conspiracy theories that had previously circulated in response to various events, technological innovations, outbreaks of diseases, wars, or stories originating from fictional literature or films. Numerous conspiracy theories that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic can be seen as a product of the collision between long-standing conspiracy beliefs and the emerging COVID-19 pandemic (Bruns, Harrington and Hurcombe,

2020). Various conspiracy narratives were often already in place and merely adapted to fit the new reality, which in turn provided confirming evidence for the conspiracy believers that everything they were predicting was finally happening.

While the corpus of conspiracy theories circulating during and after the pandemic is, as we argue, broadly similar across regions, the population in Slovenia – along with certain countries in Central and Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans in particular – has consistently demonstrated a high, often above-average, susceptibility to such theories, regardless of the specific questionnaire used. As we argue, a lack of reliable information at the onset of the pandemic, a frequent absence of transparency during its initial stages and later during the pandemic, and the pervasive influence of social media have provided a fertile ground for conspiracy theories to flourish in crisis times pervaded by uncertainties and fears, together with a widespread distrust in political institutions in Slovenia, and a broader regional tendency – particularly in Central and Eastern Europe and in the Western Balkans – to approach the origins of viruses with scepticism. It shows a clear necessity to monitor conspiracy theories and the meaning they carry, particularly in countries where such theories are highly prevalent, such as Slovenia, particular countries in Central and Easter Europe and countries in the Western Balkans.

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ECONOMIC SECURITY AND CONSPIRACY THINKING: A CROSS-CULTURAL EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

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Since 2020, European societies have faced major challenges due to COVID-19 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, both undermining social and economic security. Given the crisis conditions in Europe, this chapter examines whether socio-economic factors influence belief in intergroup conspiracy theories. Economic security is crucial for feelings of control and stability, potentially shaping the susceptibility to such beliefs. This cross-cultural study analyses data on economic conditions in over 20 European societies and their belief in general intergroup conspiracy theories, with a particular focus on Poland and Slovenia. The analysis is based on Eurostat data and surveys from the European Social Survey. Our statistical analysis does not reject the hypothesis, showing that selected socio-economic parameters are a significant factor influencing conspiracy beliefs. The results highlight the diverse role of socio-economic factors, with household income and financial difficulties appearing to be more important factors influencing support for conspiracy theories than broader inequalities or deprivation indicators.

Key words: conspiracy theories; cross-cultural; economic conditions; economic inequality; European Social Survey (ESS).

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Introduction

The period since 2020 has been particularly challenging for European societies due to the global COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. These crises – both health-related and geopolitical – have had severe social and economic consequences, significantly undermining citizens' sense of security (Wardawy-Dudziak, 2024). In times of uncertainty, conspiracy theories often emerge as a coping mechanism, offering alternative explanations for major events through assumptions about secret plots orchestrated by powerful groups (Byford, 2011; Dentith and Orr, 2017; Grimes, 2016; Turska-Kawa and Pilch, 2025). Such theories typically suggest that these hidden actors seek specific benefits or aim to achieve objectives (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009; Imhoff and Lamberty, 2020; Van Prooijen, 2018).

Given the crisis conditions in Europe, this article examines whether socio-economic indicators influence belief in intergroup conspiracy theories. Economic security is crucial for feelings of control and stability, potentially shaping the susceptibility to such beliefs. This cross-cultural study analyses data on economic conditions in over 20 European societies and their belief in general intergroup conspiracy theories. The theories used in our research include claims about (1) small, secret groups controlling global political decisions, (2) scientists manipulating evidence to mislead the public, and (3) the deliberate creation and release of COVID-19 by a government or organisation. The analysis is based on Eurostat statistical data and surveys on conspiracy beliefs from the European Social Survey.

Theoretical Background

There is an ongoing debate about what factors may influence belief in conspiracy theories, and whether socio-economic factors may be a cause for considering conspiracy theories to be true. Research has shown that economic inequality is associated with lower well-being and health (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2017), and that the impact of economic inequality also extends to the social and political vitality of society and the socio-political attitudes of citizens. Economic inequality influences people's political beliefs and preferences (Jetten et al., 2017) and is associated with lower participation in political life (Mueller and Stratmann, 2003; Solt

et al., 2011), lower support for democracy (Andersen, 2012), and greater support for strong and authoritarian leaders (Sprong et al., 2019). Research has shown that people who believe in conspiracies are more likely to have negative opinions about the current and future national economic situation, and that GDP per capita is negatively correlated with conspiracy beliefs (Hornsey et al., 2023). Studies on this topic have also shown that lower income is positively and significantly correlated with conspiracy theories about COVID-19 (Constantinou et al., 2021; Romer and Jamieson, 2020; Sallam, 2021; Van Mulukom, 2022). According to other studies, conspiracy believers have lower tax compliance and higher support for progressive taxation (Casara et al., 2023). People belonging to low-status social groups tend to accept conspiracy theories to a greater extent than people from higher-status groups (Simmons and Parsons, 2005). Studies have shown a link between conspiracy theories and low education levels, as well as lower incomes (Uscinski and Parent, 2014). They also showed that people who believe in conspiracies are more often less educated, with lower incomes, unemployed, belonging to ethnic minorities and with weaker social networks (Freeman and Bentall, 2017). From the perspective of compensatory control theory, individuals from lower social classes are particularly susceptible to conspiracy theories because reduced personal control and a heightened need for structure make such beliefs appealing as coherent worldviews (Mao et al., 2020). Research has demonstrated that a lack of perceived control increases the tendency to detect illusory patterns, which fosters conspiracy belief (Gligorić et al., 2021). Previous studies have also shown that anomie (social dysfunction and disorder) mediates the relationship between economic inequalities and conspiracy theories (Casara et al., 2022). Studies in the UK show that individuals facing economic difficulties report stronger feelings of anomie, which directly fuel belief in conspiracy theories and, in turn, increase hostility towards out-groups such as non-European immigrants (Jolley et al., 2018).

Conspiracy beliefs are associated with feelings of powerlessness (Imhoff and Lamberty, 2020; van Prooijen, 2017; Jolley et al., 2018) and self-uncertainty (van Prooijen, 2016). It seems that economic inequalities may provide fertile ground for conspiracy thinking because they undermine precisely those needs that conspiracy beliefs promise to counteract. Economic security is crucial to feelings of control and stability, and when it is threatened, individuals become more vulnerable to such beliefs. People experiencing financial difficulties and instability are therefore more likely to endorse conspiracy theories, as several psychological and social mechanisms make conspiracy thinking attractive under these conditions.

Given the growing importance of conspiracy theories today and the many factors likely to drive such beliefs, it is crucial to examine the influence of socioeconomic conditions more closely. Our research aims to contribute to this literature by focusing on the economic situation of people in Europe and its impact on conspiracy thinking. Specifically, this article investigates whether socioeconomic indicators shape belief in intergroup conspiracy theories in multicultural European societies. In doing so, it addresses a critical gap in understanding how material insecurity, instability, and inequality interact with psychological needs to create fertile ground for conspiracy beliefs.

Materials and Methods

Study objectives

The primary objective of this study was to evaluate the impact of economic parameters on the endorsement of conspiracy beliefs across 21 European countries over the period 2020–2022. Specifically, the research aimed to assess how socioeconomic indicators, including the at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate, severe material and social deprivation rate, share of households making ends meet with difficulty or great difficulty, mean equivalised net income, and Gini coefficient of equivalised disposable income, influence country-level mean ratings for three distinct conspiracy theories: belief in small secret groups controlling world politics, deliberate origins of the coronavirus, and manipulation by groups of scientists. Secondary objectives included examining cross-country patterns in response distributions, estimating intercorrelations among conspiracy belief measures, and quantifying mean ratings with associated uncertainty through statistical modelling.

Statistical analysis

Data collection and rating scale

The study utilised frequency distributions of responses to three survey items about conspiracy theories: Data was collected across 21 European countries, with ratings recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Definitely agree, 2 = Agree,

3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Disagree, 5 = Definitely disagree). For each country, the frequencies of responses for ratings 1 through 5 were compiled into a matrix, where rows represented individual countries and columns corresponded to the respective rating levels. The total sample size (n) per country was derived as the sum of frequencies across the five rating categories.

Estimation of response shares

To facilitate the comparative analysis, the shares for each response category were estimated as the proportion of the frequency for the i-th rating to the overall sample size. Specifically, the share (p_i) for rating i was calculated by equation (1):

$$p_i = \frac{f_i}{n} \times 100 \ (1),$$

where f_i is the frequency of responses at rating i, and n is the total sample size for the country. These shares were expressed as percentages to represent the relative distribution of responses within each country.

Estimation of mean rating and 95% confidence interval

To quantify the central tendency and uncertainty in the ratings, the mean rating and its 95% confidence interval (CI) were calculated for each country using a weighted approach based on the frequency data. The mean rating ($\bar{x}$) for a given country was computed according to equation (2):

$$\bar{x} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{5} r_i \cdot f_i}{n} \ (2),$$

where r_i denotes the rating value (1–5), f_i is the frequency of the responses at rating i, and $n = \Sigma_i^5{}_{=1} f_i$ is the total number of responses. The sample variance (s^2) was estimated using equation (3):

$$s^2 = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{5} (r_i - \bar{x})^2 \cdot f_i}{n - 1} \ (3),$$

The standard deviation (s) was then obtained as $s = \sqrt{s^2}$, and the standard error of the mean (SE) as equation (4):

$$SE = \frac{s}{\sqrt{n}} \quad (4),$$

Finally, the 95% CI was estimated assuming a t-distribution for the sampling distribution of the mean, appropriate for finite sample sizes according to (5):

$$95\%\ CI = \bar{x} \pm t_{crit} \cdot SE \quad (5),$$

where t_{crit} is the critical value from the t-distribution with n−1 degrees of freedom at the 97.5th percentile (two-tailed test). This method accounts for the ordinal nature of the data by treating ratings as numerical values, enabling parametric inference while incorporating variability from the frequency-weighted deviations.

Socioeconomic indicators

The study incorporated five key socioeconomic indicators averaged over 2020–2022, sourced from Eurostat databases, to contextualise cross-country variations in conspiracy theory endorsement: the at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate, severe material and social deprivation rate, share of households making ends meet with difficulty or great difficulty, mean equivalised net income, and Gini coefficient of equivalised disposable income. Collectively, these parameters reflect dimensions of economic vulnerability, inequality, and financial strain within populations, enabling an examination of how structural disparities may influence public perceptions and beliefs, as posited in established socioeconomic models of trust and misinformation susceptibility.

Correlations

Intercorrelations among conspiracy belief mean ratings and socioeconomic indicators were assessed using Pearson correlation coefficients, following verification of normality assumptions via Shapiro-Wilk tests (all $p > 0.05$, confirming approximate normality). In cases where distributions deviated from normality,

Spearman's correlation was employed instead. P-values were adjusted for multiple comparisons using Holm's method to control the family-wise error rate at $\alpha = 0.05$. This adjustment was applied to the set of pairwise tests within each matrix to mitigate Type I error inflation while preserving statistical power in the small sample context.

Regression Analysis

Given the limited number of observations (N = 21 countries), univariate robust linear regression models were employed to estimate the effects of each socioeconomic indicator on the country-level mean ratings for the three conspiracy beliefs. Robust regression, implemented with Huber's M-estimator, was selected to minimise the impact of potential outliers and leverage issues inherent in aggregate data. Models were fitted separately for each predictor-outcome pair, with significance evaluated at $\alpha = 0.05$ (unadjusted p-values reported due to the exploratory nature and univariate design). Beta coefficients (β) represent the change in mean rating per unit increase in the predictor, where lower ratings indicate greater conspiracy endorsement. Confidence intervals (95%) were derived from robust standard errors using an asymptotic approximation of the t-test statistic.

Characteristics of the statistical tool and list of the applied external libraries

Analyses were conducted using the R statistical language (version 4.3.3; R Core Team, 2024) on Windows 11 Pro 64 bit (build 26100), using the rio (version 1.2.1; Chan et al., 2023), parameters (version 0.22.2; Lüdecke et al., 2020), report (version 0.5.8; Makowski et al., 2023), correlation (version 0.8.5; Makowski et al., 2022), patchwork (version 1.2.0; Pedersen, 2024), GGally (version 2.2.1; Schloerke et al., 2024), MASS (version 7.3.60.0.1; Venables and Ripley, 2002), corrplot (version 0.94; Wei and Simko, 2024), ggplot2 (version 3.5.0; Wickham, 2016) and dplyr (version 1.1.4; Wickham et al., 2023) packages.

Results

Cross-Country patterns in endorsement of conspiracy theories

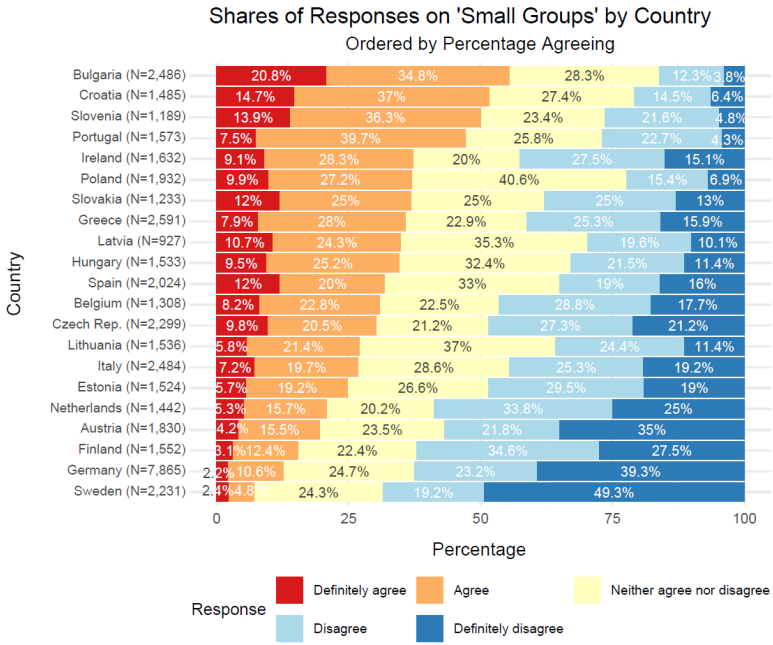
The distribution of responses to the statement 'A small secret group of people is responsible for making all the most important decisions in world politics' revealed substantial variation across the 21 European countries surveyed (Figure 1). Overall, agreement (combining the 'Definitely agree' and 'Agree' responses) ranged from a low of 7.2% in Sweden to a high of 55.6% in Bulgaria, with a cross-country median of 30.3%. Neutral responses ('Neither agree nor disagree') were prevalent, averaging 27.5% across countries, while disagreement ('Disagree' and 'Definitely disagree') was highest in Sweden (68.5%) and lowest in Bulgaria (16.1%).

Countries in Eastern and Southern Europe exhibited higher levels of agreement. For instance, Bulgaria (55.6%), Croatia (51.7%), Slovenia (50.2%), and Portugal (47.2%) showed the strongest endorsement, potentially reflecting socioeconomic or historical factors influencing perceptions of elite control. In contrast, Northern and Western European nations demonstrated greater scepticism, with Sweden (7.2%), Germany (12.8%), Finland (15.5%), and Austria (19.7%) reporting the lowest agreement rates. Poland, as a Central European case, fell in the mid-range with 37.1% agreement.

In Slovenia, the agreement rate of 50.2% ranks it among the higher-endorsing countries, comparable to Croatia (51.7%) and approaching Bulgaria (55.6%). The mean rating of 2.67, lower than Poland's and substantially below the cross-country average of 3.21, signifies pronounced endorsement. This value aligns closely with Bulgaria's mean of 2.43, highlighting stronger overall agreement despite Slovenia's relatively favourable socioeconomic indicators, such as a lower at-risk-of-poverty rate (13.60%), deprivation rate (2.77%), and higher mean equivalised net income (16.720 EUR). Such patterns imply that non-economic factors, including cultural ties to Balkan regions, post-socialist transitions, or media environments, may amplify conspiracy beliefs. The response distribution in Slovenia features neutral responses at 23.4%, below the cross-country average of 27.5%, contributing to a profile with reduced ambivalence. Disagreement levels, estimated at 26.4%, remain moderate but do not offset the predominant

agreement, resulting in a skewed distribution towards endorsement that could have implications for societal trust and policy engagement.

Figure 1: Percentage distribution of responses to the statement 'A small secret group of people is responsible for making all the most important decisions in world politics' across the 21 studied European countries, ordered by descending percentage of agreement (N values indicated per country).

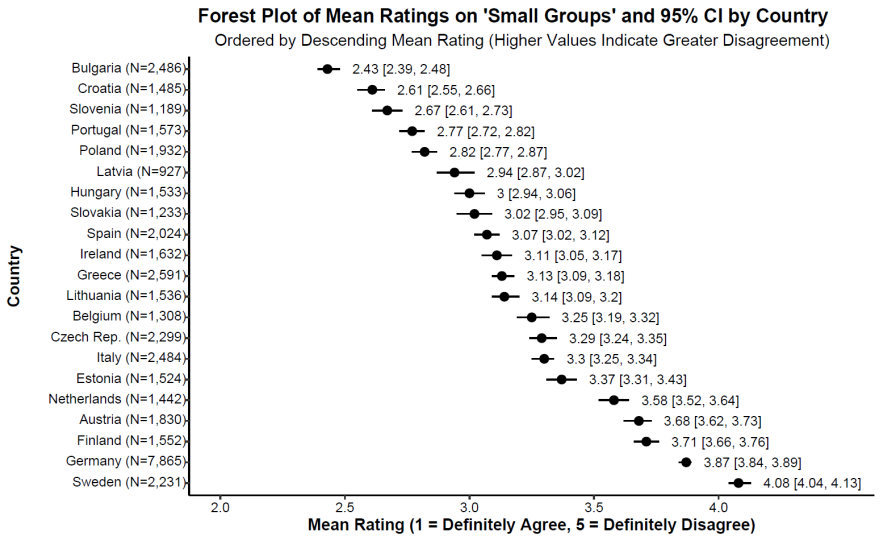


Source: own study based on: European Social Survey European Research Infrastructure (ESS ERIC) (2023) ESS10 – integrated file, edition 3.2 [Data set]. Sikt – Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research, https://doi.org/10.21338/ess10e03_2.

The mean ratings, treated as a continuous scale (1 = Definitely agree, 5 = Definitely disagree), further quantified these patterns (Figure 2). The overall cross-country mean was 3.21, indicating a slight tilt towards neutrality with a tendency for disagreement. The country-specific means ranged from 2.43 in Bulgaria (95% CI: 2.39–2.48), signifying stronger agreement, to 4.08 in Sweden (95% CI: 4.04–4.13), denoting pronounced disagreement. Poland's 2.82 indicates endorsement beyond mid-range expectations, while Slovenia's 2.67 confirms its alignment with higher-agreement clusters, emphasising the

need for nuanced consideration of both economic and contextual drivers. Notably, the confidence intervals were narrow due to large sample sizes, enhancing the reliability of these estimates.

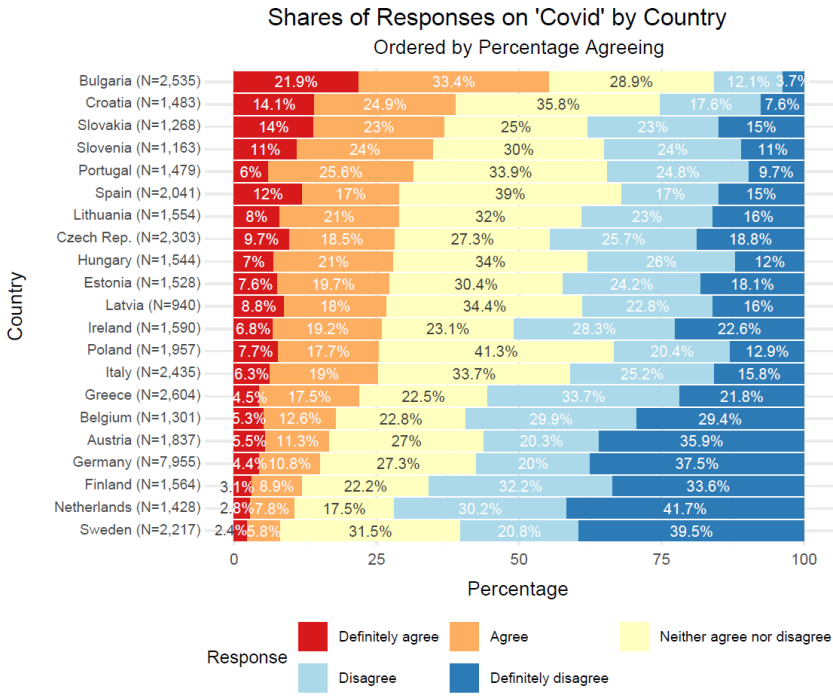
Figure 2: Mean ratings and 95% CI of responses to the statement 'A small secret group of peole is responsible for making all the most important decisions in world politics' across the 21 studied European countries, ordered by descending mean rating.



Source: own study based on: European Social Survey European Research Infrastructure (ESS ERIC) (2023) ESS10 – integrated file, edition 3.2 [Data set]. Sikt – Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research, https://doi.org/10.21338/ess10e03_2.

The distribution of responses to the statement 'The coronavirus is the result of deliberate and hidden efforts by a government or organisation' demonstrated notable variation across the 21 European countries examined (Figure 3). Agreement levels spanned from a minimum of 8.2% in Sweden to a maximum of 55.3% in Bulgaria, with a cross-country median of 27.3%. Neutral responses averaged 29.8% across nations, whereas disagreement reached its peak in the Netherlands (71.9%) and its nadir in Bulgaria (15.8%).

Figure 3: Percentage distribution of responses to the statement 'The coronavirus is the result of deliberate and hidden efforts by a government or organisation' across the 21 studied European countries, ordered by descending percentage of agreement (N values indicated per country).



Source: own study based on: European Social Survey European Research Infrastructure (ESS ERIC) (2023) ESS10 – integrated file, edition 3.2 [Data set]. Sikt – Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research, https://doi.org/10.21338/ess10e03_2.

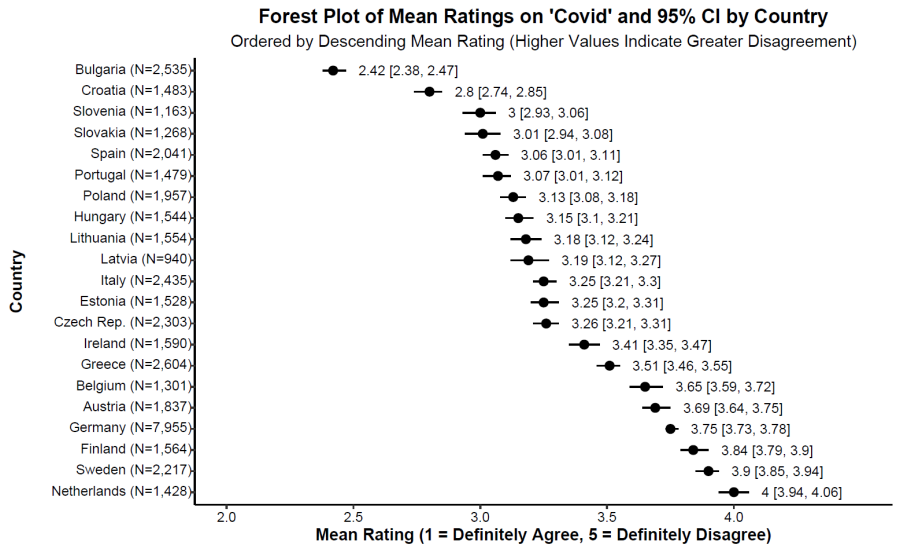
Patterns of endorsement mirrored those observed for beliefs in small secret groups controlling world politics, with elevated agreement in Eastern and Southern Europe. Bulgaria (55.3%), Croatia (39.0%), Slovakia (37.0%), and Slovenia (35.0%) displayed the highest concurrence, while Northern and Western European countries exhibited greater rejection, including Sweden (8.2%), the Netherlands (10.6%), Finland (12.0%), and Germany (15.2%). Poland occupied an intermediate position with 25.4% agreement, consistent with its placement in prior analyses.

In Poland, the agreement rate of 25.4% maintains an intermediate position, lower than in Bulgaria (55.3%) and Croatia (39.0%) but higher than in Sweden (8.2%) and the Netherlands (10.6%). The mean rating, estimated to be below the cross-country average of 3.30 and likely around 3.10–3.20 given the parallel structure to the Small Groups belief, reflects moderate endorsement. This level may arise from Poland's socioeconomic indicators, such as intermediate household financial difficulty (14.97%) and mean equivalised net income (9.330 EUR), which could contribute to partial susceptibility without reaching Eastern European extremes. The distribution implies substantial neutrality at 41.3%, the highest among all countries and exceeding the cross-country average of 29.8%, alongside higher disagreement (33.3%) than in Eastern countries like Bulgaria (15.8%), contributing to a balanced but cautious public view that aligns with Poland's central geopolitical role.

Slovenia's agreement rate of 35.0% positions it towards the higher end, comparable to Slovakia (37.0%) and Croatia (39.0%), though below Bulgaria's maximum. The mean rating is projected to be lower than Poland's, potentially around 2.90–3.00 and below the cross-country average of 3.30, indicating firmer endorsement and alignment with Bulgaria's 2.42. Despite the relatively favourable socioeconomic metrics, including higher income (16.720 EUR) and lower deprivation (2.77%), contextual factors such as regional pandemic impacts or cultural influences may heighten such beliefs. Response patterns include disagreement at 35.0%, higher than Bulgaria's 15.8% but not offsetting the endorsement, and neutrality at 30.0%, near the cross-country average of 29.8%, resulting in a distribution moderately skewed towards agreement and suggesting potential vulnerabilities in public health communication.

The mean ratings on the continuous scale reinforced these trends (Figure 4). The aggregate cross-country mean was 3.30, suggesting a mild inclination towards neutrality but with stronger disagreement in Western Europe. The individual country means varied from 2.42 in Bulgaria (95% CI: 2.38–2.47), indicating substantial agreement, to 4.00 in the Netherlands (95% CI: 3.94–4.06), reflecting robust disagreement. Poland's intermediate agreement (3.13) implies a mean near this average, indicating mild disagreement overall. Slovenia's (3.00) would be lower, closer to Bulgaria's 2.42, denoting firmer endorsement. The confidence intervals remained narrow owing to sizable samples, bolstering estimate precision.

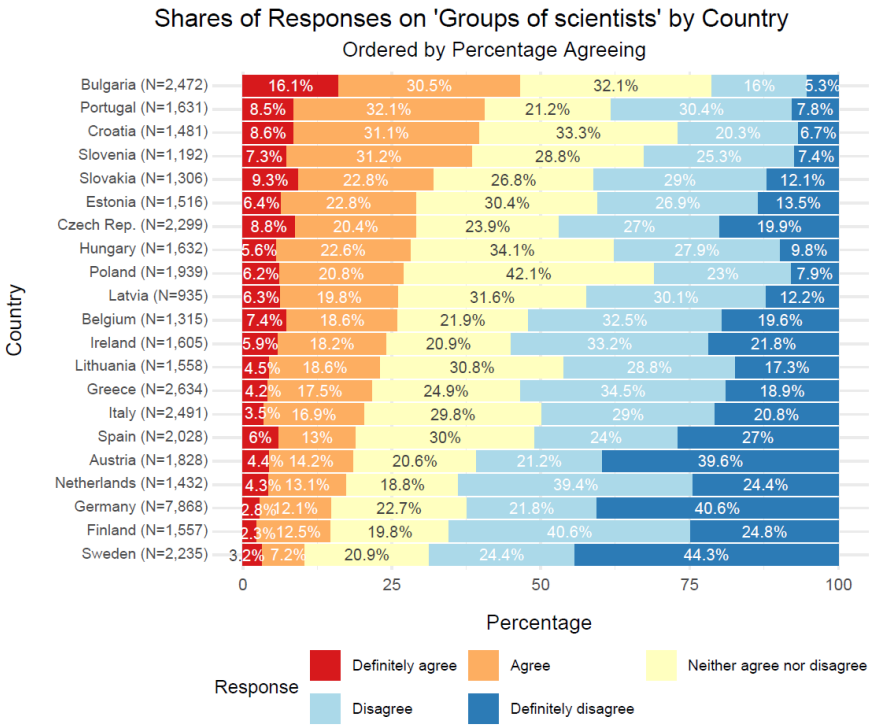
Figure 4: Mean ratings and 95% CI of responses to the statement 'A small secret group of people is responsible for making all the most important decisions in world politics' across the 21 studied European countries, ordered by descending mean rating.



Source: own study based on: European Social Survey European Research Infrastructure (ESS ERIC) (2023) ESS10 – integrated file, edition 3.2 [Data set]. Sikt – Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research, https://doi.org/10.21338/ess10e03_2.

These results indicate a parallel geographic divide to that seen in elite control beliefs, with higher conspiracy endorsement in regions facing greater socioeconomic challenges. This alignment with existing patterns underscores potential common drivers, such as economic inequality or trust in institutions, as highlighted in relevant scholarly work. The distribution of responses to the statement 'Groups of scientists manipulate, fabricate, or suppress evidence in order to deceive the public' exhibited considerable variation across the 21 European countries surveyed (Figure 5). Agreement ranged from a low of 10.4% in Sweden to a high of 46.6% in Bulgaria, with a cross-country median of 26.0%. Neutral responses averaged 26.5% across countries, while disagreement was most prominent in Sweden (68.7%) and least in Bulgaria (21.3%).

Figure 5: Percentage distribution of responses to the statement 'Groups of scientists manipulate, fabricate, or suppress evidence in order to deceive the public' across the 21 studied European countries, ordered by descending percentage of agreement (N values indicated per country).



Source: own study based on: European Social Survey European Research Infrastructure (ESS ERIC) (2023) ESS10 – integrated file, edition 3.2 [Data set]. Sikt – Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research, https://doi.org/10.21338/ess10e03_2.

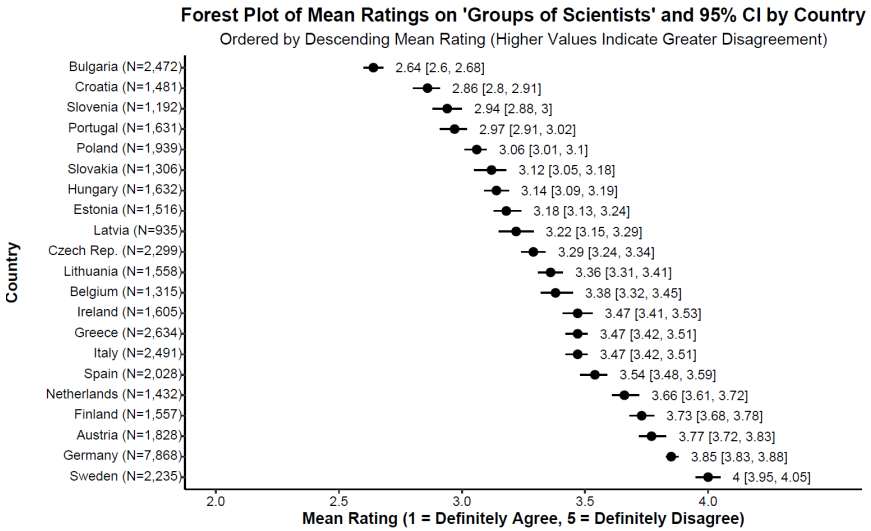
Like the patterns observed for beliefs in small secret groups and deliberate coronavirus origins, endorsement was higher in Eastern and Southern Europe. Bulgaria (46.6%), Portugal (40.6%), Croatia (39.7%), and Slovenia (38.5%) showed the strongest agreement, whereas Northern and Western European nations reported greater scepticism, with Sweden (10.4%), Finland (14.8%), Germany (14.9%), and the Netherlands (17.4%) at the lower end. Poland maintained an intermediate position with 27.0% agreement, consistent with its ranking in prior analyses. However, the overall agreement levels were somewhat lower compared to the elite control conspiracy (e.g., Bulgaria at 46.6% versus 55.6%), and slightly higher

than for the coronavirus origin theory in some Western countries (e.g., Germany at 14.9% versus 15.2%), indicating differential trust in scientific institutions relative to political or governmental entities.

In Poland, the agreement rate of 27.0% positions it in an intermediate range, lower than in Bulgaria (46.6%) and Croatia (39.7%) but higher than in Sweden (10.4%) and Finland (14.8%). The mean rating of 3.06, estimated to be below the cross-country average of 3.35 and approximately 3.06 based on the response distribution, indicates moderate endorsement with a lean towards agreement relative to the overall average. The neutral responses stand at 42.1%, the highest among all countries and surpassing the cross-country average of 26.5%, reflecting significant ambivalence that moderates stronger positions. Disagreement levels at 30.9%, higher than in Bulgaria (21.3%) but below Western European peaks, contribute to a balanced public sentiment that is cautious yet not predominantly sceptical, consistent with Poland's central European context.

For Slovenia, the agreement rate of 38.5% ranks it among the higher-endorsing countries, comparable to Croatia (39.7%) and Portugal (40.6%), though below Bulgaria's peak. The mean rating (2.94), projected to be lower than Poland's and below the cross-country average of 3.35, signifies firmer endorsement, approaching Bulgaria's 2.64. Despite Slovenia's relatively positive socioeconomic metrics, non-economic elements like historical transitions or cultural factors may enhance such beliefs, highlighting the differential trust in science compared to political entities. Neutral responses at 28.8%, near the cross-country average of 26.5%, indicate moderate ambivalence, while disagreement at 32.7%, higher than Bulgaria's 21.3%, does not fully counterbalance the endorsement, resulting in a distribution skewed towards agreement that may imply challenges in scientific communication and public engagement. The mean ratings on the continuous scale corroborated these observations (Figure 6). The cross-country mean was 3.35, indicating a moderate lean towards neutrality with stronger disagreement in Western Europe. The country-specific means spanned from 2.64 in Bulgaria (95% CI: 2.60–2.68), reflecting notable agreement, to 4.00 in Sweden (95% CI: 3.95–4.05), signifying marked disagreement.

Figure 6: Mean ratings and 95% CI of responses to the statement 'Groups of scientists manipulate, fabricate, or suppress evidence in order to deceive the public' across the 21 studied European countries, ordered by descending mean rating.



Source: own study based on: European Social Survey European Research Infrastructure (ESS ERIC) (2023) ESS10 – integrated file, edition 3.2 [Data set]. Sikt – Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research, https://doi.org/10.21338/ess10e03_2.

These outcomes reinforce the geographic disparities seen in previous conspiracy beliefs, with elevated endorsement in regions of higher socioeconomic strain. Differences in intensity, such as reduced agreement relative to political elites, may stem from varying perceptions of scientific credibility, as discussed in extant research on public trust and misinformation.

Cross-country patterns in socioeconomic context

The socioeconomic landscape of the 21 European countries under investigation exhibits marked heterogeneity, as summarised in Table 1, which presents key indicators averaged over the period 2020–2022. These metrics potentially link beliefs to factors like economic inequality, deprivation, and household financial strain. Notably, Eastern and Southern European nations, including Bulgaria, Greece, and Latvia, demonstrate elevated rates of at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion

(ranging from 25.73% to 32.47%), severe material and social deprivation (8.07% to 22.57%), and households facing difficulty making ends meet (21% to 40.37%). These countries also report lower mean equivalised net incomes (6.500 to 11.230 EUR) and higher Gini coefficients (31.00 to 39.37), indicating greater income inequality. In contrast, Northern and Western European states, such as Sweden, Finland, and the Netherlands, display more favourable profiles, with lower poverty risks (15.13% to 17.83%), minimal deprivation (1.83% to 2.57%), reduced financial strain (6.27% to 7.33%), higher incomes (27.790 to 30.580 EUR), and comparatively moderate Gini values (26.27 to 27.10). Central European countries like Poland and the Czech Republic occupy intermediate positions, with Poland showing a poverty risk of 16.57%, deprivation of 3.67%, and a Gini of 26.77.

Table 1: Key socioeconomic indicators for selected European countries, averaged over 2020–2022

Country	At-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate (%)	Severe material and social deprivation rate (%)	Households with difficulty making ends meet (%)	Mean equivalised net income (thousand EUR)	Gini coefficient
Austria	17.17	2.50	10.47	30.11	27.17
Belgium	19.27	4.70	16.30	28.28	24.80
Bulgaria	32.47	19.27	40.37	6.50	39.37
Croatia	20.43	3.43	29.13	9.00	28.67
Czech Republic	11.33	2.40	11.93	12.49	24.60
Estonia	23.40	3.60	8.80	14.95	31.00
Finland	15.13	2.03	6.27	29.00	26.27
Germany	20.83	6.47	6.97	29.19	30.23
Greece	27.33	22.57	69.73	10.28	31.73
Hungary	19.07	11.77	25.40	7.49	27.67
Ireland	19.43	5.83	16.70	32.19	27.03
Italy	24.83	6.57	23.47	20.68	32.70
Latvia	25.73	8.07	22.73	11.23	34.83
Lithuania	24.20	7.73	13.53	11.69	35.57
Netherlands	16.37	2.57	6.67	30.58	26.97
Poland	16.57	3.67	14.97	9.33	26.77
Portugal	20.83	8.17	21.63	12.99	32.07
Slovakia	15.30	5.10	27.67	8.97	21.30
Slovenia	13.60	2.77	14.23	16.72	23.20
Spain	26.93	10.57	22.17	18.46	32.37
Sweden	17.83	1.83	7.33	27.79	27.10

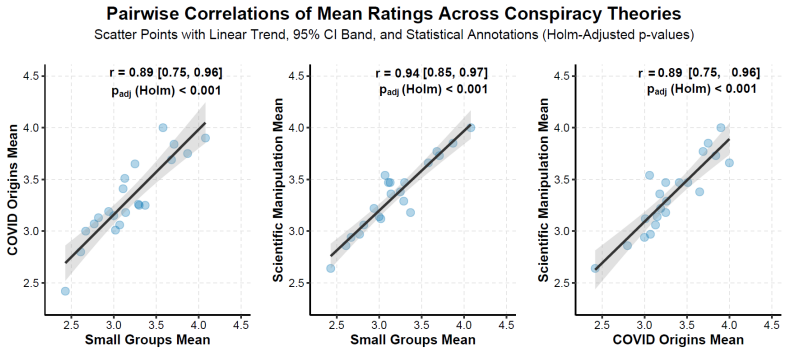
Notes: Values represent averages for 2020–2022. Gini coefficient measures income inequality (0 = perfect equality, 100 = perfect inequality). Equivalised net income adjusts for household size

and composition using OECD-modified scales. Source: own study based on: Eurostat Database – Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion by age and sex [ilc_peps01n$defaultview] https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC_PEPS01N, Material and social deprivation rate by age, sex and most frequent activity status [ilc_mdsd01__custom_17612695] https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC_MDSD01, Inability to make ends meet [ilc_mdes09__custom_17615633] https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC_MDES09, Mean and median income by age and sex [ilc_di03__custom_17606562] https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC_DI03, Gini coefficient of equivalised disposable income by age [ilc_di12$defaultview] https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC_DI12.

Intercorrelations among conspiracy belief ratings (2020–2022)

To assess the relationships between the mean ratings for the three conspiracy theories (small secret groups, deliberate coronavirus origins, and scientific manipulation), Pearson correlation coefficients were computed following confirmation of normality via Shapiro-Wilk tests. All variables exhibited normal distributions (Small Groups: $W = 0.98$, $p = 0.922$; COVID Origins: $W = 0.96$, $p = 0.524$; Scientific Manipulation: $W = 0.99$, $p = 0.998$), justifying the use of parametric correlations. The correlation plots (refer to Figure 7) revealed strong positive associations among the measures, with coefficients ranging from 0.89 to 0.94 (all $p_{adj} < 0.001$). Specifically, the Small Groups mean was highly correlated with both COVID Origins ($r = 0.89$) and Scientific Manipulation ($r = 0.94$), while COVID Origins and Scientific Manipulation also showed a robust link ($r = 0.89$). These findings indicate a substantial overlap in endorsement patterns across the conspiracy domains, inferring that belief in one theory may predispose individuals to others, which is consistent with theories of generalised conspiracy thinking. The high intercorrelations underscore the potential for a latent conspiracist ideation factor, warranting further factor analytic exploration in future studies.

Figure 7: Pairwise scatter plots of country-level mean ratings across conspiracy theories with linear regression trends, 95% confidence intervals, and Holm-adjusted p-values.



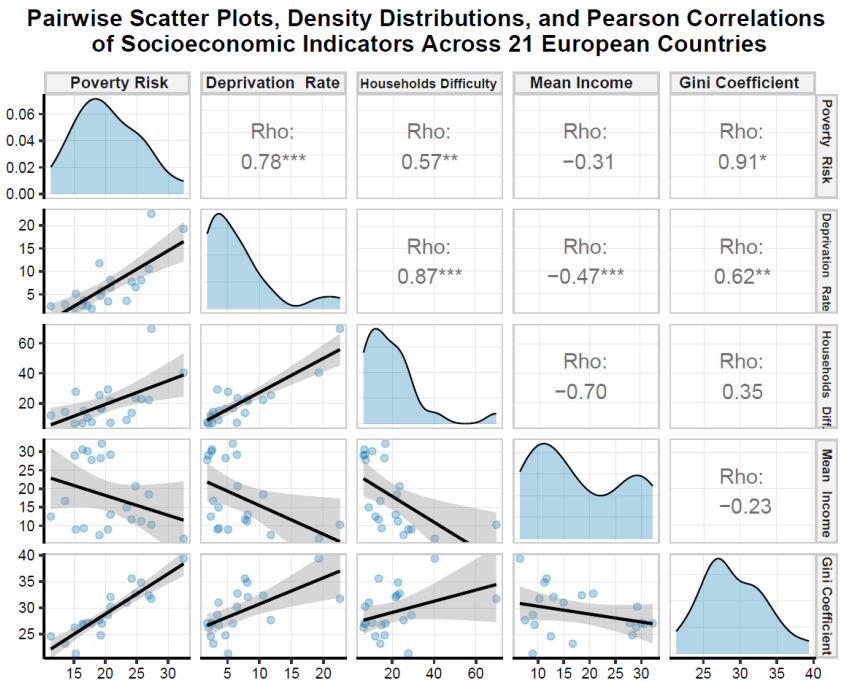
Source: own study based on: Eurostat Database – Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion by age and sex [ilc_peps01n$defaultview] https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC_PEPS01N, Material and social deprivation rate by age, sex and most frequent activity status [ilc_mdsd01__custom_17612695] https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC_MDSD01, Inability to make ends meet [ilc_mdes09__custom_17615633] https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC_MDES09, Mean and median income by age and sex [ilc_di03__custom_17606562] https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC_DI03, Gini coefficient of equivalised disposable income by age [ilc_di12$defaultview] https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC_DI12.

Intercorrelations among socioeconomic indicators (2020–2022)

The correlation analysis among the five studied socioeconomic indicators demonstrated strong positive associations between measures of economic vulnerability, such as the at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate and the severe material and social deprivation rate (Rho = 0.78, $p_{adj} < 0.001$), as well as between poverty risk and the Gini coefficient (Rho = 0.91, $p_{adj} = 0.019$). These findings indicate a clustering of inequality and deprivation metrics, where higher poverty risks align with increased deprivation and income disparity. Conversely, mean equivalised net income exhibited moderate negative correlations with household financial difficulty (Rho = –0.70, $p_{adj} = 0.126$) and deprivation rate (Rho = –0.47, $p_{adj} < 0.001$), though only the latter reached statistical significance after adjustment. The Gini coefficient showed weaker associations with other variables, such as household difficulty (Rho = 0.35, $p_{adj} = 0.363$). Non-significant correlations, including those involving mean income and Gini (Rho = –0.23, $p_{adj} = 0.363$) with certain deprivation measures, indicate partial independence among some indicators, underscoring the multi-

dimensional nature of socioeconomic status. These patterns, visualised in Figure 8 through pairwise scatter plots and density distributions, highlight a socioeconomic gradient wherein vulnerability metrics co-vary positively, while income acts as a protective factor. Such intercorrelations provide a foundation for subsequent analyses linking these indicators to conspiracy belief endorsement, which is consistent with theoretical frameworks positing socioeconomic strain as a driver of perceptual biases.

Figure 8: Pairwise scatter plots of country-level mean ratings across socioeconomic indicators with linear regression trends, 95% confidence intervals, and Holm-adjusted p-values.



Notes: Values represent averages for 2020–2022. * >0.005; * <0.05; ** <0.01 and >0.001; *** <0.001.
Source: own study based on: Eurostat Database – Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion by age and sex [ilc_peps01n$defaultview] https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC_PEPS01N, Material and social deprivation rate by age, sex and most frequent activity status [ilc_mdsd01__custom_17612695] https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC_MDSD01, Inability to make ends meet [ilc_mdes09__custom_17615633] https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC_MDES09, Mean and median income by age and sex [ilc_di03__custom_17606562] https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC_DI03, Gini coefficient of equivalised disposable income by age [ilc_di12$defaultview] https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC_DI12.

Impact of socioeconomic indicators on conspiracy belief ratings across 21 European countries, 2020–2022

Univariate robust linear regression models were employed to examine the associations between five socioeconomic indicators and country-level mean ratings for three conspiracy beliefs: small secret groups controlling world politics, deliberate origins of the coronavirus, and manipulation by groups of scientists (Table 2). In these models, lower mean ratings indicate greater endorsement of the conspiracy statements (scale: 1 = Definitely agree to 5 = Definitely disagree). All analyses were conducted at the aggregate country level with N = 21 observations per model, utilising robust estimation to mitigate the influence of outliers. The at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate showed non-significant negative associations with all three mean ratings (β ranging from –0.03 to –0.01, $p \geq 0.075$), indicating a tentative but inconclusive link to higher conspiracy endorsement in more vulnerable populations. Similarly, the severe material and social deprivation rate yielded non-significant negative coefficients (β ranging from –0.03 to –0.02, $p \geq 0.071$), implying limited independent predictive power after accounting for the small sample size. In contrast, the share of households making ends meet with difficulty or great difficulty exhibited consistent negative effects, significantly for Small Groups (β = –0.02, 95% CI [–0.03, –0.01], $p < 0.001$) and COVID Origins (β = –0.02, 95% CI [–0.03, –0.01], $p < 0.001$), and marginally for Scientific Manipulation (β = –0.01, 95% CI [–0.02, 0.00], $p = 0.026$). This pattern indicates that greater perceived financial strain at the household level is associated with stronger conspiracy beliefs. Conversely, mean equivalised net income demonstrated robust positive associations across all outcomes (β = 0.04, 95% CI [0.02, 0.05], $p < 0.001$ for each), underscoring that higher average incomes associate with increased disagreement with conspiracy narratives. The Gini coefficient, as a measure of income inequality, displayed non-significant negative coefficients (β ranging from –0.03 to –0.02, $p \geq 0.220$), failing to emerge as a strong predictor in these univariate analyses. These results highlight the differential roles of socioeconomic factors, with income and household financial difficulty appearing as more salient influencers of conspiracy endorsement than the broader inequality or deprivation metrics.

Table 2: Univariate robust linear regression estimates of socioeconomic indicators on conspiracy belief mean ratings across 21 European countries, 2020–2022 (N = 21 observations per model)

Predictor	Small Groups mean			COVID Origins mean			Scientific Manipulation mean		
	β	95% CI	p	β	95% CI	p	β	95% CI	p
At-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate (%)	−0.03	−0.06, 0.01	0.187	−0.03	−0.06, 0.00	0.075	−0.01	−0.05, 0.02	0.387
Severe material and social deprivation rate (%)	−0.03	−0.07, 0.01	0.098	−0.03	−0.07, 0.00	0.071	−0.02	−0.05, 0.02	0.253
Households with difficulty making ends meet (%)	−0.02	−0.03, −0.01	< 0.001	−0.02	−0.03, −0.01	< 0.001	−0.01	−0.02, 0.00	0.026
Mean equivalised net income (thousand euros)	0.04	0.02, 0.05	< 0.001	0.04	0.02, 0.05	< 0.001	0.04	0.02, 0.05	< 0.001
Gini coefficient	−0.02	−0.07, 0.02	0.306	−0.03	−0.08, 0.02	0.220	−0.02	−0.05, 0.02	0.422

Notes: β denotes the regression coefficient; 95% CI is the confidence interval; p-values are unadjusted. All predictors and outcomes are at the country level. Source: own study based on: Eurostat Database – Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion by age and sex [ilc_peps01n$defaultview] https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC_PEPS01N, Material and social deprivation rate by age, sex and most frequent activity status [ilc_mdsd01__custom_17612695] https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC_MDSD01, Inability to make ends meet [ilc_mdes09__custom_17615633] https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC_MDES09, Mean and median income by age and sex [ilc_di03__custom_17606562] https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC_DI03, Gini coefficient of equivalised disposable income by age [ilc_di12$defaultview] https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC_DI12 [accessed: 30.06.2025]; European Social Survey European Research Infrastructure (ESS ERIC) (2023) ESS10 – integrated file, edition 3.2 [Data set]. Sikt – Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research. https://doi.org/10.21338/ess10e03_2.

Overall Findings

The aim of this study was to link two types of data – questionnaire data on support for conspiracy theories collected in the 10th round of the ESS survey, and a selection of five socio-economic indicators based on Eurostat data – and to investigate whether these indicators influence support for conspiracy theories. The analysis reveals that the more developed countries were characterised by greater disagreement with the statement that the factors examined influence belief in conspiracy theories. In contrast, less developed countries were characterised by greater agreement with the statement. The findings from this study reveal consistent patterns in conspiracy theory endorsement across 21 European countries, with higher agreement observed in Eastern and Southern regions characterised by elevated socioeconomic vulnerabilities, such as greater poverty risks and income inequality. Beliefs in small secret groups, deliberate coronavirus origins, and scientific manipulation exhibited strong intercorrelations, suggesting a shared underlying propensity for conspiracy thinking, i.e. a conspiracy mentality (Pilch et al., 2023). This construct describes the general, fundamental tendency to believe in conspiracies, which creates a monological belief system (Imhoff et al., 2022). It predicts beliefs in specific conspiracy theories – even contradictory (Wood et al., 2012) or fictitious ones (Swami et al., 2011). Socioeconomic indicators, particularly household financial difficulty and mean income, emerged as significant predictors of these beliefs, wherein economic strain was associated with increased endorsement and higher income with greater scepticism.

Although previous studies and scientific papers have described the impact of economic inequality on negative social outcomes, the influence of socio-economic factors on support for conspiracy theories in societies remains an under-researched topic. The results presented in this article confirm that such an influence exists. These results highlight the diverse role of socio-economic factors, with household income and financial difficulties appearing to be more important factors influencing support for conspiracy theories than broader inequalities or deprivation indicators. The overall conclusions of the analysis are consistent with previous research on the subject. In a correlational study at the time, economic inequality was associated with greater conspiracy beliefs, and respondents in conditions of high inequality were more likely to endorse conspiracy narratives. These results show that economic inequality can cause conspiracy thinking, and that conspiracy beliefs can motivate collective action against economic inequality (Casara et al., 2022). It can be noted that the results presented in this article are consistent

with previous studies showing that structural social factors, such as economic inequalities, can contribute to conspiracy beliefs (Casara et al., 2022; Hornsey et al., 2022; Jetten et al., 2022; Zeng et al., 2024). Studies that used ESS results in the field of conspiracy theories also found that income inequality is an important factor influencing political, scientific and conspiracy beliefs about COVID-19, with regional inequality being positively and significantly correlated with conspiracy beliefs at the individual level (Becchetti et al., 2023).

The study shows that, in the case of support for conspiracy theories, the strongest impact comes from factors that are close to individuals' lived experience – such as the actual level of household income or perceived financial difficulties. These are more tangible and directly affect everyday life, and therefore shape attitudes more strongly than more distant, abstract indicators – for example, overall social inequalities or aggregate measures of deprivation. In other words, individuals primarily respond to their immediate material circumstances rather than to the broader structural context. This suggests that the mechanism behind support for conspiracy theories stems more from subjectively perceived economic conditions than from an assessment of wider social disparities.

It should also be noted that the analysis has certain limitations. First, the study included a small sample of European countries. They were selected geographically rather than randomly, so the results cannot be generalised to the world or other European countries that did not participate in the ESS survey. This limitation stems from access to data collected because of the 10th round of the ESS survey and from the Eurostat database, which limited the way the data could be analysed. It should also be noted that bias management in the studies selected for analysis was aimed at minimising bias. The ESS survey used a research tool to study generalised belief in conspiracy theories – the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale questionnaire (GCBS; Brotherton et al., 2013), which does not refer to specific conspiracies and is less related to cultural and temporal contexts than specially formulated questionnaires (Wood, 2017; Siwiak et al., 2019). According to the authors of the original version of the GCBS, the limitations of research tools used to measure belief in conspiracy theories relate to cultural differences, as a specific conspiracy theory may be completely unknown in one country, reducing the usefulness of the tool. Additionally, this scale is more universal because it does not require constant updates, unlike tools that examine specific conspiracy theories, which evolve and become more popular and accessible to a wider audience (Brotherton et al., 2013). The analysis showed that there are links between the socio-economic factors studied and support for conspiracy theories, so it can be concluded that

the hypothesis has been confirmed. However, it should be noted that there is no cause-and-effect relationship here; there is a correlation – there may be other factors that correlate but are not examined in the analysis. Factors other than those analysed may be the cause of such a correlation between the parameters examined, which influence the perception of conspiracy theories. In further research, it seems reasonable to include other socio-economic factors in the analysis, and to include an analysis of mediators, i.e. various intermediate variables that explain the relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable.

Discussion on the Limitations of Causal Inference in the Regression Analyses

The univariate robust linear regression models presented in Table 2 reveal notable associations between selected socioeconomic indicators and country-level mean ratings for the three conspiracy beliefs, with household financial difficulty and mean equivalised net income emerging as particularly salient predictors. However, it is essential to emphasise that these estimated associations are correlational in nature and do not establish causality. The observed relationships may be influenced by unobserved confounding variables or reverse causation, wherein socioeconomic conditions could both shape and be shaped by prevailing cultural, political, or institutional factors that foster conspiracy thinking. For instance, the significant negative beta coefficients for household financial difficulty ($\beta = -0.02$ for Small Groups and COVID Origins, $p < 0.001$; $\beta = -0.01$ for Scientific Manipulation, $p = 0.026$) and the positive coefficients for mean equivalised net income ($\beta = 0.04$ across all outcomes, $p < 0.001$) might partially reflect the effects of intertwined variables not included in the models, such as educational attainment, media literacy, or historical legacies of distrust in authorities, which are likely correlated with the predictors examined.

In the current univariate framework, the effects attributed to individual predictors could proxy for the influence of these correlated factors, leading to biased estimates that overstate or understate true relationships. For example, the non-significant associations for the Gini coefficient (β ranging from -0.03 to -0.02, $p \geq 0.220$) may mask indirect pathways through income levels or deprivation, which covary with inequality. Given the aggregate, country-level data and the

exploratory design with a limited sample size (N = 21), these findings could be susceptible to ecological fallacy, where inferences about individual behaviours cannot be reliably drawn from group-level patterns. Future research should employ multivariate regression techniques and instrumental variable approaches to disentangle causal mechanisms and account for these interdependencies, thereby providing a more robust understanding of how socioeconomic structures contribute to conspiracy belief endorsement.

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CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND (DIS)TRUST IN POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

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After the collapse of the non-democratic regimes in the late 1980s and early 1990s, new democracies emerged in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and began their nation- and state-building on a wave of democratic enthusiasm. The majority of those countries, including Slovenia, entered the European Union in May 2004 as consolidated, well-functioning democracies, although public trust in democratic political institutions has been on the slow decline since the 1990s, only to drop even more after both the global economic crisis and the wave of populism hit CEE in the last decade. The author analyses trends in (dis)trust levels in key political institutions in some CEE countries and in Slovenia with an emphasis on the wave of conspiracy theories that spread extensively during and after the global coronavirus pandemic. Crisis events such as the recent global pandemic have triggered a wave of concerns about the real backgrounds of global crises, and those concerns have eroded public trust in key political and administrative institutions and added fuel to the conspiracy theories that were often embraced by political parties and non-governmental stakeholders that exploited sometimes-legitimate concerns to their own benefits.

Key words: conspiracy theories; political trust; information; institutions; Slovenia.

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Introduction

Conspiracy theories are theories or beliefs that certain events, decisions, situations, or phenomena have been caused by a group of people who are secretly working together to achieve a specific but mysterious goal. There are usually certain sinister, frightening intentions behind such theories (Barkun, 2013: 3–4). Conspiracy theories often lack evidence and may be based on speculation or hearsay. Conspiracy theories may also result from *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, which is Latin for 'after this, therefore because of this'. It is a logical fallacy in which two events occur sequentially or simultaneously, which leads to misattribution of one event appearing to be the cause of the following event. Several of the conspiracy theories surrounding the novel coronavirus stem from numerous sources and logical fallacies.

The spread of the coronavirus was accompanied by a massive spread of conspiracy theories (Bierwiaczonek, Gunderson and Kunst, 2022: 1; see also Šteger, 2024: 83). One of the most pervasive conspiracy theories about the spread of the coronavirus is that it was deliberately released into the population by a nefarious group or organisation, most often the government of China. This theory is based on the idea that the virus was created in a lab, possibly as a bioweapon, and then accidentally or deliberately released into the public to cause mass chaos and destruction (Birchall and Knight, 2023: 60). The fact that the virus originated in the Wuhan region of China has been used to attribute the discovery of the virus to nefarious actors in China, regardless of the severe lack of evidence. Bierwiaczonek, Gunderson and Kunst's (2022: 3) study on the impact of conspiratorial claims regarding the coronavirus has had a significant and detrimental effect on public health simply due to the scale of the worldwide pandemic.

Another common conspiracy theory is that the virus was deliberately spread by 5G networks. This theory claims that 5G radiation is powerful enough to weaken the immune system, allowing the virus to spread more quickly (Birchall and Knight, 2023: 96). The fact that Wuhan, China, was among the first cities to get a 5G network added fuel to the conspiracies. While there is no scientific evidence to support this claim, the theory continues to circulate. Another popular conspiracy theory is that the virus was created to control the population by imposing restrictions on travel and public gatherings. This theory suggests that the virus was created as a tool of social engineering, to keep people in their homes and limit their ability to interact with one another. However, no motive for such social engineering ever materialises in this discourse. Finally, there is the theory that the

virus is part of a vast conspiracy to increase the power and wealth of a select group of people. This theory suggests that the virus was released to cause mass economic disruption, giving those in power an opportunity to amass even more wealth and power. How this global phenomenon leads to creating more wealth during global lockdowns seems to contradict this claim but does not halt its spread.

As noted by Douglas, Sutton and Cichocka (2017), exposure to conspiracy theories is having a negative effect on some forms of political participation of citizens, such as participation in elections. The authors note similar findings in some studies that followed this one (e.g. Douglas and Sutton, 2018: 280). Conspiracy theories, among other things, are supposed to encourage a sense of helplessness (Wardawy-Dudziak, 2024: 53), which is an important factor in an individual's decision not to participate in elections. With this, the authors indicate the influence that conspiracy theories can have in the political arena. Einstein and Glick (2015: 682–685) were among the first to investigate the connection between beliefs in conspiracy theories and trust in the government. According to them, it is intuitive to expect that exposure to various conspiracy theories about the government's involvement in sinister principles affects an individual's attitude towards government and political institutions in general. The goal of their experimental research was to determine the connection between exposure to conspiracy theories in the mass media and trust in the government. Their findings confirm that exposure to conspiracy theories has a negative effect on trust in the government and political institutions, even when the institutions are not directly involved in the conspiracy theory itself. Mari et al. (2022: 288) make a similar observation on the example of a study that covered almost 12,000 people in different cultural settings in Europe, America, and New Zealand.

The goal of this article is to analyse trends in levels of (dis)trust in key political institutions in some Central and Eastern European countries, including Slovenia, with an emphasis on the most recent period before, during and after the coronavirus pandemic, when the wave of conspiracy theories, both old and new, especially intensified and spread. After we determine the state of public (dis)trust towards major Slovenian political and administrative institutions, we will connect those findings with the results of empirical research among followers and sympathisers of conspiracy theorist profiles on Slovenian social media sites, mostly Facebook, and with the results of the representative national survey implemented in late 2024 to ascertain the levels of embeddedness of conspiracy theories in Slovenia and to discover the profile of an average follower of Slovenian conspiracy theories and his/her attitude towards mainstream politics.

(Dis)Trust in Key Decision-Making Political and Administrative Institutions

In dealing with and managing crisis situations such as the global economic crisis of 2008–2014 (Koller, 2021: 61), the migration wave of 2015, or the novel coronavirus pandemic of 2020–2022, a policy narrative framework is extremely important for at least two reasons. First, a clear policy framework reduces ambiguity and thus challenges policy implementation, but it cannot ensure effective implementation. The latter depends on structural issues or the capacity of the system. In other words, if appropriate resources are not allocated to the establishment of an adequate policy response, the crisis situation cannot be successfully addressed, no matter how good the policy narrative. Second, an effective framework for action increases the likelihood that citizens will correctly interpret and support the public policies and actions implemented. The latter is essential for policy implementation and compliance. At the operational level, it is important that leaders provide accurate, timely and credible information across the hierarchy of decision-making and crisis response, including to citizens and communities involved in crisis management, in different settings (Boin and 't Hart, 2010: 360). Based on the analysis of political leaders' responses, Mintrom and O'Connor (2020: 209) formulate the following four recommendations:[2] 1) provide convincing accounts of what is happening, why it is happening, and what can be done about it; 2) build a broad coalition of support for the policy actions to be taken and minimise opportunities for conflict; 3) foster trust and collaboration among key actors and groups whose actions are relevant to managing the crisis; and 4) empower individuals and communities to make informed decisions about crisis management in their respective jurisdictions.

The lack of a clear framework for action leads to doubt and ambiguity in the messages that political leaders try to convey, leading to varying degrees of confusion among citizens. If we take the most recent coronavirus crisis situation as the latest example, we could observe a contagious coronavirus on one side and the complacency and deviant behaviour of a minority of citizens on the other side that lead to the rapid spread of the virus, with disastrous and sometimes fatal

2 It should be added, however, that new crisis situations will challenge other behavioural patterns of political leaders.

results. Because of the high virulence of the novel coronavirus, it was necessary to take rapid action, which inevitably had a major impact on people's daily routines. Many political leaders issued emergency powers in their jurisdictions to enforce social distancing and lockdown measures, which were a serious violation of social norms. For this reason, it was necessary to create a clear political narrative simultaneously with the legalisation of measures, which some political leaders succeeded in doing much better than others (Koller, 2022). Those politicians who failed to enforce an effective political narrative among the population quickly became targets of a blame game, which led to disregard for the measures taken to combat the novel coronavirus and a decline in citizens' support for and trust in policymakers. Indeed, Haček and Brezovšek (2014: 3) explain that the trust we have in the representatives of a particular political or administrative institution generates trust in the institution. However, the consequences of distrust in political institutions – especially in crisis situations – can be fatal.

Gamson (1968: 42) argues that trust in political and administrative institutions is important because it serves as a creator of collective power, enabling the government to make decisions and commit resources without resorting to coercion or seeking the explicit consent of citizens for every decision. When trust is high, governments can make new commitments based on that trust and, if successful, increase support even further. A virtuous spiral is created. On the other hand, if trust is low, governments cannot govern effectively, trust is further eroded, and a vicious cycle is created (Muller and Jukam, 1977). Trust is particularly important for democratic governments because they cannot rely on coercion to the same extent as non-democratic regimes. Trust is therefore essential for representative relations (Bianco, 1994). In modern democracies, where citizens exercise control over government through representative institutions, it is trust that gives representatives the latitude to set aside short-term concerns of the electorate while pursuing long-term national interests (Mishler and Rose, 1997: 419). Trust is necessary for individuals to voluntarily participate in collective institutions, whether political or civic. However, trust is a double-edged sword. Democracy requires trust, but it also requires an active and vigilant citizenry (Haček, 2019: 420) with a healthy scepticism of government and a willingness to suspend trust when necessary and assert control over government by replacing the current government.

We begin our analysis by examining the level of trust in (political) institutions in selected European Union member states, namely Slovenia, Austria, Hungary, Croatia and Poland, countries that share many aspects of their political histories and political cultures. Three time periods have been included in the analysis,

namely (a) the period before the novel coronavirus pandemic (2018–2019), (b) the period of the novel coronavirus pandemic outbreak (2020–2022), and (c) the period after the novel coronavirus pandemic (2023–2024).

Based on the publicly available data presented in Table 1, two clusters of countries can be observed. The first cluster consists of countries (Austria, Hungary) whose populations maintained relatively high levels of trust in all major political and administrative institutions (namely their national government, national parliament, political parties, police, judiciary, and public administration) from before the novel coronavirus pandemic to the last measurement after the pandemic in spring 2024, when countries had already implemented exit strategies from the crisis situation and largely moved on. Still, the first group also includes cases with a slight downward trend in public confidence, with Austria showing the largest decrease in public confidence, as trust in the national parliament fell by 10% and in the national government by 17% between 2018 and 2023, but both major political institutions managed to regain some trust again in 2024. The second cluster of countries is those that have stable, but very low levels of public trust towards major political and administrative institutions, well below the EU-27 averages (Slovenia, Croatia, and partly also Poland). It should be added that the increase or decrease in public trust is influenced by various factors, one of which was certainly the change of government that Slovenia experienced in April 2022, but we can also clearly see that trust levels returned to the pre-electoral levels just nine months later (Eurobarometer survey in spring 2023) and experienced further drops to their historically lowest levels in Spring 2024.

Table 1: Trust in key political institutions (tend to trust; in %)

	NATIONAL GOVERNMENT							NATIONAL PARLIAMENT						
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Austria	55	50	59	45	39	38	46	56	54	58	50	47	46	54
Croatia	19	15	24	22	20	24	34	18	16	21	22	21	26	32
Hungary	48	48	46	45	48	41	40	46	45	42	42	44	38	38
Slovenia	23	31	25	25	37	25	19	22	26	22	19	34	23	17
Poland	33	34	34	28	26	31	40	26	30	28	26	38	29	37
EU-27	35	35	40	37	34	32	33	35	36	36	35	34	33	36

Sources: European Union (2018; 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022; 2023; 2024).

Table 1 cont.: Trust in key political institutions (tend to trust; in %)

	POLITICAL PARTIES							PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION				
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Austria	33	33	41	35	32	27	35	67	68	73	65	66
Croatia	12	12	14	12	11	19	26	27	23	31	33	34
Hungary	28	30	25	26	27	21	29	58	57	62	62	61
Slovenia	10	14	12	10	14	11	9	41	39	44	41	40
Poland	14	22	22	22	24	23	27	45	44	48	46	45
EU-27	18	20	23	21	21	20	22	50	49	52	52	50

Sources: European Union (2018; 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022; 2023; 2024).

Table 1 cont.: Trust in key political institutions (tend to trust; in %)

	JUSTICE SYSTEM							THE POLICE						
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Austria	73	69	73	70	68	68	72	77	75	77	76	77	75	77
Croatia	24	20	23	21	26	36	37	58	53	54	55	54	61	69
Hungary	50	50	50	53	55	52	51	63	64	65	67	66	63	64
Slovenia	22	25	36	33	37	34	33	63	65	67	58	57	67	67
Poland	35	36	35	35	37	40	49	58	53	52	46	45	46	59
EU-27	51	51	52	54	52	52	55	72	71	71	71	69	69	72

Sources: European Union (2018; 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022; 2023; 2024).

In addition to public trust in key decision-making political institutions, as measured by Eurobarometer, we also examined public trust in key Slovenian political institutions (see Table 2) measured by the most publicly recognised public opinion trackers, namely Centre for Public Opinion and Mass Communication Research at the University of Ljubljana, with data all the way from 2010 to 2024. We can observe that levels of public trust towards major political institutions were at quite low levels until 2022, when the post-covid elections saw the biggest voter turnout in the last couple of decades, bringing major change to the political landscape, and, at least temporarily, increased levels of public trust towards major political institutions; but trust towards political parties and national government decreased again in 2024.

Table 2: Trust in key political institutions in Slovenia: surveys from 2010 to 2022

	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024
National parliament	2.98	2.96	2.76	3.33	3.58	3.86	4.21	-
President of the Republic	4.17	4.49	4.36	4.99	-	-	5.02	5.05
National government	2.75	2.69	2.69	3.27	3.53	-	4.31	3.65
Legal system	3.08	3.28	3.13	3.63	3.92	4.31	-	-
The police	4.99	5.38	5.47	6.02	6.15	6.21	6.04	6.16
Politicians	2.25	2.30	1.90	2.44	2.67	2.72	-	-
Political parties	2.24	2.27	2.00	2.47	2.70	2.78	3.37	2.85

Question: 'Please use a scale from 0 to 10 to rate how much you personally trust each of the following institutions. How much you trust ... Please use a scale from 0 to 10 to rate how much you personally trust each of the following institutions. 0 means you don't trust the institution at all, and 10 means you trust it completely'. Sources: Centre for Public Opinion and Mass Communication Research (2020; 2022; 2024); Toš (2021a: 644) and Toš (2021b: 99).

With the help of comparative analysis, we can establish the following facts. First, public trust in the main political and administrative institutions is at the highest levels in Austria and Hungary, and quite a bit lower in Slovenia, Poland, and Croatia; the lowest trust in the key political institutions is found in the most recent measurement in Slovenia. Second, the coronavirus crisis did not have a major impact on the public trust in key political and administrative institutions in any of the five analysed Central and Eastern European states, with some drops in public trust detected that were merely temporal in nature. Third, Slovenian public trust in key political and administrative institutions is for the most part well below the EU-27 average in all seven analysed Eurobarometer measurements from 2018 to 2024. And fourth, we can see that the coronavirus crisis and political backslash to it (Kukovič, 2022: 17) had an important, but also short-lived, influence on political events (with the prime example being the national elections held in Slovenia in April 2022) that brought major changes to the political landscape, including (temporarily) increased public trust towards major political and administrative institutions.

Empirical Study on Conspiracy Theories in Slovenia

Research design

To answer the research questions on the levels of embeddedness of conspiracy theories in Slovenian society and to discover the profile of the average followers of Slovenian conspiracy theories and their attitude towards mainstream politics, we first conducted empirical research among followers and sympathisers of the most frequented Slovenian conspiracy theory groups on Facebook.

The Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale/GCBS (Brotherton, 2015) was used to explore conspiracy mentality. The survey was conducted between February and April 2023, when followers of the mentioned groups were invited several times to fill out a web-based anonymous questionnaire; 257 respondents answered the questionnaire, of whom 115 were men and 142 were women. Most respondents were quite young, as 51.4% declared being between 18 and 24 years of age, and only 3.5% of respondents were over 65 years of age; this fact may very well also have contributed to the nature of our research, as social media activity is much more populated by the younger portion of the population. The largest group of our respondents (65.4%) had completed high school, 30.4% had obtained a higher or university level diploma, and 3.1% had obtained a master's and/or PhD. Most respondents were married or in a relationship (47.1%), and 46.3% were single when our survey was conducted.[3]

Next, in order to add an additional degree of validity and the possibility to compare both sets of data, we also asked some of the same and some similar questions to the general population as part of the representative Slovenian Public Opinion poll (2024) conducted between October 2024 and January 2025 as field research that included 992 respondents, of which 50.1% were male and 49.9% were female. Most respondents (49.6%) were between 31 and 60 years of age, 33.5% were older than 61 years of age, and 17% were younger than 30 years of age. The

3 As with any survey conducted on social media, we should assume a critical mindset when interpreting this survey.

largest group of our respondents (43.7%) had completed high school, 35.4% had obtained a higher or university level diploma, and 7.3% had obtained a master's and/or PhD. Most respondents were married or in a relationship (71.3%), and 25% were single when the survey was conducted.

Results

We will analyse and debate some of the most intriguing and interesting results of the quite extensive studies among Slovenian followers of conspiracy theories and the general public. We presented a series of statements (Tables 3 and 4) to both sets of survey respondents, where they evaluated the degree to which they believe each statement is likely to be true on the scale from 1 (definitely not true) to 5 (definitely true).

The first four statements (Table 3) test the conspiracy theories that suggest that 'the virus' was released to cause mass economic disruption, giving those in power an opportunity to amass even more wealth and power, and that there is a secret group of people behind the world governments that is pulling many if not all the strings. We can see quite substantial support among Slovenian followers of conspiracy theories for all four statements, which is not surprising, as the 'secret group' conspiracy theory is the most well-established and well-known. The strongest support (65% of respondents believe that it is probably or definitely true) was given to the statement that claims that the power held by heads of state is second to that of small unknown groups who really control world politics. The same statement in the general population survey (Table 4) received 46.1% support from the respondents, who believe that it is probably or definitely true, but the mean value (3.49) is still quite high and only marginally lower compared to the conspiracy theorists' survey. The weakest support (55.4% of respondents believe that it is probably or definitely true) among conspiracy theorists was given to the similar statement that claims a small, secret group of people is responsible for making all major world decisions, such as going to war.

Table 3: Conspiracy theory followers' opinions on selected statements

	STATEMENTS	Definitely not true (1), in %	Probably not true (2), in %	Not sure; cannot decide (3), in %	Probably true (4), in %	Definitely true (5), in %	Mean value (1–5)
1)	The power held by heads of state is second to that of small, unknown groups who really control world politics.	7.4	16.5	12.1	33.9	31.1	3.66
2)	The spread of certain viruses and/or diseases is the result of the deliberate, concealed efforts of a secret organisation.	13.2	14.0	16.3	29.6	26.8	3.43
3)	A small, secret group of people is responsible for making all major world decisions, such as going to war.	14.1	14.1	16.4	27.3	28.1	3.41
4)	Certain significant events have been the result of the activity of a small group that secretly manipulates world events.	13.2	12.1	14.0	28.4	32.3	3.54
5)	Vaccine safety data are often fabricated.	19.5	17.5	18.3	30.7	14.0	3.02
6)	Vaccines are harmful, and this fact is hidden from people.	23.7	15.2	17.5	33.5	10.1	2.91
7)	There is a link between autism and vaccines.	26.8	13.6	22.2	23.0	14.4	2.84
8)	Evidence of the dangers of 5G radiation is being hidden from the public.	26.1	16.3	18.3	23.7	15.6	2.86
9)	The introduction of the 5G network is responsible for the spread of the coronavirus.	39.1	14.1	18.0	14.8	14.1	2.51
10)	The COVID-19 pandemic is a tool to control society.	17.6	12.9	12.1	35.5	21.9	3.31
11)	The SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus was deliberately created to benefit the richest.	18.7	16.7	12.8	33.1	18.7	3.16
12)	Statistics on COVID-19 cases and deaths are deliberately fabricated.	16.0	12.1	9.7	38.9	23.3	3.42

The question was: 'There is often debate about whether or not the public is told the whole truth about various important issues. This brief survey is designed to assess your beliefs about some of these subjects. Please indicate the degree to which you believe each statement is likely to be true on the following scale'. N = 257. Source: Haček (2023).

Statements 8–9 in Table 3 relate to the common conspiracy theory that claims COVID-19 was deliberately spread by 5G networks. As we can see from Table 3, there is no clear cut support for either of those two statements, as the majority of followers of conspiracy theories (53.2%) do not agree that the introduction of the 5G network is related to the COVID-19 pandemic, and there are also more followers of conspiracy theories (42.3%) not agreeing with the statement 'Evidence of the dangers of 5G radiation is being hidden from the public' than those agreeing with that particular statement (39.3%). The support for those two statements is even weaker among the general population (Table 4, statements 3–4), where the majority of the general population (55.5%) opposed the statement that the introduction of the 5G network is related to the COVID-19 pandemic, while only 5.7% of the population believed that this conspiracy theory is valid.

Table 4: General population's opinions on selected statements

STATEMENTS	Definitely not true (1)	Probably not true (2)	Not sure; cannot decide (3)	Probably true (4)	Definitely true (5)	Don't know, no answer (8–9)	Mean value (1–5)
1. The power held by heads of state is second to that of small, unknown groups who really control world politics.	6.2%	9.8%	20.5%	29.7%	16.4%	17.4%	3.49
2. Vaccine safety data are often fabricated.	12.6%	18.9%	25.3%	14.7%	10.5%	18.0%	2.90
3. Evidence of the dangers of 5G radiation is being hidden from the public.	14.1%	17.7%	22.0%	13.2%	5.0%	27.9%	2.69
4. The introduction of the 5G network is responsible for the spread of the coronavirus.	33.8%	21.7%	14.0%	4.2%	1.5%	23.8%	1.91
5. Groups of scientists are withholding, falsifying, or concealing data in order to mislead the public.	8.1%	19.1%	27.7%	18.5%	7.2%	19.5%	2.97
6. The coronavirus is the result of deliberate and covert action by one government or organisation.	10.3%	16.6%	24.4%	18.1%	10.2%	20.4%	3.02
7. The SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus was deliberately created and let out of the lab.	10.1%	14.2%	21.9%	21.2%	11.8%	20.7%	3.13

The question was: 'Please indicate the degree to which you believe each statement is likely to be true on a scale from 1 to 5'. N = 992. Source: Slovenian Public Opinion 2024/1 (2024).

The next six statements under discussion (numbered 5–7 and 10–12 in Table 3) focus to vaccines and the COVID-19 global pandemic and relate to the two popular and well-established conspiracy theories claiming a) that the virus was created in a lab and accidentally or deliberately released into the public to cause mass chaos, and that the coronavirus is a tool of social engineering, to keep people in their homes and limit their ability to interact with one another, and b) vaccines are harmful and their safety data is compromised and fabricated. We can clearly see from Table 3 that the support of followers of conspiracy theories towards those two statement clusters is not overwhelming, especially towards the statements regarding vaccines. In fact, there is a large group of followers of conspiracy theories who strongly oppose statements regarding the supposed harmfulness of vaccines and the link between vaccines and autism. There is even less support towards those conspiracy theories among the general population, as statements 5, 8 and 9 from Table 3 were also offered for evaluation in the general population survey (statements 2–4 in Table 4), the smallest difference in those two datasets is noticeable regarding the statement 'vaccine safety data are often fabricated', where 44.7% of conspiracy theorists believe that the statement is probably or definitely true versus only 25.2% of respondents from the general population.

Table 5: Followers of conspiracy theories' levels of interaction

	Not at all (1)	Once a week or less (2)	Two or three times a week (3)	Every day or almost every day (4)	Mean value
Started discussions about these topics on social media.	180 (70.0%)	44 (17.1%)	20 (7.8%)	13 (5.1%)	1.48
Replied to other people's posts.	160 (62.3%)	60 (23.3%)	28 (10.9%)	9 (3.5%)	1.56
Retweeted (shared) entries devoted to these topics to other users.	166 (64.8%)	54 (21.1%)	21 (8.2%)	15 (5.9%)	1.55
Used the 'like', 'love', 'thumbs up' functions on posts dedicated to these topics.	100 (39.1%)	84 (32.8%)	39 (15.2%)	33 (12.9%)	2.02
Discussed these topics by e-mail or private messages.	135 (52.7%)	77 (30.1%)	28 (10.9%)	16 (6.3%)	1.71
Participated in discussion forums or written comments under articles on the Internet.	188 (73.2%)	46 (17.9%)	13 (5.1%)	10 (3.9%)	1.40
Share a video on these topics with other users.	150 (58.6%)	69 (27.0%)	25 (9.8%)	12 (4.7%)	1.61

The question was: 'We would now like to ask you about your experiences on the Internet related to content such as vaccinations, 5G, the pandemic or the obscure and harmful plans of people in power. How often in the last month have you…?' N = 257. Source: Haček (2023).

The situation is quite different for the last three statements in Table 3 (numbered 10–12) regarding the COVID-19 disease and global coronavirus pandemic, where 50–60% of followers of conspiracy theories (strongly) support all three statements, with strongest support (62.2% of respondents (strongly) agreeing) with the statement claiming that the statistics on COVID-19 disease cases and deaths are deliberately fabricated. It should also be noted that there is a (weak-to-moderate) negative correlation between the respondent's interest in politics and their support for these three statements.

Table 6: Sources of information for followers of conspiracy theories

SOURCES OF INFORMATION	Not at all (1)	Once a week or less (2)	Two or three times a week (3)	Every day or almost every day (4)	Mean value (1–4)
News and current affairs programs on television	78 (30.6%)	77 (30.2%)	51 (20.0%)	49 (19.2%)	2.28
Friends and family members	40 (15.7%)	102 (40.2%)	67 (26.4%)	45 (17.7%)	2.46
Newspapers and magazines	140 (55.1%)	65 (25.6%)	34 (13.4%)	15 (5.9%)	1.70
Online news sites	58 (22.7%)	73 (28.5%)	63 (24.6%)	62 (24.2%)	2.50
Blogs and websites of Internet users	121 (47.6%)	68 (26.8%)	40 (15.7%)	25 (9.8%)	1.88
YouTube	107 (42.0%)	80 (31.4%)	33 (12.9%)	35 (13.7%)	1.98
Twitter/X	181 (71.0%)	30 (11.8%)	15 (5.9%)	29 (11.4%)	1.58
Facebook	72 (28.2%)	73 (28.6%)	56 (22.0%)	54 (21.2%)	2.36
Telegram	198 (77.6%)	24 (9.4%)	14 (5.5%)	19 (7.5%)	1.43
TikTok	177 (69.4%)	32 (12.5%)	28 (11.0%)	18 (7.1%)	1.56

The question was: 'How often during the last month did you get information about current events in Slovenia and in the world from the following sources?' N = 257. Source: Haček (2023).

We also asked followers of conspiracy theories how often in the last month they had interacted about their experiences online related to content such as vaccinations, 5G, the pandemic or the harmful plans of people in power (Table 5). We can see that Slovenian followers of conspiracy theories are quite passive and not personally engaged in online activities regarding the mentioned topics; most of

them and only occasionally, just once or maybe twice weekly, also 'like' posts dedicated to those topics, but they also do not reply, start discussions, participate in discussions or share videos. There is quite a small subgroup of followers of conspiracy theories (less than 15% of them) that are very active in starting discussions, replying to other people's posts, sharing video or other content, and participating in discussion forums.

It is also interesting to analyse the sources of information of Slovenian followers of conspiracy theories (Table 6). We can see that the (strongly) prevailing sources of information are in fact not traditional media channels, like television, news press or radio, but online news sites, friends and family members, and also social media, especially Facebook, where more than 40% of followers of conspiracy theories get their information about currents event in the country and globally at least two or three times a week. The least popular sources of information are the Telegram, TikTok and Twitter/X social media networks.

Table 7: (Dis)trust in various institutions (in %)

INSTITUTIONS	Trust	Do not trust
Political parties	10.6	89.4
Police	55.4	44.6
Regional or local authorities	42.4	57.6
Government	18.0	82.0
Parliament	22.4	77.6
Church	11.5	88.5

The question was: 'To what extent do you trust the following institutions?' (the answer 'don't know' was excluded from the analysis). N = 257. Source: Haček (2023).

To conclude the data analysis, we also asked Slovenian followers of conspiracy theories how interested they are personally in politics. The results are interesting, as 48% of followers of conspiracy theories follow what is happening in politics quite or very closely, and only 25.4% of them are not interested in politics and often overlook even the most important events. The group is also very active regarding various elections, as they claim to be willing to cast their vote in presidential elections (72.8%), parliamentary elections (72%), local elections (66.9%) and even in the elections to the European parliament (54.5%), contradicting the findings of Douglas, Sutton and Cichocka (2017), who found that exposure to conspiracy theories has a negative effect on some forms of political participation. At the same time, the group is also very reserved regarding their levels of trust in

various institutions (Table 7), especially institutions from the political sphere, like political parties (89.4% do not trust), parliament (77.6% do not trust) or government (82% do not trust); the levels of distrust are also a bit higher compared to the general population results presented and analysed in the second section.

Conclusion

Crisis events such as the global economic crisis in the early 2000s, the wave of migration in the mid-2010s, or the recent pandemic have triggered a wave of concerns about the real backgrounds of those crises, eroded public trust in key political and administrative institutions, and added fuel to the spread of conspiracy theories that were often embraced by both political and non-political stakeholders who exploited sometimes-legitimate concerns for their own benefit. The goal of this article was to analyse trends in (dis)trust levels in key political institutions in Slovenia with an emphasis on the most recent period before, during and after coronavirus pandemic, when a wave of conspiracy theories, both old and new, especially intensified and spread. Using sets of both international (Eurobarometer, see Table 1) and national (Centre for Public Opinion and Mass Communication Research, see Table 2) data, it is very straightforward to conclude that Slovenia can be regarded as among the EU members with below-average levels of public trust in major political and administrative institutions and that the 2020–22 global coronavirus pandemic did not have either a significantly negative or positive influence on those (dis)trust levels, but that the post-covid response and governance further diminished the levels of trust, making Slovenia one of the most distrustful political societies in the EU at the moment.

We then analysed these findings in the light of the results of empirical research among followers and sympathisers of conspiracy theorists' profiles on Slovenian social media sites and among the general public, to ascertain the levels of embeddedness of conspiracy theories in Slovenia and to discover the profile of the average follower of Slovenian conspiracy theories and his/her attitude towards mainstream politics and also to compare the attitudes of conspiracy theorists towards some of the most prevalent conspiracy theories with those of the general public. We determined that the levels of support of Slovenian followers of conspiracy theories are stronger towards COVID-19 related conspiracy theories and towards more established traditional theories, like those that suggests there is

a secret group of people behind the world's governments that is pulling many strings; at the same time, the levels of support are weaker towards the vaccine- and 5G-related conspiracy theories. The levels of support towards conspiracy theories among the general population are, expectedly, always lower compared to the conspiracy theorists' group, but the average Slovenian citizen still quite firmly believes that the coronavirus is the result of deliberate and covert action by the government or some other organisation and – even firmer – that the power held by heads of state is second to that of small unknown groups who really control world politics.

We could clearly establish that Slovenian followers of conspiracy theories are quite passive, mostly just following and maybe also liking posts regarding established conspiracy theories, but (mostly) not also actively participating. We could also establish that the most important news sources of followers of conspiracy theories are online news sites, friends and family members, and social media, and that followers of conspiracy theories are on one hand above-averagely political active, but on the other hand also very distrustful towards major political institutions.

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CONSPIRACY STEREOTYPES IN TIMES OF WAR: THE IMPACT OF PARTY IDENTIFICATION ON BELIEF IN ANTI-UKRAINIAN CONSPIRACIES IN POLAND

Agata OLSZANECKA-MARMOLA and Maciej MARMOLA[1]

In February 2022, the Russian army launched an attack on Ukraine. This conflict has had a profound impact on Poland due to geographic proximity, historical background, and the large influx of migrants. Initially, the war strengthened Polish-Ukrainian relations, but over time, competition for valuable resources reinforced an 'us vs. them' mentality, fostering conspiracy stereotypes. Some political actors have begun to exploit anti-Ukrainian sentiments to gain electoral support. Our study (N = 1,040) examines whether party identification influences belief in conspiracy stereotypes about Ukrainians (the Job Theft and Romantic Rivalry narratives). The results confirm that supporters of parties promoting anti-Ukrainian rhetoric are significantly more likely to endorse such stereotypes. Identification with the far-right Confederation party correlates more strongly with support for anti-Ukrainian conspiracies than national identification, populism, right-wing authoritarianism, religiosity, or ideology. Stronger associations are observed only for xenophobia, paranoid ideation, collective narcissism, and belief in unique in-group victimhood.

Key words: conspiracy theory; conspiracy stereotypes; anti-Ukrainian conspiracies; party identification; Russo-Ukrainian war.

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Introduction

On the night of February 24, 2022, Vladimir Putin delivered an address to the Russian nation in which he announced the beginning of a 'special military operation' aimed at defending the population of the Donbas from alleged 'genocide' and at 'demilitarising and denazifying Ukraine'. In practice, this declaration provided the justification for the Russian Federation to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Wilk and Domańska, 2022). The invasion marked the outbreak of one of the largest armed conflicts in Europe since the Second World War and generated a profound geopolitical crisis in the region (Grosse, 2023). As a result of the hostilities, nearly 4.5 million refugees left Ukraine between February and April 2022 alone (UNHCR, 2022). The main host countries included Poland, Moldova, Romania, Slovakia, and Hungary. This massive exodus of people posed a major challenge for the receiving states, particularly for Poland.

Prior to the war, a significant majority – 57% – of the Ukrainian minority in Poland consisted of men who had arrived primarily for work-related purposes. The refugee crisis substantially altered this demographic structure. At present, the Ukrainian minority in Poland is composed predominantly of women, children, and young people. The most pronounced change occurred among those under the age of 18, whose numbers rose from approximately 200,000 before the invasion to around 1.4 million one year later (Selectivv, 2023).

It should be emphasised that from the very first days – and indeed even hours – of the arrival of refugees from Ukraine in Poland, there was an extraordinary mobilisation of ordinary citizens, who engaged in grassroots assistance in various forms, ranging from financial support and in-kind aid to volunteering and even hosting refugees in their own homes. Moreover, the Polish authorities introduced a series of formal administrative measures. The Sejm of the Republic of Poland adopted the Act on Assistance to Citizens of Ukraine in Connection with the Armed Conflict on the Territory of That Country. On the very same day, the act was signed by the President and published (Journal of Laws 2022, item 583). The legislation primarily introduced the possibility of granting Ukrainian citizens a PESEL number, which allowed them, among other things, to access medical, social, and educational services, take up employment, and establish business activities. The act was adopted with 439 votes in favour, 12 against, with 3 abstentions, and 6 members absent. Among those who voted against it were 9 MPs from Confederation, as well as one MP each from Poland 2050, the Left, and

Kukiz'15. Confederation's opposition at that time already signalled that the assistance to Ukraine could become a significant source of division in Polish politics in the future.

Immediately after the outbreak of the war, Poles' attitudes towards accepting refugees from Ukraine were overwhelmingly positive. In April 2022, as many as 91% of respondents believed that Poland should admit Ukrainian refugees. Only 4% held the opposite view, while 5% expressed no opinion on the matter. At the same time, nearly two-thirds of respondents declared that they themselves, or members of their family, had been actively involved in providing assistance to refugees (Feliksiak, 2022). However, this initial consensus eroded over time. By September 2023, support for accepting refugees from Ukraine had declined sharply to 65%, while opposition had risen to more than one-quarter (28%) (Scovil, 2023). The downward trend continued into September 2024, when just over half of Poles (53%) expressed pro-Ukrainian sentiment. A record 40% of people had the opposite opinion. Within the span of two years, public support for Ukrainian refugees had thus dropped by nearly forty percentage points, while opposition registered a tenfold increase compared to the early months of the war. Sociodemographic patterns further highlighted the divisions in public opinion. Support for admitting Ukrainian refugees was less frequently declared by women, the youngest age cohort (18–24 years), rural residents, individuals with lower levels of education and income, as well as those who support right-wing political parties (Scovil, 2024).

Anti-Ukrainian Narratives and Realistic Group Conflict Theory (RGCT)

As indicated, Poles' attitudes towards Ukrainians have changed substantially over a short period. The reasons for this shift can be traced primarily to two interrelated factors. First, it is important to note the phenomenon of 'compassion fatigue' (Figley, 1995), which can arise during prolonged traumas and crises, such as war. This condition involves feelings of exhaustion and burnout resulting from extended involvement in helping others, including refugees. Moreover, continuous exposure to information about armed conflict can lead to gradual habituation and, consequently, emotional desensitisation (Bushman and Anderson,

2009). This response serves as a natural adaptive mechanism that helps reduce chronic stress. As a result, public sentiment shifted after several weeks of widespread mobilisation to provide assistance – which engaged a significant portion of Polish society – and the willingness to support those in need declined. Secondly, narratives increasingly emerged in public discourse suggesting that Ukrainians were receiving preferential treatment, particularly with regard to access to medical care and medications. Such claims – often spread through social media (for example, stories alleging that Poles had to wait years for a given procedure while Ukrainians received it within weeks) – contributed to perceptions of unfairness. Increasingly, Ukrainian refugees arriving in Poland were portrayed as overly demanding, economically opportunistic, and insufficiently grateful. Przemysław Sadura and Sławomir Sierakowski (2022) referred to this phenomenon as invasive narratives, highlighting their rapid diffusion, the impossibility of identifying their source, and the difficulty of eradicating them. Research indicates that in times of heightened uncertainty – such as the outbreak of a full-scale war on Poland's eastern border – the emergence and circulation of such narratives tends to intensify (Kapferer, 1990; DiFonzo and Bordia, 2007). These narratives are used not only as instruments of hybrid warfare employed by Russia but also as tools for certain political actors in Poland to mobilise their voters.

Within weeks of the invasion, anti-Ukrainian messages started circulating on social media, emphasising the alleged entitlement of Ukrainian refugees and their negative impact on the Polish economy. Emerging false narratives included such claims that Ukrainians were migrating primarily to access social benefits, were granted priority in housing, healthcare, and education, lived lavishly at the expense of Polish taxpayers, or failed to pay Polish entrepreneurs for services (Tymińska, 2023). At the same time, persistent assertions circulated that Ukrainians were 'taking jobs' from Poles – despite empirical evidence showing that their mass arrival did not increase unemployment (Błaszczak, 2022) and that they in fact filled labour shortages in sectors such as hospitality, gastronomy, industry, and trade (Terlikowski, 2023). The demographic structure of the refugee population also gave rise to gendered narratives, with online content suggesting that Ukrainian women were breaking up Polish families, seducing Polish men, and breaking up marriages (Długosz and Izdebska-Długosz, 2024).

In a study conducted by Franciszek Czech and Paweł Ścigaj (2023), nearly half of the respondents (47.3%) agreed with the statement: *'Today in Poland, Poles are becoming second-class citizens. Ukrainians are privileged. They receive a PESEL number, access to employment, social assistance at a higher level than Poles, and better*

support in education'. The belief in the privileged status of Ukrainians was more frequently expressed by women, respondents with lower levels of education, and the youngest age group. Interestingly, among political party voters, this narrative was most strongly endorsed by supporters of Confederation (71.9%). In other electorates, the proportions were 33.3% for the Left, 39.8% for Civic Coalition, 42.2% for United Right, 46.4% for Poland 2050, and 50% for Polish People's Party – Polish Coalition.

Shortly after the outbreak of the war, anti-Ukrainian narratives began to be exploited by political actors, particularly those associated with Confederation, with social media serving as their primary vehicle. According to a report by Demagog and the Institute of Media Monitoring, in 2023 – the year of the parliamentary elections – almost 290,000 anti-Ukrainian posts appeared in the Polish-language online sphere. Among the accounts most actively spreading anti-Ukrainian propaganda were the official profiles of MEP Grzegorz Braun, as well as those of Confederation of the Polish Crown, and National Movement (Grzesiczak, 2024). Messages alleging the preferential treatment of Ukrainian immigrants in access to welfare benefits and public services were also disseminated by Confederation politicians, including its leaders Sławomir Mentzen and Krzysztof Bosak. The presidential elections of 2025 further fuelled anti-Ukrainian sentiment. In 2024, the number of anti-Ukrainian narratives circulating on Polish-language social media accounts increased by 13% (Grzesiczak and Kostecki, 2025). Notably, in January 2025, the volume of negative sentiment in social media comments towards Ukrainians reached its highest level since the beginning of the war: as many as 78% of comments were critical, focusing on financial assistance to Ukraine, competition in the labour market, access to the welfare system, and historical grievances, especially references to the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) and the Volhynia massacre (ResFutura, 2025). During the campaign, scepticism towards immigrants was voiced not only by candidates of the far right but also by mainstream politicians, who stressed, for example, the need to suspend certain welfare benefits for unemployed Ukrainians.

The belief in the entitlement and privileged status of Ukrainians corresponds to realistic group conflict theory (RGCT), which explains intergroup tensions as arising from competition over desirable and limited resources (LeVine and Campbell, 1972). Such conflict may intensify when the balance between two groups is disrupted (Sherif and Sherif, 1953) – for example, through mass immigration, which may trigger rivalry over jobs or access to public services (Stephan, Stephan and Gudykunst, 1999). RGCT predicts that conflict with outgroups strengthens ingroup solidarity. The more strongly an outgroup is perceived to

hinder the ingroup's pursuit of desired goals, the greater the cohesion within the ingroup. This cohesion, in turn, generates increased hostility towards the outgroup.

Dollard (1938), for example, found that U.S. residents who were initially friendly towards German immigrants became hostile as unemployment rose, perceiving them as competitors for factory jobs. Similarly, later research indicated that white Americans, who occupied only slightly higher positions on the socio-economic ladder, expressed the strongest prejudice towards African Americans, whom they viewed as direct rivals in the labour market (Aronson and Aronson, 2011: 325).

Walter and Cookie Stephan (2000) identified four key sources of prejudice: realistic threats, symbolic threats, intergroup anxiety, and negative stereotypes. Realistic threats refer to challenges posed by an outgroup. Unlike the classic RGCT approach by LeVine and Campbell (1972), they are broader and encompass any threats to the well-being of the group or its members. Realistic threats also emphasise subjectively perceived intergroup conflict, which does not necessarily involve actual competition for resources. Symbolic threats, by contrast, concern intergroup differences in values, morality, beliefs, and attitudes. Intergroup anxiety involves emotions experienced during direct encounters with outgroup members (e.g., self-confidence, worry, calmness, or unease). Finally, negative stereotypes reinforce perceptions of threat by portraying outgroups as harmful to ingroup interests. Research shows that strong ingroup identification, high levels of negative intergroup contact, and perceived conflict intensify these forms of threat (Corenblum and Stephan, 2001).

Conspiracy Stereotypes

Alongside traditional stereotypes, Janusz Kofta and Grzegorz Sędek proposed the concept of conspiracy stereotypes (Kofta and Sędek, 1999; Kofta, 2001). While a stereotype can be seen as a simplified individual image of a 'typical' member of a given community, a conspiracy stereotype constitutes a holistic representation of an entire ethnic or national outgroup as a coherent and intentional actor. Such representation is inherently negative and closely linked with beliefs characteristic of conspiracy theories (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2006). The outgroup is thus imagined as a hostile collective, attributed with power-seeking, deceitfulness, high levels of egoism, and a secret character of group behaviour (Kofta, 2001).

A conspiracy stereotype can be understood as a specific set of beliefs suggesting that an outgroup aims to dominate, subjugate, or deprive the ingroup of valued resources – and that it does so in a deceptive and covert manner. Although research in this field has typically focused on Jews, Germans, or Russians, the social climate that emerged after the outbreak of war in Ukraine created fertile ground for similar narratives directed at Ukrainians. In contexts of geopolitical insecurity and economic strain, individuals often experience a diminished sense of personal control, which in turn amplifies perceptions of the power and influence of other groups (Kay and Eibach, 2013).

Conspiracy stereotypes serve primarily an explanatory function: they allow individuals to make sense of complex political conflicts and locate responsibility in hostile 'others'. They tend to be activated in times of collective anxiety and uncertainty but also during electoral campaigns, when they serve as useful tools of political mobilisation (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2013). Following Michał Bilewicz and Grzegorz Sędek (2015), we argue that both individual traits and situational factors contribute to endorsing conspiracy stereotypes. In addition, these beliefs are activated by specific political contexts, such as electoral mobilisation or the desire to gain political capital in the future. Research indicates that an intense election campaign is one of the triggers for conspiracy stereotypes (Enders et al., 2021). An additional driver of such beliefs is disinformation campaigns, often described as components of hybrid warfare. Social media enables hostile states to destabilise domestic politics by amplifying conspiracy narratives. After Russia invaded Ukraine, such activity intensified in Poland, often drawing on historical grievances to erode Polish-Ukrainian solidarity and to discourage public support for refugees (Wrzosek, 2024).

Conspiratorial thinking is also empirically connected to populism (Castanho Silva, Vegetti and Littvay, 2017). Right-wing populists frequently construct national identity in opposition to ethnic minorities, foreign nations, or social groups deemed a threat to cultural integrity (Mutz, 2018). Immigration plays a central role in these narratives: migrants are portrayed as a source of danger, while responsibility for this danger is attributed to 'establishment' parties that support refugee admission. As such, both populism and right-wing self-identification are expected to foster endorsement of conspiracy stereotypes.

Research on individual differences confirms that right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) is a robust predictor of belief in conspiracy stereotypes. Individuals high in RWA perceive the world as threatening, value order and security, and show

heightened hostility towards outgroups. This disposition makes them more receptive to conspiracy narratives portraying outsiders as dangerous plotters. Indeed, studies demonstrate that RWA is closely linked with prejudice towards minorities, immigrants, or religious groups, and conspiracy stereotypes (e.g., about alleged Jewish or Muslim conspiracies) provide justification for such attitudes (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2015).

Social identity processes are also critical in this context (Eskelinen et al., 2022). Secure forms of attachment foster resilience and intergroup openness, whereas narcissistic forms promote antagonism. Collective narcissism, defined by an exaggerated sense of uniqueness and superiority of the ingroup with a strong need for external recognition of their special status, predisposes individuals to interpret outgroup actions as hostile conspiracies and correlates with prejudice towards outgroups with whom the ingroup shares historical conflicts (Golec de Zavala and Lantos, 2020). Another factor fostering belief in conspiracy stereotypes is the belief in unique in-group victimhood. This conviction – that one's own national or ethnic community is a distinctive victim of past or present injustices – renders perceived grievances central to group identity and frames intergroup relations in terms of ongoing antagonism and threat (Bar-Tal et al., 2009).

Methods

The study was conducted using the survey method (CAWI technique) within the Ariadna research panel on a nationwide random-quota sample of adult residents of Poland (N = 1,040) in November 2024, as part of the *Social Identity and Belief in Ethnic Stereotypes* project, co-financed by the Student Research Grants of the European City of Science 2024.[2] The sample was stratified to reflect the population distribution across four variables: gender, age, size of place of residence, and political preferences in the 2023 Polish parliamentary election. The study was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee for Scientific Research of the University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland (KEUS/O/5/10.2024). The research sample consisted of 560 women (53.9%) and 480 men (46.1%). The participants'

2 The project was carried out by a team composed of Sandra Malikowska (student) and Agata Olszanecka-Marmola (supervisor).

mean age was 48.21 years (SD = 16.38). Detailed sample characteristics, including sociodemographic variables and voting preferences, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample characteristics

Gender					
Women				Men	
560 (53.9%)				480 (46.1%)	
Age					
18–24	25–34	35–44	45–54	55–64	65+
87 (8.4%)	169 (16.3%)	215 (20.7%)	160 (15.4%)	166 (16.0%)	243 (23.4%)
Place of residence					
rural area	city up to 20,000 inhabitants	city between 20,001 and 100,000 inhabitants	city between 100,001 and 200,000 inhabitants	city above 200,000 inhabitants	
407 (39.1%)	137 (13.2%)	200 (19.2%)	90 (8.7%)	206 (19.8%)	
Education					
incomplete primary	primary	vocational	secondary	higher	
1 (0.1%)	36 (3.5%)	123 (11.9%)	446 (42.9%)	434 (41.7%)	
Financial situation					
I live very poorly	I live modestly	I live on an average level	I live well	I live very well	
33 (3.1%)	154 (14.8%)	569 (54.7%)	257 (24.7%)	27 (2.6%)	
Party preferences in 2023 parliamentary elections					
Law and Justice (PiS)				273 (26.2%)	
Civic Coalition (KO)				236 (22.7%)	
Third Way (TD)				112 (10.7%)	
Left				66 (6.4%)	
Confederation				55 (5.3%)	
other party				28 (2.7%)	
I did not vote				271 (26.1%)	

Source: own elaboration.

To assess the intensity of conspiracy stereotypes about Ukrainians, we employed two original items, with responses recorded on a five-point scale (1 = definitely not true; 5 = definitely true): (1) Job Theft Narrative measured by attitudes towards the statement: *Ukrainians are taking jobs and development opportunities away from Poles* [Polish: *Ukraińcy zabierają Polakom miejsca pracy i możliwości rozwoju*]. (2) Romantic Rivalry Narrative operationalised through respondents'

attitudes towards the statement: *Ukrainian women deprive Polish women of the opportunity to be in a relationship and start a family by entering into relationships with men from Poland* [Polish: *Ukrainki odbierają Polkom możliwość związania się i założenia rodziny, wchodząc w relacje z mężczyznami z Polski*].

Both statements, in the context of realistic group conflict theory, imply that the mass immigration of Ukrainians is not perceived as a consequence of war but rather as an intentional effort to deprive Poles of valuable resources, such as employment or family. They also exhibit features of conspiracy stereotypes, as they attribute to immigrants from Ukraine deliberate, deceitful, and hostile actions intended to harm Poles.

Party identification was assessed using feeling thermometers, where respondents rated six relevant political parties (Civic Platform, Confederation, The Left, Polish People's Party, Poland 2050, Law and Justice) on a scale from 0 to 100. Scores below 50 indicated negative feelings, a score of 50 represented neutrality, and scores above 50 reflected positive and favourable attitudes towards the party. This approach is widely used in research on party-voter relationships in both established and emerging democracies (Turner-Zwinkels et al., 2025; Gidron, Sheffer and Mor, 2022; Olszanecka-Marmola, 2020). In the study, we also included several variables reflecting different dimensions of social identity:

1) National identification: a Polish short 6-item version (Puchała and Bilewicz, 2023) of the national identification scale (Cameron, 2004; Bilewicz and Wójcik, 2010). The Cronbach's alpha for the measure reflects high internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.922$).
2) Collective narcissism scale (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009). The reliability analysis indicates high internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.916$).
3) Populism: a 3-item index that reflects people-centrism and anti-elitism ($\alpha = 0.723$) – two dimensions of populism indicated by Blassnig et al. (2019). In this study, we used the following statements: *a. Those in power should stay close to the people and understand their views and needs* [Polish: *Rządzący powinni być blisko ludu oraz znać ich poglądy i potrzeby*]. *b. The political elites are responsible for the country's problems because of the negative consequences of their decisions and actions* [Polish: *Elity polityczne są odpowiedzialne za problemy w państwie przez negatywne skutki swoich decyzji i działań*]. *c. The political elites do not understand the needs of the people* [Polish: *Elity polityczne nie rozumieją potrzeb ludu*] (Olszanecka-Marmola, Marmola and Jagoda, 2025).
4) Right-wing authoritarianism (RWA): a modified three-dimensional authoritarianism scale by Funke (2005) excluding reverse-coded items ($\alpha = 0.851$).

5) Xenophobia Scale (α = 0.877): a 4-item scale that measures the extent to which respondents perceive identity-cultural, material, and physical threats related to the presence of immigrants in their country (Jasińska-Kania and Skarżyńska, 2009)
6) Belief in unique in-group victimhood assessed with the statement: *No other nation suffered as much as Poles did* (Bilewicz et al., 2019).
7) Paranoid ideation measured with the statement: *Those who claim that powerful forces in the world are conspiring against Poland are quite right*.
8) Identification with the local community (α = 0.877): 4 community items of the Identification with All Humanity (IWAH) scale (McFarland, Webb and Brown, 2012) in Polish version (Hamer et al., 2020).
9) Religiosity (α = 0.902): a 4-item of the Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire (Plante and Boccaccini, 1997). In this study, we used the following statements: *a. I look to my faith as providing meaning and purpose in my life. b. I enjoy being around others who share my faith. c. I consider myself active in my faith or church. d. My faith impacts many of my decisions.*

We also asked the respondents to define their ideological self-identification on a 7-point scale (1 = extreme left; 7 = extreme right).

The main goal of the study was to examine how sociodemographic characteristics, political preferences, and party identification influence support for conspiracy stereotypes targeting the Ukrainian minority.

In this part of the study, we formulated the following hypotheses:

H1: Gender influences the intensity of conspiracy stereotypes about Ukrainians.
In the context of realistic group conflict theory, we assume that women are more inclined to endorse both the Job Theft Narrative and the Romantic Rivalry Narrative. Given the predominance of women among Ukrainian refugees, Polish women should feel intergroup threats more strongly, both in relation to labour market competition and in the sphere of romantic relationships.

H2: Age influences the intensity of conspiracy stereotypes about Ukrainians.
We expect that younger people should be more susceptible to conspiracy stereotypes, as they face greater uncertainty in competing for scarce resources such as jobs and romantic partners. Conversely, the lowest levels of support for the Job Theft and Romantic Rivalry Narratives are anticipated among the oldest respondents, who are usually retirees or individuals long settled in stable relationships.

H3: Education influences the intensity of conspiracy stereotypes about Ukrainians.
Prior research demonstrates that individuals with higher education are not only more open to others, including immigrants and refugees (Umansky, Weber and Lutz, 2025), but also display greater critical thinking abilities (Clouston et al., 2020) and higher levels of cognitive reflection, which reduce the susceptibility to conspiracy narratives (van Prooijen, 2017).

H4: Economic status influences the intensity of conspiracy stereotypes about Ukrainians.
We assume that economically disadvantaged groups should express higher support for conspiracy stereotypes, especially the Job Theft Narrative. Members of these groups are more likely to perceive migrants as direct competitors in the labour market and in access to resources such as social benefits and public assistance.

H5: Place of residence influences the intensity of conspiracy stereotypes about Ukrainians.
We expect that residents of rural areas and smaller cities should more frequently endorse anti-Ukrainian conspiracy narratives, especially the Job Theft Narrative. This stems from the specific conditions of these localities, where employment opportunities are limited. Statistical analyses confirm that rural areas have higher unemployment rates than urban centres (Statistics Poland, 2025).

H6: Intergroup contact influences the intensity of conspiracy stereotypes about Ukrainians.
In line with contact theory, both the frequency and quality of personal contact with members of a given community shape perceptions of the group as a whole. Positive contact reduces feelings of threat from outgroups and, consequently, diminishes stereotypical perceptions (Stephan and Stephan, 2000: 38). It may also mitigate the influence of conspiracy narratives circulating in the media.

H7: Party preferences influence the intensity of conspiracy stereotypes about Ukrainians.
We hypothesise that voters of parties promoting negative or conspiracy narratives about Ukrainians – particularly Law and Justice (PiS) and Confederation – show stronger support for anti-Ukrainian conspiracies than those who voted for parties forming Donald Tusk's governing coalition. This pattern is expected to apply to both the Job Theft and Romantic Rivalry Narratives.

In the correlational design, we also examined whether endorsement of conspiracy stereotypes about Ukrainians was associated with party identification and other dimensions of social identity. As noted earlier, party identification was measured using a 101-point feeling thermometer scale anchored at 0 = most negative and 100

= most positive, on which each respondent rated their feelings towards six parties (Law and Justice, Civic Coalition, Poland 2050, Polish People's Party, the Left, and Confederation). We hypothesised that identification with Confederation and Law and Justice – parties that have expressed negative attitudes towards immigrants, including those from Ukraine – would be positively correlated with conspiracy stereotypes. In addition, we conducted an extended correlational analysis incorporating variables representing different dimensions of social identity, including national identification, collective narcissism, belief in unique in-group victimhood, and local community identification. This enabled us to compare the relative strength of these associations with the Job Theft Narrative and the Romantic Rivalry Narrative.

Results

H1: Gender influences the intensity of conspiracy stereotypes about Ukrainians.
The independent samples t-test did not reveal significant differences between women and men in support for anti-Ukrainian conspiracies. On the Job Theft Narrative scale, women scored an average of 3.05 (SD = 1.18) and men 3.05 (SD = 1.14). For the Romantic Rivalry Narrative, the corresponding results were 2.70 (SD = 1.15) and 2.73 (SD = 1.13). Thus, H1 was not supported. Importantly, the in-depth analysis also did not confirm any significant differences between young women and young men in their support for conspiracy stereotypes, including the Romantic Rivalry Narrative.

H2: Age influences the intensity of conspiracy stereotypes about Ukrainians.
A one-way ANOVA confirmed H2 for the Job Theft Narrative [$F(5,1034) = 9.616$, $p < .001$]. Post-hoc analyses (Games–Howell) showed that the oldest age cohort supported this conspiracy stereotype significantly less ($M = 2.66$, $SD = 1.03$) than respondents aged 18–24 ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.18$), 25–34 ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.21$), 35–44 ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.25$), 45–54 ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 1.13$), and 55–64 ($M = 2.99$, $SD = 1.04$). No other significant intergroup differences were observed. Similar patterns appeared for the Romantic Rivalry Narrative, though the differences did not reach statistical significance.

H3: Education influences the intensity of conspiracy stereotypes about Ukrainians.
A one-way ANOVA confirmed that education affects support for both the Job Theft Narrative [$F(3,1035) = 12.151$, $p < .001$] and the Romantic Rivalry

Narrative [F(3,1035) = 8.067, p < .001]. Post-hoc Tukey HSD tests showed that respondents with higher education were significantly less likely to endorse anti-Ukrainian conspiracies than those with secondary or vocational education.

Table 2: Education level and support for anti-Ukrainian conspiracies

Education	Job Theft Narrative		Romantic Rivalry Narrative	
	M	SD	M	SD
primary	3.29	1.09	2.76	1.28
vocational	3.30	1.06	2.93	1.09
secondary	3.20	1.19	2.85	1.19
higher	2.80	1.13	2.52	1.05

Source: own elaboration.

H4: Economic status influences the intensity of conspiracy stereotypes about Ukrainians.
A one-way ANOVA confirmed that perceived economic situation affects the endorsement of both the Job Theft Narrative [F(4,1035) = 2.761, p = .027] and the Romantic Rivalry Narrative [F(4,1035) = 3.322, p = .010]. Follow-up analyses indicated that better-off respondents were less likely to agree with conspiracy stereotypes about Ukrainians.

Table 3: Financial situation and support for anti-Ukrainian conspiracies

Financial situation	Job Theft Narrative		Romantic Rivalry Narrative	
	M	SD	M	SD
I live very poorly	3.41	1.22	3.20	1.30
I live modestly	3.15	1.17	2.89	1.21
I live on an average level	3.09	1.16	2.71	1.09
I live well	2.87	1.13	2.59	1.17
I live very well	2.96	1.32	2.55	1.02

Source: own elaboration.

H5: Place of residence influences the intensity of conspiracy stereotypes about Ukrainians.
A one-way ANOVA did not show statistically significant differences between rural and urban residents in endorsement of conspiracy narratives. However, respondents living in rural areas and cities of up to 20,000 inhabitants displayed slightly higher agreement with both the Job Theft Narrative and the Romantic Rivalry Narrative.

Table 4: Place of residence and support for anti-Ukrainian conspiracies

Place of residence	Job Theft Narrative		Romantic Rivalry Narrative	
	M	SD	M	SD
rural area	3.11	1.10	2.74	1.12
city up to 20,000 inhabitants	3.23	1.15	2.92	1.05
city between 20,001 and 100,000 inhabitants	3.03	1.24	2.67	1.16
city between 100,001 and 200,000 inhabitants	2.91	1.09	2.53	1.11
city above 200,000 inhabitants	2.89	1.16	2.67	1.22

Source: own elaboration.

H6: Intergroup contact influences the intensity of conspiracy stereotypes about Ukrainians.
As we expected, personal contact with Ukrainians reduced endorsement of conspiracy stereotypes. An independent samples t-test confirmed that respondents reporting contact scored lower on the Job Theft Narrative (M = 3.00, SD = 1.21) than those without such contact [(M = 3.15, SD = 1.05), t(1038) = 2.049, p = .041]. A similar pattern emerged for the Romantic Rivalry Narrative: those with personal contact (M = 2.63, SD = 1.16) scored lower than those without [(M = 2.92, SD = 1.07), t(1038) = 3.941, p < .001].

H7: Party preferences influence the intensity of conspiracy stereotypes about Ukrainians.
Party preferences proved to be the strongest determinant of support for conspiracy stereotypes relative to the other variables. A one-way ANOVA confirmed differences across electorates in endorsement of the Job Theft Narrative [F(5,762) = 12.487, p < .001]. Post-hoc analyses revealed that these differences followed the expected government–opposition cleavage: voters of Law and Justice (PiS) and Confederation were significantly more likely to perceive Ukrainians as a threat to the developmental opportunities and labour market position of Poles compared to the electorate of governing coalition parties.

Table 5: Party preferences and support for Job Theft Narrative

Formation	M	SD	post hoc (Games-Howell)
Law and Justice (PiS)	3.25	.98	PiS > KO, TD, Left
Civic Coalition (KO)	2.67	1.15	KO < PiS, Confederation
Third Way (TD)	2.87	1.21	TD < PiS, Confederation
Left	2.58	1.21	Left < PiS, Confederation
Confederation	3.60	1.11	Confederation > KO, TD, Left
other formation	3.01	1.17	

Source: own elaboration.

Significant differences also emerged for the Romantic Rivalry Narrative [$F(5,762) = 8.799$, $p < .001$], with PiS and Confederation supporters again showing higher support for this conspiracy stereotype than Civic Coalition and Left voters. These results indicate that political preferences are closely tied to endorsement of anti-Ukrainian conspiracy narratives.

Table 6: Party preferences and support for Romantic Rivalry Narrative

Formation	M	SD	post hoc (Games-Howell)
Law and Justice (PiS)	2.94	.97	PiS > KO, TD, Left
Civic Coalition (KO)	2.44	1.12	KO < PiS, Confederation
Third Way (TD)	2.53	1.15	TD < PiS
Left	2.27	1.07	Left < PiS, Confederation
Confederation	3.01	1.28	Confederation > KO, Left
other formation	2.72	1.12	

Source: own elaboration.

We also examined the relationship between party identification and support for conspiracy stereotypes targeting Ukrainians using a Spearman's rank-order correlation. The analysis confirmed that identification with Confederation – a party whose politicians most frequently reproduce anti-Ukrainian narratives – was significantly associated with both the Job Theft Narrative ($\rho = .310$) and the Romantic Rivalry Narrative ($\rho = .275$). Positive but weaker correlations between identification with Law and Justice (PiS) and the two stereotypes were also observed. Once again, the findings indicate that perceptions of Ukrainian migrants largely reflect the government–opposition cleavage. Identification with Civic Coalition was negatively correlated with endorsement of both the Job Theft Narrative ($\rho = -.307$) and the Romantic Rivalry Narrative

(ρ = –.243). Similar, though weaker, negative correlations were recorded for identification with other parties of the ruling coalition – the Left, Poland 2050, and the Polish People's Party.

Table 7: Correlations between party identification and anti-Ukrainian Conspiracies

Party identification	Job Theft Narrative	Romantic Rivalry Narrative
Law and Justice (PiS)	.213***	.189***
Civic Coalition (KO)	–.307***	–.243***
Poland 2050	–.191***	–.169***
Polish People's Party (PSL)	–.082**	–.079**
Left	–.257***	–.208***
Confederation	.310***	.275***

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001. Source: own elaboration.

Table 8: Correlations between independent variables and anti-Ukrainian Conspiracies

Variables	Job Theft Narrative	Romantic Rivalry Narrative
National identification	.124***	.142***
Collective narcissism	.417***	.421***
Populism	.094***	–.006
RWA	.270***	.298***
Xenophobia	.675***	.486***
Belief in unique in-group victimhood	.385***	.414***
Paranoid ideation	.468***	.422***
Identification with the local community	.021	.074**
Religiosity	.280***	.269***
Ideology	.261***	.240***

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001. Source: own elaboration.

To place the strength of party identification in a broader context, we incorporated into the analysis a range of other variables that previous research has linked to belief in conspiracy theories (Pilch et al., 2023). The results showed that identification with Confederation was more strongly associated with both the Job Theft Narrative and the Romantic Rivalry Narrative than national identification, populism, right-wing authoritarianism, religiosity, or ideology. Stronger associations

with anti-Ukrainian conspiracies were observed only for xenophobia, paranoid ideation, collective narcissism, and belief in unique in-group victimhood – all of which are recognised in the literature as powerful individual-level predictors of prejudice and conspiratorial thinking.

Discussion

Intergroup conspiracy stereotypes serve to delegitimise an outgroup by portraying it as deliberately depriving the ingroup of valuable resources or exercising illegitimate domination. Such narratives are disseminated not only by troll farms and individual social media users but also strategically employed by politicians and political parties. Political actors, in particular, exploit conspiracies and conspiracy stereotypes to present themselves as defenders of 'ordinary citizens' while consolidating and mobilising their electoral base.

In Poland, research on the determinants of belief in conspiracy stereotypes has focused mainly on Jews, Germans, and Russians, while relatively little attention has been paid to Ukrainians. Therefore, this chapter aimed to identify the characteristics of individuals who endorse statements suggesting that Ukrainians deprive Poles of scarce resources. We operationalised this through two narratives: the Job Theft Narrative and the Romantic Rivalry Narrative.

In our study, we tested sociodemographic, political, and psychological variables. Our findings show that, among sociodemographic variables, education and material situation played a significant role. Better-educated and economically advantaged respondents were less likely to endorse conspiracy stereotypes. Contrary to a study by Piotr Długosz and Dominika Izdebska-Długosz (2024), which suggested that young women oppose the admission of Ukrainian refugees due to fears of labour market and marital competition, our research did not confirm such effects. Gender and other basic sociodemographic factors proved less important than party preferences. The strongest endorsement of anti-Ukrainian conspiracies was found among supporters of Confederation and Law and Justice. While the position of Confederation's voters is consistent with the long-standing anti-refugee stance of this party, Law and Justice initially framed assistance to Ukraine as a matter of solidarity but later adopted a more sceptical rhetoric, reflecting both shifting public opinion and competition with Confederation.

Party identification, measured with feeling thermometers, also emerged as a significant correlate of conspiracy stereotypes. Respondents identifying strongly with right-wing parties (Confederation, Law and Justice) were more inclined to accept both the Job Theft Narrative and the Romantic Rivalry Narrative, whereas those closer to liberal and centrist parties showed weaker endorsement. Given our correlational design, we cannot determine whether party identification drives belief in conspiracies or whether individuals predisposed to conspiratorial thinking gravitate towards particular parties. This leaves open the question of whether political elites merely mirror preexisting attitudes or actively radicalise their electorate by amplifying anti-Ukrainian narratives.

Interestingly, identification with Confederation correlated more strongly with anti-Ukrainian conspiracy stereotypes than variables typically considered robust predictors of general conspiracy mentality and belief in specific conspiracy theories, such as religiosity, national identification, or right-wing authoritarianism. Only xenophobia, paranoid ideation, collective narcissism, and belief in unique in-group victimhood demonstrated stronger associations with anti-Ukrainian conspiracies. The latter two constructs, however, are based on a sense of exceptional injustice and harm suffered by the ingroup. Individuals who strongly identified with their national group and simultaneously believed that Poland was uniquely victimised in international relations were more likely to believe in conspiracy stereotypes about Ukrainians. Such narratives reinforce the 'us vs. them' dichotomy and simultaneously facilitate the legitimisation of conspiracy theories that frame Ukrainians as existential threats.

Future analyses in the context of conspiracy stereotypes about Ukrainians should expand the focus to other individual psychological variables, such as anxiety, need for cognitive closure, or sense of control. It is also worth exploring how populist communication and social media reinforce the susceptibility to conspiracy stereotypes. Discourse analysis and experimental designs testing narrative framing (e.g., community-oriented vs. threat-oriented messages) could shed further light on factors influencing belief in conspiracy stereotypes.

Finally, our findings carry broader social implications. The spread of conspiracy stereotypes targeting Ukrainians not only exacerbates xenophobic attitudes but also undermines intergroup relations and public support for humanitarian assistance. By fuelling 'us vs. them' thinking, politicians hinder the social integration of refugees from Ukraine. Thus, conspiracy theories serve not only a cognitive but also a political and identity-building function – becoming powerful tools for polarisation and division.

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THE SLOVENIAN CONSPIRACY THEORIST: AN ANALYSIS OF NATIONAL SURVEY RESULTS

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Slovenia, a small post-socialist state situated at the crossroads of Central and Southeastern Europe, provides an interesting case for the study of conspiratorial worldviews. The country's relatively short democratic history, persistent mistrust in political elites and political institutions, and polarised media landscape create fertile conditions for the spread of conspiratorial thinking. Yet systematic empirical research into the personality of the conspiracy theorist remains rather limited. The article seeks to address this gap by presenting the results of a national survey conducted in Slovenia, with the central aim of answering the main research question: Who is the person that can be labelled a conspiracy theorist in the Slovenian societal context? The analysis finds that belief in conspiracy theories varies most strongly by education, religion, and age rather than gender or urban–rural differences. Higher education consistently reduces conspiracy belief, Catholics show greater support than atheists, and Generation X is most prone to the Covid-19 bioweapon theory. Gender differences are minimal, except that older women are more likely to believe in the 5G conspiracy theory. Urban–rural divides are small, though Ljubljana residents are less prone to anti-vax and bioweapons conspiracies. Voter participation also correlates with lower support for Covid-19 and anti-vax conspiracies.

Key words: conspiracy theorist; Slovenia; political orientation; demographics; Covid19.

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Introduction

In recent years, scholarly interest in conspiracy theories has intensified, reflecting their growing visibility and influence within contemporary societies. Conspiracy theories are commonly defined as explanatory narratives that attribute significant social or political events to the secret actions of powerful groups pursuing hidden agendas (Douglas et al., 2019). While such beliefs have historically circulated on the fringes of political culture, recent studies demonstrate that they are now firmly embedded within mainstream discourse, shaping attitudes towards institutions, science, and public policy (van Prooijen and Douglas, 2018). Slovenia, a small post-socialist state situated at the crossroads of Central and Southeastern Europe, provides a particularly revealing case for the study of conspiratorial worldviews. The country's relatively short democratic history, persistent mistrust in political elites and political institutions, and polarised media landscape create fertile conditions for the spread of conspiratorial thinking. Yet systematic empirical research into the personality of the conspiracy theorist remains rather limited.

This article seeks to address this gap by presenting the results of a national survey conducted in Slovenia, with the central aim of answering the main research question: Who is the person that can be labelled a conspiracy theorist in the Slovenian societal context? The research does not treat conspiracy theorists as a homogenous or monolithic group, but rather as a heterogeneous category shaped by intersecting demographic, socio-economic, and attitudinal variables. By situating the Slovenian case within broader comparative research, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of conspiracy belief as a global yet locally embedded phenomenon.

The importance of such inquiry lies in the multiple consequences that conspiracy theories exert on democratic life and social cohesion. Empirical research has consistently shown that conspiracy beliefs are associated with lower institutional trust, increased political cynicism, and reduced compliance with public health measures (Imhoff and Lamberty, 2020; Jolley and Paterson, 2020). In Slovenia, these effects became particularly salient during the COVID-19 pandemic, when opposition to vaccination campaigns, the spread of 5G-related fears, and claims about global elites intersected with broader dissatisfaction towards the political establishment. Understanding the socio-demographic and attitudinal profile of conspiracy believers is thus not merely an academic exercise but a crucial step towards designing evidence-based interventions that strengthen democratic resilience against misinformation.

From a theoretical perspective, this study draws on several interrelated strands of literature. Research on the 'conspiracy mentality' (Imhoff and Bruder, 2014) highlights the psychological predisposition to interpret events as the result of hidden plots, irrespective of the specific content of a given conspiracy theory. Sociological approaches, meanwhile, emphasise the role of social trust, cultural cleavages, and historical legacies in shaping the plausibility of conspiratorial claims (Butter and Knight, 2020). By combining these perspectives, the Slovenian case enables us to test established theoretical assumptions while also identifying particularities rooted in the country's unique historical and political trajectory.

The structure of this article is as follows. The next section reviews the relevant theoretical framework, focusing on individual demographic factors that may influence susceptibility to belief in conspiracy theories, followed by an overview of the survey methodology and data collection process. The empirical section then presents key findings regarding the demographic, socio-economic, and ideological correlates of conspiracy belief in Slovenia. Finally, the discussion reflects on the implications of these findings both for the Slovenian context and for the broader scholarly debate on conspiracy theories. Through this analysis, the figure of the 'Slovenian conspiracy theorist' will emerge not as a caricature but as a complex social actor, whose beliefs are embedded in broader dynamics of trust, identity, and power.

Literature Review

The following section offers an overview of the most recent research on the relationship between demographic factors and belief in conspiracy theories. As the reviewed literature demonstrates, studies on how individual demographic factors influence the susceptibility to belief in conspiracy theories have yielded mixed results. This may be due to the different social context of the countries under investigation, spanning from Asia and Europe to the US, as well as variations in research approaches, particularly the conspiracy-related statements used to assess the degree of support for conspiracy theories among the population.

Gender

A common stereotype portrays a typical conspiracy theorist as an 'unwashed, middle-aged white male' (Uscinski and Parent, 2014). However, empirical findings

on the relationship between gender and belief in conspiracy theories are inconsistent. Some studies suggest that men are more likely than women to endorse conspiracy beliefs (Galliford and Furnham, 2017), including specific ones about COVID-19 (Cassese, Farhard and Miller, 2020), while others report the opposite (Popoli and Longus, 2021), conclude with mixed findings (Enders et al., 2024; Kukovič, Pope, Dewell-Gentry and Haček, 2024) or find no significant correlation between gender and belief in conspiracy theories (Jolley and Douglas, 2014; Goertzel, 1994). These mixed results suggest that the relationship between gender and belief in conspiracy theories may vary depending on the specific content of the conspiracy theory. For instance, men are significantly more likely to endorse conspiracy theories related to feminism and LGBTQ+ (Marchlewska, Cichocka, Lozowski, Gorska and Winiewski, 2019), as well as the previously mentioned COVID-19 conspiracy theories (Cassese, Farhard and Miller, 2020).

Age

Conclusions regarding whether a typical conspiracy theorist is a middle-aged male appear to be more consistent with respect to age than they are with respect to gender. While some studies find no significant correlation between age and belief in conspiracy theories, other reveals that young people are generally more likely to support conspiracy theories (Galliford and Furnham, 2017), including those related to COVID-19 (Uscinski et al., 2020; Duplaga, 2020). One possible explanation is that young people are more likely to endorse conspiracy theories as they are more frequently exposed to them due to higher levels of social media use (Galliford and Furnham, 2017), or due to their less affluent position within society in social, political and economic terms versus their older peers (Enders et al., 2024).

Income

One highly consistent finding across studies is that income is negatively correlated with conspiracy thinking, meaning that individuals with higher incomes are less likely to endorse conspiracy theories and vice versa (Kukovič, Pope, Dewell-Gentry and Haček, 2024; Smallpage, Drochon, Uscinski and Klofstad, 2020). According to some studies, this may be linked with feelings of marginalisation, anomia, and helplessness among those with lower income status, as higher income levels often correlate with greater security, material comfort, and a sense of personal success (Uscinski et al., 2020; Enders et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, not all studies confirm this relationship. A recent study by Sato et al. (2024), using Japan as a case study, revealed key findings that contrast with those reported in Western contexts. Notably, they found that higher income,

wealth, and regular employment were, at least in Japan, associated with higher endorsement of conspiracy beliefs. However, as the authors emphasise, further research is needed to provide an explanation for this unique finding.

Education

Previous research has identified education level as one of the key demographic predictors of belief in conspiracy theories. Multiple studies indicate that individuals with higher levels of education are less likely to believe in conspiracy theories compared to those with lower levels of education (Douglas, Sutton, Callan, Dawtry and Harvey, 2016; Mancosu, Vassallo and Vezzoni, 2017; Enders et al., 2024). In exploring why this relationship emerges, Van Prooijen (2017) confirmed that education increases individuals' sense of control over their lives, thereby decreasing feelings of powerlessness. This is important because people are particularly susceptible to conspiracy theories when they feel powerless (Wardawy-Dudziak, 2024). Education also negatively predicts a tendency to accept overly simplistic explanations for complex events – a relationship that is mediated by analytic thinking skills – which, in turn reduces belief in conspiracy theories (Van Prooijen, 2017). Although the author did not establish a causal link between education and belief in conspiracy theories, the findings suggest that education may equip individuals with a set of cognitive skills that help them resist conspiracy theories (Douglas et al., 2019).

However, not all research has confirmed this relationship (Uscinski et al., 2020; Goertzel, 1994), and some studies have even reported contrasting findings (Galliford and Furnham, 2017). These inconsistencies may be due, in part, to certain limitations – such as the restricted generalisability of some findings.

Political Orientation

Various studies suggest that individuals at the political extremes – whether on the far left or far right – are more likely to endorse conspiracy theories, particularly those targeting other-minded groups. Extremist thinking, whether left- or right-wing, tends to rely on rigid, clear-cut worldviews grounded in concrete axioms, which makes it easier to assign meaning to social and political events (Pilch, Turska-Kawa, Wardawy, Olszanecka-Marmola and Smolkowska-Jedo, 2023). Van Prooijen et al. (2015) investigated this phenomenon through four studies (one in the US and three in the Netherlands). Their findings indicate that belief in conspiracy theories is significantly higher among individuals at both ends of the political spectrum, while those with moderate political views tend to endorse such theories less frequently. Smallpage et al. (2020) confirmed that relationship

in Poland, Argentina, Portugal, and Italy, but not in Sweden, Great Britain, and Germany. Other studies confirmed the relationship between extreme right-wing identification and belief in conspiracy theories (Mancosu, Vassallo and Vezzoni, 2017; Galliford and Furnham, 2017).

At the same time, it would be reasonable to assume that the level of support for a given conspiracy theory on the extreme left or right end of the political spectrum depends on the content of the specific theory, particularly when the conspiracy theory targets representatives of the opposing side or emphasises malevolent intentions directed at one's in-group (Marmola and Olszanecka-Marmola, 2024). Individuals on the far left may be more likely to endorse conspiracy theories related to the profit-driven capitalist system, such as COVID-19 conspiracy theories claiming that the virus was intentionally developed by Big Pharma (Šteger, 2024), whereas individuals on the far right may be more inclined to support theories concerning climate change or immigration, such as the conspiracy theory about Muslims replacing the Christian population with Islam, the so-called Eurabia conspiracy theory (Bergmann, 2021).

Nonetheless, those findings and assumptions raise further questions about the underlying political dynamics within countries (Smallpage, Drochon, Uscinski and Klofstad, 2020), including in countries within the European Union.

Religiosity

The relationship between religiosity and endorsement of conspiracy theories is not straightforward (Jasinskaja-Lahti and Jetten, 2019). It remains ambiguous due to religious heterogeneity, variation in cultural contexts, and differences in research approaches (Turska-Kawa and Galica, 2024). Empirical research on the topic has yielded mixed results. For instance, a study in Italy found a positive and significant association between religiosity and belief in conspiracy theories (Mancosu, Vassallo and Vezzoni, 2017), which is similar to our previous research on the case of Slovenia (Kukovič, Pope, Dewell-Gentry and Haček, 2024) and a study in the US, where the authors examined the relationship between religiosity and conspiracy theories about COVID-19 (Uscinski et al., 2020). These findings may reflect a shared tendency in both religiosity and belief in conspiracy theories to attribute unexplained phenomena to invisible forces that allegedly secretly shape people's lives (Oliver and Wood, 2014). Interestingly, our previous research revealed quite important differences among religious groups within the European Union in their support for a specific but religiously neutral conspiracy theory – namely that viruses have been produced in government laboratories to

control our freedom. The lowest level of support was observed among Protestants (12.7%), while the highest was found among Orthodox Christians (48.2%) (Kukovič, Pope, Dewell-Gentry and Haček, 2024).

On the other hand, other research has failed to find significant differences in the degree of endorsement of conspiracy theories between believers and non-believers (Jasinskaja-Lahti and Jetten, 2019). Moreover, studies using complementary measures – such as strength of faith, religious beliefs, religious experience, and religious practice – to assess religiosity, as well as both a general conspiracy belief scale and a specific conspiracy theories scale to assess conspiracy belief, have found mixed results (Turska-Kawa and Galica, 2024).

Research Design

The data collection for the Slovenian opinion poll took place from October 2024 to February 2025. The approach and implementation of the survey followed the proven methodology used at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Ljubljana when conducting national opinion polls based on probability sampling. The survey was conducted as part of the research programme of the Centre for Public Opinion Research and Mass Communication. It was possible to participate in the survey either online (self-completion using an online questionnaire) or by post (self-completion using a paper questionnaire). The people on the sample list received a written invitation with a personalised code to take part in the online survey. The population consisted of all residents of the Republic of Slovenia aged 18 years or older. The selection of persons included in the sample was based on the Central Register of Residents of Slovenia as the initial list. Based on the sampling plan, the sample size was set at N = 2700 persons. After the first three weeks, 361 people (13.4% of the sample) had responded to the invitation to participate. All others received a repeated invitation to participate (1st reminder). The response rate after the first reminder was 12.4%. We reached a further 7.2% of the sample with the second reminder. After two and a half months of running the survey, a third (final) reminder was sent out, to which a further 103 respondents (3.8% of the sample) replied. At the end of the survey, 966 fully completed surveys were collected. We also included 26 partially completed surveys in the final database. The final size of the file thus amounts to 992 completed surveys. The calculation of the response rate, excluding the proportion of ineligible respondents,

gives a sample utilisation rate of 37%. In terms of the method of response, 89.6% of the SJM24/1 (2024) survey was completed online and 10.4% by post.

Analysis

We investigated the propensity of the general population towards conspiracy theories as a function of a few demographic factors, including gender, age, religious beliefs and education. The aim was to determine which segment of the population is most inclined towards the prevailing conspiracy theories, including the New World Order conspiracy theory, the Covid-19 bioweapons conspiracy theory, the anti-vax conspiracy theory and the 5G radiation conspiracy theory, and to determine the profile of the typical 'Slovenian conspiracy theorist'.

Table 1: Propensity towards conspiracy theories according to gender (in %)

Statements	Male				Female			
	up to 30 years	31 to 45 years	46 to 60 years	61 and over	up to 30 years	31 to 45 years	46 to 60 years	61 and over
A small secret group of people is responsible for making all major decisions in world politics	56.3				55.2			
	54.9	56.5	55.4	58.2	46.7	62.5	57.5	51.8
A group of scientists manipulates, fabricates or suppresses evidence to deceive the public	34.3				29.3			
	39.2	30.1	29.6	38.4	24.6	33.3	28.4	30.2
The coronavirus is the result of deliberate and concealed efforts of a government or organisation	35.8				35.4			
	25.3	30.1	42.2	41.4	32.8	42.1	38.6	29.8
The coronavirus was deliberately created and intentionally released from a laboratory	40.2				43.5			
	32.9	38.3	45.2	41.7	38.1	46.4	48.3	41.3
The introduction of the 5G network is responsible for the spread of the coronavirus	5.8				9.9			
	6.1	2.8	8.2	7.0	5.3	7.9	14.7	9.3
Evidence of the dangers of 5G radiation is being hidden from the public	16.5				35.9			
	19.8	9.1	15.4	21.3	28.1	26.0	38.1	44.4
Vaccine safety data are often fabricated	31.8				29.7			
	37.3	29.9	26.9	33.4	28.3	30.6	34.0	27.2

* The question was: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements on a scale from 1 (do not agree at all) to 5 (strongly agree)? The answers 'don't know' and 'have no opinion' were not included. Percentages show agreement (answers 4 agree and 5 totally agree) with individual statements within a gender and/or age group. N=992. Source: Slovenian Public Opinion Poll 2024/1, Centre for Public Opinion and Mass Communications Research, available at https://www.cjm.si/ul/SJM_24_1.pdf

We first tested the propensity of both sexes to believe four major conspiracy theories (Table 1). We can clearly see that the greatest inclination towards the conspiracy theories tested can be attributed to the New World Order conspiracy theory ('A small secret group of people is responsible for making all the important decisions in world politics'). 56.3% of men and 55.2% of women (strongly) agree with this conspiracy theory, with agreement being highest among older men and middle-aged women. The only conspiracy theory where one gender differs from the other is the 5G radiation conspiracy theory, as women (particularly those aged 45+) are statistically significantly more likely than men to believe that evidence of the dangers of 5G radiation is being hidden from the public. All other conspiracies tested in Table 1 revealed no statistically significant differences between the two genders, as the t-test for independent samples revealed no statistically significant differences in the means between the two groups compared. However, it is interesting to note that the Covid-19 bioweapon conspiracy theory still has significant support among both genders several years after the end of the global pandemic, as middle-aged men and middle-aged women in particular tend to believe that the coronavirus was deliberately created and deliberately released from a laboratory.

Table 2: Propensity towards conspiracy theories according to age (both genders together, in %)

Statement	Up to 30 years	31 to 45 years	46 to 60 years	61 and more
A small secret group of people is responsible for making all major decisions in world politics	51.8	59.2	56.9	55.0
The coronavirus is the result of deliberate and concealed efforts of a government or organisation	29.1	35.1	40.4	35.6
The coronavirus was deliberately created and intentionally released from a laboratory	35.4	42.0	46.9	41.6
Vaccine safety data are often fabricated	33.3	30.2	30.2	30.5

* The question was: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements on a scale from 1 (do not agree at all) to 5 (strongly agree)? The answers 'don't know' and 'have no opinion' were not included. Percentages show agreement (answers 4 agree and 5 totally agree) with individual statements within an individual group. N=992. Source: Slovenian Public Opinion Poll 2024/1, Centre for Public Opinion and Mass Communications Research, available at https://www.cjm.si/ul/SJM_24_1.pdf

The inclination of the different age groups towards the three most important conspiracy theories (Table 2) with the highest level of agreement is in line with the results of the previous section. While there are only minor differences

between age groups for the New World Order and the anti-vax conspiracy theories, the largest differences can be seen for the Covid-19 bioweapons conspiracy theory, where the lowest support was measured among the youngest age group (up to 30 years; Generation Z and Generation Alpha) and the highest support was found among the middle-aged population, especially the 46–60 age group, usually referred to as Generation X (people born between 1965 and 1980). The only conspiracy theory with an inclination of over 50% is the New World Order conspiracy theory.

Table 3: Propensity towards conspiracy theories according to education (in %)

Statement	Primary school or less	Vocational school	High school	Higher education, MA, PhD
A small secret group of people is responsible for making all major decisions in world politics	52.8	62.3	55.4	55.0
The coronavirus is the result of deliberate and concealed efforts of a government or organisation	39.6	47.4	44.1	25.3
The coronavirus was deliberately created and intentionally released from a laboratory	50.9	57.1	48.1	30.2
Vaccine safety data are often fabricated	50.0	37.6	33.2	23.1

* The question was: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements on a scale from 1 (do not agree at all) to 5 (strongly agree)? The answers 'don't know' and 'have no opinion' were not included. Percentages show agreement (answers 4 agree and 5 totally agree) with individual statements within an individual group. N=992. Source: Slovenian Public Opinion Poll 2024/1, Centre for Public Opinion and Mass Communications Research, available at https://www.cjm.si/ul/SJM_24_1.pdf

The next demographic factor we tested for propensity towards the three prevailing conspiracy theories was education. We divided the population into four different groups according to the level of formal education acquired, namely primary school or less, vocational school, high school and higher education or more (Table 3). There are statistically significant differences between the different groups, as the higher the level of education acquired, the lower the tendency towards the conspiracy theories tested. The largest differences can be observed for the anti-vax and Covid-19 bioweapons conspiracy theories, with much smaller differences between the groups concerning the New World Order conspiracy theory.

Table 4: Propensity towards conspiracy theories according to place of residence (in %)

Statement	Rural areas	Small urban settlements	Larger urban settlements	Towns with more than 10.000 inhabitants	Ljubljana
A small secret group of people is responsible for making all major decisions in world politics	58.8	54.2	51.7	59.7	54.5
The coronavirus is the result of deliberate and concealed efforts of a government or organisation	37.4	36.4	36.6	37.4	25.5
The coronavirus was deliberately created and intentionally released from a laboratory	44.9	40.6	41.7	45.8	32.7
Vaccine safety data are often fabricated	29.8	33.2	28.3	36.5	23.3

* The question was: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements on a scale from 1 (do not agree at all) to 5 (strongly agree)? The answers 'don't know' and 'have no opinion' were not included. Percentages show agreement (answers 4 agree and 5 totally agree) with individual statements within an individual group. N=992. Source: Slovenian Public Opinion Poll 2024/1, Centre for Public Opinion and Mass Communications Research, available at https://www.cjm.si/ul/SJM_24_1.pdf

We expected that the propensity for believing the three prevailing conspiracy theories would be greater in rural areas than in urban areas, as the level of education is generally higher in urban areas (Table 4). We found that there are only very small statistically significant differences between rural areas, smaller towns and even larger Slovenian cities with several tens of thousands of inhabitants in terms of the inclination towards the three most frequently tested conspiracy theories. However, once we also tested the inhabitants of the capital, which is by far the largest Slovenian city (Ljubljana), the propensity to believe the anti-vax and Covid-19 bioweapons conspiracy theories decreased significantly, while there was basically no significant difference in the New World Order conspiracy theory.

Table 5: Propensity towards conspiracy theories according to place of employment (in %)

Statement	Public sector	Private sector
A small secret group of people is responsible for making all major decisions in world politics	56.7	57.8
The coronavirus is the result of deliberate and concealed efforts of a government or organisation	36.7	34.6
The coronavirus was deliberately created and intentionally released from a laboratory	41.1	40.6
Vaccine safety data are often fabricated	27.2	29.7

* The question was: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements on a scale from 1 (do not agree at all) to 5 (strongly agree)? The answers 'don't know' and 'have no opinion' were not included. Percentages show agreement (answers 4 agree and 5 totally agree) with individual statements within an individual group. N=992. Source: Slovenian Public Opinion Poll 2024/1, Centre for Public Opinion and Mass Communications Research, available at https://www.cjm.si/ul/SJM_24_1.pdf

There was virtually no statistically significant difference in the propensity for the three predominant conspiracy theories in relation to place of employment (Table 5), as both people employed in the public and private sector show very similar and surprisingly high levels of propensity for the New World Order conspiracy theory (namely 56.7% in the public sector and 57.8% in the private sector), and a less significant propensity for the anti-vax and Covid-19 bio-weapons conspiracy theories.

Table 6: Propensity towards conspiracy theories according to religious beliefs (in %)

Statement	Atheists	Catholics
A small secret group of people is responsible for making all major decisions in world politics	51.0	57.4
The coronavirus is the result of deliberate and concealed efforts of a government or organisation	29.3	38.0
The coronavirus was deliberately created and intentionally released from a laboratory	33.8	44.9
Vaccine safety data are often fabricated	27.2	31.1

* The question was: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements on a scale from 1 (do not agree at all) to 5 (strongly agree)? The answers 'don't know' and 'have no opinion' were not included. Percentages show agreement (answers 4 agree and 5 totally agree) with individual statements within an individual group. N=992. Source: Slovenian Public Opinion Poll 2024/1, Centre for Public Opinion and Mass Communications Research, available at https://www.cjm.si/ul/SJM_24_1.pdf

The situation is different when discussing the tendency for the three predominant conspiracy theories in connection with religious beliefs (Table 6). It should be noted that the respondents self-reported their individual religious beliefs, and we only tested two large groups, namely self-identified Catholics and self-identified atheists. What we can observe in Table 6 is a clear statistically significant difference between the two groups when we tested the Covid-19 bioweapons conspiracy theory, and a slightly less significant (but still noticeable) difference when we discussed the anti-vax and New World Order conspiracy theories. In all three cases, people who describe themselves as Catholics showed a stronger inclination towards conspiracy theories than atheists.

Table 7: Propensity towards conspiracy theories according to 2022 parliamentary voter turnout (in % inside each individual (yes/no) group)

Statement	Yes, I have participated	No, I have not participated
A small secret group of people is responsible for making all major decisions in world politics	55.2	60.2
The coronavirus is the result of deliberate and concealed efforts of a government or organisation	32.9	45.4
The coronavirus was deliberately created and intentionally released from a laboratory	38.8	52.2
Vaccine safety data are often fabricated	26.3	42.9

* The question was: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements on a scale from 1 (do not agree at all) to 5 (strongly agree)? The answers 'don't know' and 'have no opinion' were not included. Percentages show agreement (answers 4 agree and 5 totally agree) with individual statements within an individual group. N=992. Source: Slovenian Public Opinion Poll 2024/1, Centre for Public Opinion and Mass Communications Research, available at https://www.cjm.si/ul/SJM_24_1.pdf

Data analysis using a t-test for independent samples showed that the groups of voters and non-voters (Table 7) differed in their level of support for certain conspiracy theories, particularly in relation to the Covid-19 bioweapons and anti-vax conspiracy theories.

For the statement that a small secret group of people is responsible for making all important decisions in world politics, the difference between the two groups was not statistically significant ($p = 0.158$). This means that voter turnout is not significantly related to the tendency to agree with this statement – both groups express a similar level of agreement. For the statement that the coronavirus is the result of a deliberate and covert action by a government or organisation,

the results showed a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.001$). The average level of agreement was lower among voters than among non-voters (difference = –0.423). The same applies to the statement that the coronavirus was deliberately created and deliberately released from a laboratory, where voters expressed lower agreement ($p < 0.001$, difference = –0.443) than non-voters. There was also a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.001$, difference = –0.458) between the two groups on the statement that vaccine safety data is largely falsified, with voters expressing significantly lower agreement than non-voters. Overall, the results suggest that voter turnout is not associated with the propensity towards the New World Order conspiracy theory but is associated with a lower propensity towards the Covid-19 bioweapons and anti-vax conspiracy theories.

Table 8: Propensity towards conspiracy theories among voters according to their electoral choice (in %)

Statement	Center-left	Center-right	Others
A small secret group of people is responsible for making all major decisions in world politics	53.1	55.8	70.2
The coronavirus is the result of deliberate and concealed efforts of a government or organisation	31.8	31.4	51.1
The coronavirus was deliberately created and intentionally released from a laboratory	38.0	33.1	60.4
Vaccine safety data are often fabricated	26.8	21.6	37.5

* The question was: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements on a scale from 1 (do not agree at all) to 5 (strongly agree)? The answers 'don't know' and 'have no opinion' were not included. Percentages show agreement (answers 4 agree and 5 totally agree) with individual statements within an individual group. N=992. Source: Slovenian Public Opinion Poll 2024/1, Centre for Public Opinion and Mass Communications Research, available at https://www.cjm.si/ul/SJM_24_1.pdf

If we focus our analysis (Table 8) only on the group of voters (i.e., only those who voted in the April 2022 general election), and divide them according to their voting decision,[2] we can clearly see that there is no statistically significant

2 We divided voters into a centre-left group (voters that cast their votes for the Freedom Movement, The Left, Social Democrats, Alenka Bratušek Party, List of Marjan Šarec, Vesna, and Pirate Party), centre-right group (voters that cast their votes for the Slovenian Democratic Party, New Slovenia Christian Democrats, Lets Connect Slovenia (Povežimo Slovenijo), Our country Party of Aleksandra Pivec, and Slovenian National Party) and others group (all others, mostly very small political parties).

difference between the two groups (centre-left party voters and centre-right party voters) when it comes to their inclination towards the three conspiracy theories tested. However, there is a statistically significant difference with the group of the other parties, which shows a much stronger inclination towards all three tested conspiracy theories. However, it should be noted that only very small political parties with modest support belong to this group, with one exception. Namely, the political party Resni.ca, which was founded during the Covid-19 pandemic in December 2020 as an anti-systemic and conspiracy-oriented political party and was able to obtain almost 3% of the vote in the 2022 parliamentary elections.

We also asked the respondents whether they believe that the political system allows them to have any influence on the government's decision-making processes. The results show that the feeling of political powerlessness (the belief that one has very little or no say in decision-making) is strongly associated with agreement with the New World Order conspiracy theory, but not also with the Covid-19 bioweapons and anti-vax conspiracy theories. The claim that a small secret group of people is responsible for making all important decisions in world politics is directly related to the feeling that the political system is closed and inaccessible. People who feel that they have no influence on the functioning of government are more susceptible to the idea that there is a hidden elite that makes all the important decisions. This connection is understandable to some extent, as a feeling of powerlessness can indeed reinforce the impression that decision-making processes are secretive or even abused and manipulated. Conspiracy theories related to the coronavirus pandemic also have a political dimension, but are often based on medical, scientific or technological interpretations of events. The propensity for these claims may (also) depend more on general attitudes towards science, healthcare and vaccination than on a sense of political influence.

Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that individuals who perceive themselves as politically powerless are, on average, more likely to endorse conspiracy theories. Specifically, they are more inclined to support the New World Order theory and the claim that the coronavirus was the result of a deliberate and covert action by governments or organisations. However, no statistically significant differences were observed between politically powerless individuals and those who perceive some

degree of influence when it comes to the Covid-19 bioweapons and anti-vaccination conspiracy theories. This suggests that perceptions of political powerlessness shape belief in conspiracy theories unevenly, depending on the specific narrative.

Gender differences were minimal, with the sole exception of the 5G radiation conspiracy theory, where women – particularly those over 45 – were significantly more likely than men to believe that evidence of health risks is being concealed from the public. Notably, the Covid-19 bioweapon conspiracy theory continues to attract considerable support across genders even years after the pandemic, especially among middle-aged men and women who believe the virus was deliberately engineered and released. These findings align with prior research indicating that susceptibility to conspiracy theories depends heavily on the content of the specific theory.

Age-based differences were relatively small for the New World Order and anti-vaccination theories but more pronounced for the Covid-19 bioweapons theory, with the support lowest among Generations Z and Alpha and highest among Generation X. Education emerged as a strong predictor: higher educational attainment was consistently associated with lower belief in conspiracy theories. This effect was most pronounced for the anti-vaccination and Covid-19 bioweapons theories, while smaller differences were observed for the New World Order theory. These results are consistent with prior studies, which similarly show that higher education reduces susceptibility to conspiratorial thinking (Douglas et al., 2016; Mancosu et al., 2017; Enders et al., 2024).

Contrary to expectations, geographic differences were modest. Only small statistical differences were found between rural areas, small towns, and larger Slovenian cities, though residents of Ljubljana showed significantly lower support for both the anti-vaccination and Covid-19 bioweapons theories. Religious affiliation, however, proved more consequential: Catholics were consistently more inclined towards conspiracy theories than atheists, with statistically significant differences for the Covid-19 bioweapons theory and smaller yet notable differences for the anti-vaccination and New World Order theories.

Finally, voting behaviour was also a differentiating factor. Independent samples t-tests revealed that voters and non-voters diverged in their support for certain theories, particularly the Covid-19 bioweapons and anti-vaccination conspiracies. While voter turnout was unrelated to belief in the New World Order theory, it was associated with a significantly lower propensity towards the Covid-19 bioweapons and anti-vaccination narratives.

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VIRALITY WITHOUT ADHESION: HOW TIE STRENGTH SHAPES THE SPREAD OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES ON X

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This study investigates the role of social tie strength in the diffusion of political conspiracy theories on the social media platform X (formerly Twitter). By analysing 74 million interactions related to Polish politics between April 2021 and October 2022, the research aims to identify the relationship between tie strength and the spread of conspiracy narratives compared to other political content. The study also examined which social ties are activated during dissemination spikes of conspiracy theories. The findings based on Bayesian proportion tests reveal that weak ties, particularly retweets and quotations, are the primary conduits for spreading conspiracy content, whereas replies show a more diverse distribution. Conspiracy content is spread less through close-knit, frequently interacting accounts and more through casual or single-interaction accounts compared to non-conspiracy political content. During dissemination spikes, weak-tie retweets, fan account interactions, and one-time contributors drive the increase in conspiracy narratives, whereas moderate and strong ties show no significant changes. The results suggest that conspiracy theories are broadcast rather than debated on X, with limited engagement from strong and moderate ties. Furthermore, the presence of conspiracy narratives in political discourse, despite temporary surges, remained constant, suggesting that the diffusion process is limited. However, these findings highlight the challenges posed by the spread of conspiracy beliefs through weak social ties on social media platforms, potentially normalising fringe ideas.

Key words: conspiracy theories; platform X; politics; Poland; interactions.

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Introduction

According to the Eurobarometer Report (European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, 2025), the proportion of Europeans who believe that 'Viruses have been produced in government laboratories to control our freedom' rose from 28% in 2021 to 35% in 2024. Similarly, the proportion of Europeans who think that 'The cure for cancer exists but is hidden from the public by commercial interests' increased from 26% to 34%. Although studies do not agree on whether the percentage of people who believe in conspiracy theories is increasing, it is undeniable that some conspiracy beliefs are shared by a significant portion of the population in various countries (Heft and Buehling, 2022; Uscinski et al., 2022). This can have far-reaching political implications. In democratic systems, where political power is tied to the electorate's decisions, the spread of conspiracy theories can significantly influence political decisions. For instance, a party whose electorate largely consists of climate change deniers may hesitate or deliberately delay implementing necessary environmental policies (Uscinski, 2020; Uscinski et al., 2017). Some leaders use conspiracy theories to set themselves apart from the rest and build a support base. Conspiracy beliefs also affect political activities. On the one hand, by fostering distrust in the political system, they decrease political engagement (Uscinski, 2020) and prosocial behaviours (van der Linden, 2015). On the other hand, they can mobilise people to dangerous actions, such as when a man who believed in the Pizzagate theory entered a pizzeria armed and fired several shots, fortunately injuring no one. He suspected that the pizzeria was connected to a paedophile ring and human trafficking (Metaxas and Finn, 2017). A far more dangerous event was the attack on the Capitol in January 2021. Fuelled by suspicions of fraud in the 2020 U.S. presidential election, it resulted in the death of five persons, and numerous injuries.

Before a conspiracy theory can become part of a person's belief system, it must first be communicated (DiFonzo, 2019). This communication is crucial in the process of adopting and altering beliefs (Centola, 2015; Rogers, 2003). In this study, we explore how conspiracy theories are disseminated on the Polish X (formerly Twitter) by employing the theory of weak and strong ties (Granovetter, 1973). The spread of conspiracy theories depends on social networks in which individuals are connected through various types of social ties. Strong ties, characterised by close, trust-based relationships, reinforce shared beliefs within close-knit groups, fostering a sense of belonging while heightening vulnerability to groupthink and

confirmation bias. Conversely, weak ties, which are more distant social connections, enable exposure to new information, expand individuals' perspectives, and serve as entry points for fringe ideas. Although Granovetter's 'strength of weak ties' theory suggests that weak ties promote societal trust by connecting individuals to diverse networks, they can also serve as conduits for misinformation, introducing conspiracy narratives to new audiences (Greve et al., 2022; Moffitt et al., 2021; Xu and Sasahara, 2022).

The strength of ties has implications for the social diffusion of beliefs (Centola, 2015). Weak ties are particularly crucial for gaining awareness of new ideas, playing a vital role in the knowledge stage of the diffusion process, in which individuals first encounter novel concepts (Rogers, 2003). While weak ties suffice for transmitting information (simple contagion), they fall short in altering beliefs, especially when such changes entail risks or costs. This is evident in the context of conspiracy theories, as these theories are often mocked, deemed pathological, and their proponents are labelled deviants (Uscinski, 2020). Under these circumstances, strong ties, marked by greater trust between individuals, prove more effective than weak ties. As Rogers (2003: 337) observed, 'Certainly, the influence potential of network ties with an individual's intimate friends is stronger than the opportunity for influence with an individual's weak ties'. This is crucial at the persuasion stage of the innovation decision process (Rogers, 2003), when individuals become more psychologically engaged with new ideas and seek social validation to confirm that their beliefs align with their environment. What is important is not multiple exposures but exposure to multiple sources, a phenomenon known as complex contagion (Centola and Macy, 2007)2007. It is noteworthy that adding new connections (creating weak ties) may not only be inefficient but also counter efficient. For instance, Bail (2018) discovered that exposing individuals to opposing political views did not moderate their beliefs but made them even more extreme. In complex contagions, it matters whether the source is trustworthy (Goldberg and Stein, 2018).

Conspiracy theories are typically examined from a psychological standpoint, focusing on cognitive, motivational, personality, and psychopathological factors (see Douglas et al., 2019; Enders et al., 2023; Goreis and Voracek, 2019; Pilch et al., 2023). However, to our knowledge, there has been limited focus on how these theories are disseminated. The first research question explores the crucial issue of how conspiracy theories spread through different types of social connections: *RQ1. What is the relationship between social tie strength and the diffusion patterns of political conspiracy narratives on X, and how does that relationship differ from that of*

other political content? By examining the strength of the social ties involved in this dissemination, we can discern whether conspiracy theories display unique spreading patterns compared to other content on the X platform. The second research question investigates the specific phenomenon of dissemination spikes observed in the rapid spread of conspiracy theories: *RQ2. Which social ties (considering their strength) are activated during dissemination spikes of conspiracy narratives?* By identifying which social ties are activated during these spikes, we can pinpoint the key structural sources of sudden increases in the volume of conspiracy narratives.

Defining Conspiracy Theories

Our research aims to understand how conspiracy theories (CTs) spread through social media, and for this reason, a distinction must be made. What one can observe in textual communications – such as X/Twitter or other social media – are different manifestations of CTs. Some of them can be expressions of support or purposeful dissemination, but others – even though they might use language typical of CTs – can criticise or ridicule them. Considering both phenomena as manifestations of potential CT transmission can lead to many false positives. That is why, following previous research, we decided to focus on statements indicating involvement in CTs, which we define as CT narratives. We distinguished four main criteria for identifying such communications (Matuszewski and Rams-Ługowski, 2025, 72):

1) Statements about belief in a conspiracy involving people in power or a secret group controlling the economy/politics/society, such as 5G, chemtrails, the Flat Earth theory, climate denialism, politicians being paid by foreign governments, COVID not existing.
2) Statements that imply the author shares beliefs produced by existing conspiracy theories.
3) Events being explained by conspiracies and sinister intentions, such as doctors being paid off to hide the truth about a fake pandemic for profit.
4) Questioning mainstream interpretations and providing alternative conspiracy explanations with a low probability.

If any of these criteria are met, but the case raises doubts, we consider four auxiliary criteria related to the form of argumentation.

1) Stating strong beliefs about important events that are contradictory, incoherent, or unverifiable.
2) Taking on the role of a victim of the mainstream narrative explaining important events.
3) Statements about important events pointing to evidence of resistance and self-sealing, such as believing that if NASA denies something, it is proof of a conspiracy.
4) Statements containing an extreme degree of suspicion, preventing belief in anything that does not fit the conspiracy theory.

The above approach is based on the research by Lewandowsky et al. (2015). Instead of challenging the substance of a given claim, we attempt to reconstruct the epistemic position behind a given argument.

Tie Strength and Misinformation

The role of weak and strong ties in the transmission of CTs remains largely unexplored. Therefore, while reviewing the current state of the art, we were forced to broaden our perspective to include different contemporary forms of misinformation, such as fake news. In our literature review, we identified three leading roles of tie strength that have been explored by researchers: the way it facilitates belief in each piece of information, how it encourages sharing of content on social media, and how it modifies susceptibility to changing one's mind.

The first research issue is the impact of tie strength on people's tendency to believe certain information. In their survey of social media users in Nigeria, Apuke and Omar (2020) found that tie strength was the strongest predictor of believing fake news related to COVID-19. In addition, the authors observed that the effect of tie strength was moderated by respondents being informed about fake news, which reduced their tendency to believe in misinformation. In their theoretical analysis, Spatan and Rich (2025) argue that tie strength is a key factor in the assimilation of misinformation, which is often overlooked in analyses focused on the epistemic quality of a given source. According to the authors, the core of this phenomenon is that strong ties serve as customary and normative points of reference. The problem emerges when people assume that if a source aligns with their values, it must also align with the truth. In other words, one can assume that if a given source allows us to better navigate the normative sphere, the same will be

true for the factual one. Moreover, if an issue is related to our identity, strong ties are usually the leading sources of information.

The role of tie strength appears to be slightly different in the study by Rossini and Kalogeropoulos (2025). Based on two surveys among Brazilian users of WhatsApp groups, they found that the more intense the communication on political topics in each group, the easier it is for users to believe the disinformation to which they are exposed. Moreover, the authors recognise that the greatest threat exists in groups characterised by weak ties – or, as they write, 'no ties' – as this is where disinformation appears most frequently. This is consistent with the general state of the literature, as shown by Spatan and Rich (2025) where weak ties, despite their transience, have a broad reach and are capable of virally transmitting less complex (mis)information. Another social platform, Facebook, was studied by Di Domenico et al. (2021) in a simulation experiment. The authors identified tie strength as merely a moderator of the primacy effect, namely that source-primacy increases suspicion if the information comes from a weak tie. Pareek and Gonclaves (2024), on the other hand, conducted an experiment in which participants were exposed to news headlines accompanied by simulated commentary from people with different tie strengths and political views relative to the participants. Statistical analysis of the results showed that regardless of the tie strength between a person exposed to headlines and the person commenting on them, it was shared political views that caused those headlines to be questioned. Nevertheless, based on open-ended questions asked to the participants after the experiment, the authors observed a general tendency to trust strong ties, while weak ties reinforced some people's opposing beliefs due to a lack of trust.

The second area of research we identified is the role of tie strength in the retransmission of misinformation on social media. Once again, Apuke and Omar (2020) consider strong ties with the source of information to be the most important predictor of sharing fake news. Rossini and Kalogeropoulos (2025) observed that respondents who were in groups consisting of strangers ('no ties') were more likely to share fake news than those who were in groups with stronger ties. Di Domenico et al. (2021) did not find a direct effect of tie strength but rather identified it as a moderating factor of the primacy effect: respondents were less likely to share fake news if it came from a weak tie source characterised by source-primacy. Meanwhile, Pareek and Gonclaves (2024) found no statistically significant relationship between tie strength and the propensity to share disinformation.

The last issue we distinguished is the role of tie strength in susceptibility to changing views. This is an important problem because it concerns not only the processes of acquiring views related to CT or disinformation in general but also the prospects of convincing them to adopt fact-based views. Suthaharan and Corlett (2023) conducted an experiment among individuals exhibiting paranoid personality traits and examined the role of social ties in the persistence of one's own views. The experiment showed that paranoid individuals reported significantly larger social networks than the rest of the participants, which made them feel more confident about their beliefs. Spatan and Rich (2025) came to a similar conclusion, writing that even if a person has reliable sources of information, their epistemic perspective will be very unstable if the views obtained from such sources do not agree with their strong-tie environment. Therefore, in their practical conclusions, the authors note that the authority of science alone is not enough and that actions addressing disinformation should target not 'special people' (i.e., influencers), but key nodes for a given tightly knit community. Although Rossini and Kalogeropoulos (2025) did not study the variability of views, they noted that in WhatsApp groups characterised by weak ties and in the case of intense political discussions, there is a greater likelihood of encountering both disinformation and its correction. These are therefore dynamic environments in terms of changing views, both for better and for worse. In contrast, Pareek and Gonclaves (2024) did not find a statistical effect of tie strength on the propensity to change views. At this level of analysis, only political agreement with the person criticising a given message proved to be a significant factor in changing one's views, and in the case of open-ended questions, respondents prioritised the epistemic authority of a given person over their tie strength.

Notably, none of the empirical studies cited above were conducted in the natural environment of interpersonal communication or on a specific social media network. These were either experiments or surveys. Moreover, in each case, tie strength was determined based on the respondents' reports, and there was no attempt to determine it more objectively. At the same time, tie strength was operationalised in different ways: as a quantitative variable resulting from a network analysis (Suthaharan and Corlett, 2023), a variable on a scale obtained from survey questions (Apuke and Omar, 2020; Pareek and Goncalves, 2024), the reported intensity of interaction with a given group on social media (Rossini and Kalogeropoulos, 2025), or as a binary variable determined through an interview (Di Domenico et al., 2021; Rossini and Kalogeropoulos, 2025). In this situation, we identify a significant research gap, which is addressed by our study based on

the objectified criteria of tie strength and data obtained from within a social media platform, namely, X.

In general, we can see the dual role of tie strength in the adoption, correction, and transmission of misinformation. The latter is more easily acquired when arriving through strong ties, but at the same time, they are most often encountered through weak ties. Similarly, efforts to counter misinformation should be carried out with a particular emphasis on strong ties, as this type of relationship most strongly influences changes in beliefs. Finally, when it comes to the transmission of misinformation, weak ties remain the most far-reaching interactions, capable of crossing different environments and providing simple confirmation of one's beliefs. Simultaneously, strong ties seem to play the most important role in assessing the truthfulness of a given piece or source of information. Even when tie strength is not a direct factor in such assessments, it is an important moderator of other epistemic factors, such as the primacy effect.

Methods

This study uses data collected on the Polish X between April 2021 and October 2022 via the Twitter REST API and the academictwitteR R package (Barrie and Ho, 2021). They consist of all tweets, retweets, replies, and quotations that contain the names and Twitter handles of the major Polish political parties (included in surveys), party leaders, members of the Polish Parliament (both chambers), Polish members of the European Parliament, the President of Poland, or mayors of 18 major cities (capitals of voivodeships – the highest-level administrative division, similar to a province in other countries). The dataset consisted of 1,461,964 unique accounts that formed 19,448,679 pairs and interacted 73,592,452 times. Each account was considered a node connected to another node by one of three types of directed edges: quotes, retweets, and replies.

A crucial part of this study was the detection of conspiracy narratives in textual data. Based on the algorithm described in Matuszewski and Rams-Ługowski (2025), we defined a list of keywords (unigrams, that is, single words, and skip-grams, that is, two words that may occur in close proximity to each other, for instance, *schwab* and *reset* in the sentence 'this is the beginning of the globalist reset planned by Klaus Schwab'). We then employed word embedding to identify

semantically similar words based on a cosine similarity above 0.7, supplemented by expert evaluation (excluding words clearly unrelated to conspiracy theories). This process was repeated three times, each iteration expanding the list from the previous step. Subsequently, we randomly sampled at least 10 tweets per keyword and manually verified whether they contained any conspiracy narratives. Some keywords appeared together, resulting in a sample size smaller than the simple multiplication of the number of keywords by ten. Ultimately, we manually verified 3,804 tweets. The Cohen's Kappa for the two annotators was 0.86, indicating a very high level of inter-coder agreement. Hand coding was used to calculate the probability of a tweet containing conspiracy narratives if it included one or more keywords. Based on the analysis of these probabilities using Bayesian proportion tests, we classified all keywords with a lower 95% Credible Interval for a probability above 0.5 as indicators of conspiracy narratives (N = 146). The classification metrics were as follows: F1-score = 0.88, precision = 0.79, and recall = 0.99.

Social ties, defined as unique pairs of accounts, were assessed based on the interaction duration, interaction asymmetry, and average weekly interaction frequency. We used empirical distributions for the duration and frequency of retweets, quotations, and replies. Relationship length was categorised as either short- or long-term, and frequency as infrequent or frequent, using the 90th percentile of interaction duration in weeks or the mean weekly number of interactions. However, specific rules were added for categorisation: social ties that interacted only once during the observation period were labelled as one-timers. For asymmetry, we used another approach because its scale ranges from 0 to 1 and is interpretable. Social ties with a score of 0.5 or below were deemed symmetric, those with scores between 0.5 and 0.8 (inclusive) were considered asymmetric, and scores above 0.8 were classified as unidirectional to distinguish this from asymmetry, where both accounts are engaged but disproportionately. Based on these criteria, social ties were divided into five levels: strong tie, moderate tie, weak tie, weak tie (fan), and weak tie (one-timer) (see Table 1 for details).

Table 1: Operationalisation of social ties is based on asymmetry, duration, and frequency of interactions between X accounts.

Asymmetry	Duration	Frequency	Description	Social tie
<= 0.5	> 90th percentile	> 90th percentile	symmetric long-term frequent	strong tie
<= 0.5	> 90th percentile	<= 90th percentile	symmetric long-term infrequent	strong tie
<= 0.5	<= 90th percentile	> 90th percentile	symmetric short-term frequent	strong tie
<= 0.5	<= 90th percentile	<= 90th percentile	symmetric short-term infrequent	moderate tie
(0.5, 0.8>	> 90th percentile	> 90th percentile	asymmetric long-term frequent	moderate tie
(0.5, 0.8>	> 90th percentile	<= 90th percentile	asymmetric long-term infrequent	moderate tie
(0.5, 0.8>	<= 90th percentile	> 90th percentile	asymmetric short-term frequent	moderate tie
(0.5, 0.8>	<= 90th percentile	<= 90th percentile	asymmetric short-term infrequent	moderate tie
> 0.8	> 90th percentile	> 90th percentile	unidirectional long-term frequent	weak tie (fan)
> 0.8	> 90th percentile	<= 90th percentile	unidirectional long-term infrequent	weak tie
> 0.8	<= 90th percentile	> 90th percentile	unidirectional short-term frequent	weak tie
> 0.8	<= 90th percentile	<= 90th percentile	unidirectional short-term infrequent	weak tie
---	---	1 time	unidirectional short-term one-timer	weak tie (one-time contributor)

Our research questions focused on the differences in proportions. To address these issues, we utilised Bayesian proportion tests with the brms package in R, which shows differences in proportions and the degree of certainty in the results. The second question also involved identifying instances where conspiracy content appears disproportionately more frequently, which we refer to as spikes. To detect these periods, we applied a changepoint detection algorithm to the weekly proportion of conspiracy narratives in all tweets over time. This method allowed us to identify an unspecified number of change points in both the mean and variance of time series. We used a relatively conservative Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) penalty to fine-tune the number of change points and set a minimum segment duration of two weeks to reduce the likelihood of capturing random fluctuations or short-term noise.

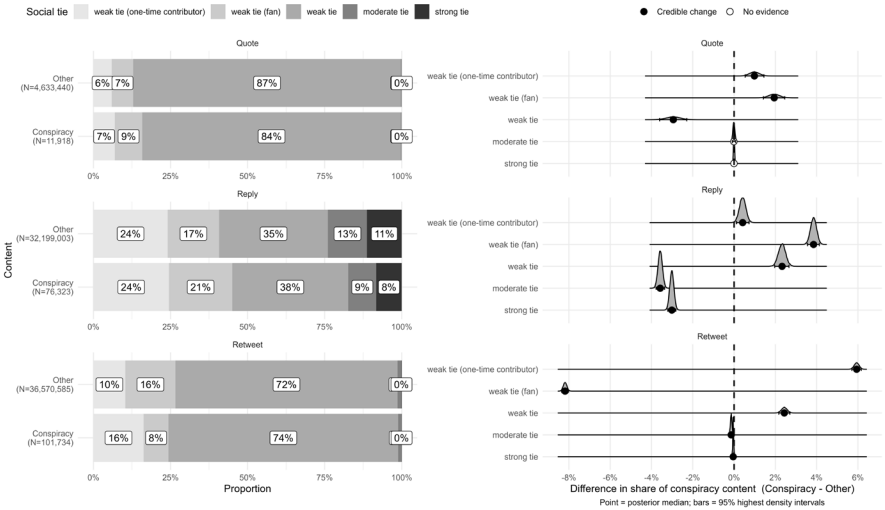
Results

Through which conspiracy ties do conspiracy theories spread?

Our first major finding is that the mode of contact – retweet, quote, or reply – shapes which social-tie strengths transmit conspiracy theories. Both quotations and retweets are spread predominantly via 'plain weak ties' (short- or long-term but infrequent connections), accounting for 84% of quotation transmissions and 74% of retweets. A total of 9% of quotations containing conspiracy narratives were transmitted by fans and 7% by one-time contributors. In the case of retweets, these proportions are slightly different. While the majority (74%) of conspiracy narratives are transmitted by plain weak ties, 16% are transmitted by one-time contributors and 8% by fans. By contrast, replies show a markedly different profile: only 38% of conspiracy replies come via weak ties, while replies among one-time contributors (24%) and fans (21%) rise sharply, and moderate and strong ties jointly account for 17% of transmissions. This picture is completed by the fact that most conspiracy narratives are transmitted by retweets (N = 101,734; 53.55%), followed by replies (N = 76,323; 40.18%) and quotations (N = 11,918; 6.27%), which makes weak tie retweets responsible for the dissemination of 36.4% of all political conspiracy content in the sample.

Next, we detected statistically significant differences in tie strength distributions when comparing conspiracy-laden versus non-conspiracy content. For quotations, conspiracy narratives are slightly more often spread by one-time contributors and fans (up 2 and 1 percentage points, respectively), balanced by a small decline in weak-tie transmission. Retweets of conspiracy content show a larger shift: they are more often shared by one-time contributors (16% vs. 10%) and weak ties (74% vs. 72%), but less often by fan accounts (8% vs. 16%). The pattern holds that strong and moderate ties remain negligible. Among replies, the share of conspiracy content decreases by 3 percentage points for strong ties and by 4 percentage points for moderate ties and increases by 4 percentage points for fans and by 3 percentage points for weak ties. Thus, conspiracy theories diffuse less through close-knit, frequent interlocutors and more through casual or single-interaction accounts.

Figure 1: Proportion of political content produced on the X platform through different types of social ties



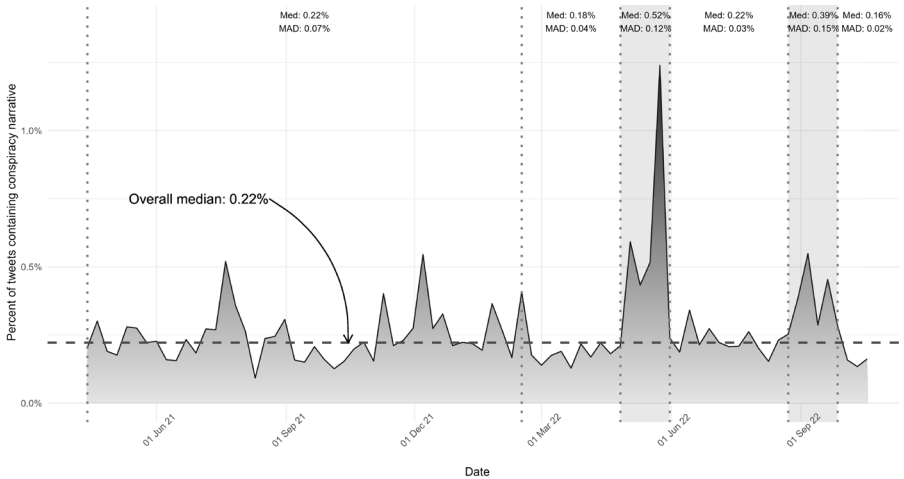
Notes: The left panel shows the percentage share of each type of social tie in the production of content, distinguishing between conspiracy-related and other political narratives. The right panel displays the posterior differences in the predicted proportions (Conspiracy – Other) for each contact type and level of social ties, estimated using a Bayesian model. The points represent posterior medians, and the horizontal bars indicate the 95% highest density intervals. The filled points denote credible differences.

What kind of social ties are engaged in the dissemination of conspiracy narratives during conspiracy dissemination spikes?

The changepoint detection algorithm detected two significant spikes in the number of disseminated conspiracy narratives: April 26–May 31, 2022, and August 23–September 27, 2022 (Figure 2). The first interval coincided with Prime Minister Morawiecki's visit to Chancellor Scholz in Berlin (26 April 2022), Gazprom's suspension of gas deliveries to Poland (27 April 2022), the transition

from a state of epidemic to a state of epidemic threat in Poland (16 May 2022), and Prime Minister Morawiecki and President Duda's attendance at the WEF summit in Davos (22–26 May 2022). The second spike followed events including the assassination of Darya Dugina (20 August 2022), Ukrainian Independence Day (24 August 2022), along with subsequent solidarity demonstrations in Poland, new visa and entry restrictions for Russian citizens, and the inauguration of the Baltic Pipe gas pipeline (27 September 2022).

Figure 2: Proportion of conspiracy narratives among all political tweets, over time



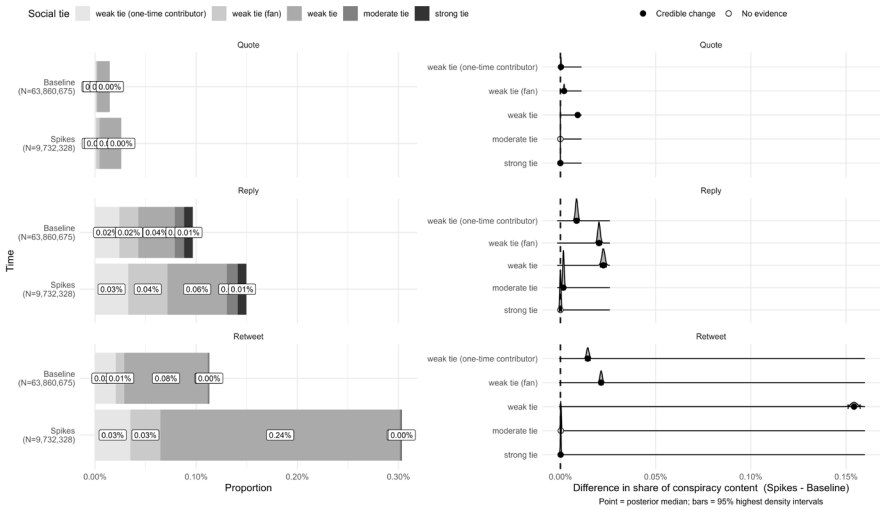
Notes: The grey-shaded areas indicate spike periods identified through changepoint detection. The vertical dotted lines mark the boundaries of the time segments detected by the changepoint algorithm. Summary statistics (Med = median; MAD = median absolute deviation) are provided for each segment.

To illustrate the problem in question, we used the proportion of conspiracy narratives among all publications on X and differentiated between quotations, retweets, and replies (see Figure 3).

During the two dissemination 'spikes' detected via changepoint analysis, conspiracy content among all political posts rose by 0.255 percentage points (pp) over the baseline. Weak-tie retweets drove 60.5% of that increase, rising from 0.08% to 0.24% of political content. In other words, weak ties during spikes disseminated 200% more retweets than they did in the baseline period. The remaining inflows during the spikes were much smaller. They came from replies

between weak ties (+0.026 pp), fan account replies (+0.0203 pp), one-time contributors' retweets (+0.0144 pp), fan account retweets (+0.014 pp), weak ties' quotations (+0.009 pp), and one-time contributors' replies (+0.009 pp). The size of all other inflows was less than 1.68% of the spike. The coefficients for them were above 0 within 95% credible intervals, but their statistical effect was nearly unnoticeable. Notably, moderate and strong ties showed no significant changes. These findings underscore that ephemeral, infrequent contacts – and accounts participating only once – are chiefly responsible for sudden increases in the volume of conspiracy narratives. A noticeable share of conspiracy content is disseminated by accounts that join discussions just to make a conspiracy-related statement and are never or almost never replied to. The other visible pattern is accounts that persistently retweet conspiracy content of selected accounts. The next pattern is that during spikes, there was an increase in accounts that retweeted conspiracy content or replied to accounts with conspiracy content just once and never tried to maintain the relationship. Such actions may be coordinated and/or paid activities aimed at quickly increasing the visibility of certain tweets. In summary, the disproportionate increase in conspiracy content on the X platform is associated with weak ties (including fan accounts and one-time contributors). These spikes are not associated with more profound discussions among moderate or strong ties. Accounts that formed moderate or strong ties produced a statistically equal share of conspiracy content during spikes and beyond.

Figure 3: Proportion of conspiracy-related content among political posts produced on X through different types of social ties, compared between periods of intensified conspiracy activity (spikes) and baseline periods.



Notes: The left panel shows the percentage share of each social tie type in the production of conspiracy content during both periods. The right panel presents the posterior differences in predicted proportions (Spikes – Baseline) for each contact type and level of social ties, estimated using a Bayesian model. The points represent posterior medians, and the horizontal bars indicate the 95% highest density intervals. The filled points denote credible differences.

Discussion

Our work expands the conspiracy theory literature by offering insights into the diffusion patterns of conspiracy theories, especially how the tie strength between X accounts is related to the transmission of political conspiracy narratives. On a conceptual and operational basis, we distinguished three different types of weak ties – fans, one-time contributors, and 'plain weak ties' – which was a significant improvement that allowed for detailed analyses of diffusion patterns.

We present four key findings. First, conspiracy narratives are spread through weak ties, but the mode of contact changes the transmission patterns. Quotations and retweets predominantly spread via 'plain weak ties' (84% and 74%, respectively), while replies reveal a more diverse distribution, with 'plain weak ties' accounting for only 38%. This means that conspiracy narratives are rarely discussed. Usually, they are simply passed on. This suggests that while conspiracy theories might spread on platforms like X, their discussion and development occur elsewhere.

Second, there are notable differences in the distribution of tie strengths between conspiracy and non-conspiracy content. For quotations and retweets, shifts were observed among weak tie categories, which accounted for nearly all transmissions. However, when it comes to replies, conspiracy content experiences a decline among strong and moderate ties, while there is an increase among fans and weak ties. This indicates that conspiracy content is less frequently discussed than other political content, and that strong and moderate ties do not disseminate conspiracy content as readily as they do other political topics. This may imply that sharing conspiracy content is perceived as a riskier or more costly behaviour (Centola and Macy, 2007) compared to discussing political topics free of conspiracy theories.

Third, a time series analysis showed that weak-tie retweets accounted for 60.5% of the increase during spikes in conspiracy dissemination. Smaller contributions were from replies between weak ties, fan account retweets and replies, one-time contributors' retweets, and weak ties' quotations. Moderate and strong ties showed no significant changes. This means that ephemeral, infrequent contacts, one-time contributors, and accounts that persistently retweet a conspiracy from one source were primarily responsible for the sudden increases.

Fourth, the spikes were not associated with deeper discussions among moderate or strong ties. Furthermore, conspiracy content did not "stick", in the sense that its share in political discussions permanently grew after surges. There were sudden spikes, but then the levels of conspiracy content returned to the baseline.

Our research corroborates existing studies indicating that weak social ties serve as primary channels for the dissemination of conspiracy content (Rossini and Kalogeropoulos, 2025). As theorised by Granovetter (1973), weak ties link the distant parts of a network. However, as suggested by Macy and Centola (2007) this may not be enough to change the behaviour of X users and make them discuss conspiracy theories more often. This corresponds with the analysis by

Spatan and Rich (2025), who emphasised the pivotal importance of the reliability of strong ties in the process of adopting conspiracy beliefs. However, it is important to consider further implications. Dow et al. (2021) hypothesised that conspiracy beliefs, when reinforced and spread within online communities, blur the distinction between fringe and mainstream beliefs, fostering the perception that such beliefs are more widespread than they actually are, thereby normalising them. Although we did not examine these perceptions, our analyses indicate no evidence of the adoption of these ideas online, as measured by an increase in the volume of such content. Over the 15 months of observations, and in line with other studies (Uscinski et al., 2022), we did not observe any systematic growth in conspiracy theories.

Next, we highlight the limited role of strong and moderate ties. Our analyses revealed that conspiracy theories were usually broadcast but not debated. On X, accounts discussed them significantly less often than the usual political content. This suggests that X is not a platform where conspiracy theorists engage in deep conversation. Moreover, the observed patterns suggest bot/farm activity or opportunistic one-off users. Such amplification by bots may lead to increased visibility and dissemination of conspiracy theories (Greve et al., 2022; Moffitt et al., 2021; Xu and Sasahara, 2022).

Our findings are constrained by the observational nature of the study, which prevents us from interpreting them as causal mechanisms. Additionally, our operationalisation of tie strength, which uses interaction frequency as a proxy, constrains the interpretation of the results. X is the sole sphere where individuals can interact, and our operationalisation does not account for other spheres. In other words, the strength of the ties is confined to interactions on X alone. For instance, two accounts might have interacted only once on X, but they could be colleagues who communicate daily offline. Another limitation arises from the time span of the data. Although we collected tweets over 15 months, this period may not be sufficient to capture long-term changes. Furthermore, while X is a significant platform for political communication, there are others, such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, each with distinct demographics and specific mechanisms for discussion, sharing and feedback. Future research could incorporate other platforms and countries and conduct longitudinal studies on the persistence of conspiracy networks.

The spread of conspiracy beliefs poses significant challenges to democratic societies, as evidenced by their impact on political decision-making, civic engagement,

and social cohesion. This study's findings underscore the critical role of weak social ties in disseminating conspiracy narratives on social media platforms such as X. Although X accounts significantly less frequently discuss such content than other political accounts, their constant presence in the public sphere may normalise such narratives. These trends are particularly troubling given the current political polarisation and array of global challenges, including climate change and global conflict, which require well-informed citizens and politicians who are neither swayed by nor captive to fringe ideas.

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SYNTHETIC REALITIES: AI-GENERATED DEEPFAKES AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES AS A CHALLENGE TO TRUST IN MODERN DEMOCRACIES

Kornelia BATKO[1]

This chapter explores the complex interplay between artificial intelligence (AI), deepfake technology, and the spread of conspiracy theories, highlighting their collective impact on democratic trust. The analysis conducted in the chapter on using synthetic reality (hyperrealistic images, audio and video files generated by artificial intelligence) to spread disinformation and conspiracy narratives has made it possible to identify threats and consequences for democratic societies. Based on the referenced cases of deepfake use in political and social contexts, the chapter discusses how these technology-based manipulations support the spread of conspiracy theories, thereby exacerbating social tensions, undermining public trust in democratic institutions, and disrupting political discourse. The chapter emphasises the need to develop proactive strategies to limit the spread of AI-powered conspiracy theories to protect trust in democracy and social resilience.

Key words: conspiracy theories; AI-generated content; synthetic realities; deepfakes; trust.

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Introduction

We live in an era where information is a valuable resource and tool for influencing others. Information is the foundation of democratic societies, and the line between true and false is becoming increasingly blurred. The development of artificial intelligence (AI) in recent years has affected many sectors of the economy, as well as our daily lives, bringing enormous benefits and improving the quality of life. However, with the evolution of AI, unprecedented challenges are also emerging. One of these challenges is synthetic reality, applications of artificial intelligence, with AI-generated content (Wang, 2023). Synthetic Realities (SR) can be defined as computer-generated and hyper realistic media content, especially deepfakes (George and George, 2023; Hynek et al., 2025). Deepfakes are audiovisual materials (images, audio and video recordings) produced using advanced generative artificial intelligence to imitate real people or events (Babaei et al., 2025). The fast development of machine learning has made deepfakes increasingly realistic and challenging to distinguish from reality (Sharma et al., 2025). In this way, a digital equivalent of a person can be created and used to produce fake multimedia content, including by placing digitally generated people in events that did not take place, or imitating the events themselves in a way that is difficult to distinguish from the authentic version. That kind of AI-generated content is created not only for entertainment but more often for shaping public opinion, influencing election results, or destabilising democratic institutions. Citizens can no longer reliably determine whether the information they encounter is true, which has profound implications for public trust. Thus, this technology spreads political misinformation, propaganda, and conspiracy theories. Synthetic content in the form of deepfakes, which reinforces conspiracy theories and undermines public trust, is a significant threat to the performance of modern democracies.

Conspiracy theories (CTs) are characterised as explanatory narratives regarding powerful entities conspiring covertly to achieve malevolent goals (Fortaleza, 2020; Motta, 2021). Although significant organisations could be accused of conspiracies the government and multinational businesses remain the most commonly implicated (Douglas et al., 2019). Accordingly, 'conspiracy beliefs' describes convictions regarding specific conspiracy theories (Pilch et al., 2023). Conspiracy theories have been part of political and social life for a long time. Historically, they have emerged during periods of uncertainty, serving as narratives through which individuals have attempted to explain complex events or

crises. While some conspiracy theories may be harmless or amusing, spreading harmful ones has been linked to political violence, public crises, and a decline in trust in democratic governance. In today's world, thanks to content generated by artificial intelligence, which is an effective medium for such narratives, they are becoming more convincing and difficult to refute.

The interaction between deepfakes and conspiracy theories is a huge problem, as deepfakes provide visual and audio 'evidence' to make conspiracy theories seem credible, even if they are fake. This chapter analyses the interaction between synthetic realities (deepfake technology), the spread of conspiracy theories, and the resulting challenges to trust in democracies. Examples of incidents involving deepfakes in various political contexts – from global conflicts, through Western countries (Europe and the US), to Poland – will be discussed to show how synthetic media can intensify social tensions, reinforce misinformation, and fuel conspiracy theories. To understand these relationships, two research questions were formulated:

- How do deepfakes increase the spread and impact of conspiracy theories in democratic societies?
- How do synthetic realities affect public trust and disrupt political discourse?

Based on a series of case studies and theoretical perspectives from political science, psychology, and information technology, this chapter argues that addressing the challenge of deepfakes and conspiracy theories requires a series of coordinated actions. Thus, the spread of conspiracy theories aided by synthetic realities risks creating a post-truth environment in which trust will be irreversibly damaged, and democracy itself may be endangered. This is particularly relevant today, as we face multiple crises: the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences, the war in Ukraine, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and a deepening migration crisis.

Theoretical Background

Conspiracy Theories

The phenomenon of conspiracy theories has been a part of human societies for centuries, explaining complex events by hypothesising the existence of covert, malevolent actions by powerful actors. A conspiracy theory can be defined as

'a secret arrangement between a small group of actors to usurp political or economic power, violate established rights, hide vital secrets, or illicitly cause widespread harm' (Boncu et al., 2022). According to Swami and Furnham (2014) 'conspiracy theory' usually refers to *a subset of false beliefs in which the ultimate cause of an event is believed to be due to a plot by multiple actors working together with a clear goal in mind, often unlawfully and in secret*. Uscinski et al. (2016) define conspiracy belief as *'an individual's belief in a specific conspiracy theory'.* Furthermore, they state that 'conspiratorial predispositions or thinking' can be defined as 'an individual's underlying propensity to view the world in conspiratorial terms'.

The concept of conspiracy theories frequently ascribes extraordinary capabilities to specific entities, such as planning, controlling others, and keeping secrets (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009). The three elements that are typically present in conspiracy theories are: Actors (usually said to be powerful elites, institutions, or secret organisations), Intentionality (the belief that actions are deliberate and hidden) and Secrecy (the assumption that the true motives are concealed from the public).

Van Prooijen and Douglas (2017) extend this definition by viewing conspiracy theories as cognitive narratives that help individuals make sense of a situation. It follows that such beliefs are increasingly likely to the extent that people experience uncertainty or a lack of control. This explains the spread of conspiracy theories in times of crisis in society, as such situations are perceived as uncontrollable and therefore cause considerable uncertainty and anxiety among citizens.

In the digital age, conspiracy theories have transformed into global narratives that spread rapidly via online platforms, creating a cascade effect. The democratisation of information production, combined with the rapid spread of digital communication, has meant that even marginal conspiracy theories can attract public attention within hours. Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) linked the cascade effect to group polarisation, which characterises a situation in which members of a decision-making group tend to adopt a more radical position in line with their pre-decision views. Thus, belief in conspiracy theories is often fuelled by group polarisation.

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube act as accelerators for conspiracy narratives, allowing the viral spread of emotionally charged content, rewarding user engagement through likes, shares, and subscriptions, which encourages sensationalism and misinformation, and removing

traditional gatekeepers (e.g., journalists, editors, moderators) who have historically filtered information. Due to all this, fake news spreads faster and more broadly than fact-based information, mainly because it elicits stronger emotional responses (Wrzosek, 2019). Conspiracy theories fit well into the digital environment because they often involve dramatic revelations, secret plots, and big money. Social media algorithms also support the reinforcement of fake content as they are designed to maximise engagement and inadvertently create filter bubbles and echo chambers, where users are repeatedly exposed to duplicate content and narratives. This further exacerbates polarisation and makes conspiracy beliefs more resistant to refutation. Moreover, social media has fundamentally changed how conspiracy theories are created and spread.

Synthetic Realities and Deepfakes

The definition of synthetic realities evolved from a narrow technological understanding to a broader socio-cultural concept focused on human relationships with AI-generated content. Some definitions emphasise the technological nature of synthetic realities. Lusquino Filho and Rocha define them as digital constructs or enhancements created using artificial intelligence techniques that use deep learning and data analysis algorithms to build a new 'reality' or narrative, regardless of whether they may mislead the audience (Filho and Rocha, n.d.). Other researchers noted the immersive nature of synthetic realities and their impact on user perception. Cardenuto et al. (2023) emphasise that synthetic realities have become a 'new wave' of human-technology interaction, in which the boundary between reality and artificiality becomes quite fluid. Subsequent approaches emphasise their application and the ambivalent potential of these tools – both creative and disinformative. Thus, Wang (2023) defines synthetic realities as products of the convergence of artificial intelligence, immersive media, and automation, which enable the creation of realistic virtual experiences, but at the same time open up space for manipulation, disinformation, and privacy violations. Finally, Flores (2025) added an ethical and communicative dimension to this concept, pointing out that synthetic realities redefine the concepts of authenticity, consent, and trust, becoming one of the key challenges for contemporary digital democracy. All kinds of hyper-realistic AI-generated content blur the boundaries between reality and fake, redefining the concepts of consent, authenticity, and trust in communication (Stroebel et al., 2023)

Unlike traditional images, films, or computer-generated images, which require considerable expertise and resources, synthetic reality is created using machine learning models capable of independently generating realistic images, sounds, and texts. A characteristic feature of synthetic reality is that it is realistic, which makes it so convincing that the recipient perceives it as authentic. For these reasons, synthetic reality can be seen as a potent persuasion, manipulation, and deception tool. The development of synthetic media is based on deep learning technologies, including neural networks such as GANs (Generative Adversarial Networks), VAEs (Variational Autoencoders), and diffusion models (Stroebel et al., 2023). Types of synthetic realities include:

- Synthetic images – extremely realistic photos of people, events, or places that do not exist (e.g., fake pictures of protests, fabricated evidence), often used in advertising, education, and design, but also for discrediting and manipulating politics.
- Synthetic video (deepfake video) – generated by artificial intelligence, which convincingly changes a person's face, voice, or movements, making them appear to say or do things they never did. Such realistic manipulations of faces and gestures in videos are often used for satirical or propaganda purposes.
- Synthetic audio – voice cloning, AI-generated speech that reproduces a person's unique vocal characteristics, imitating them in a virtually indistinguishable way, allowing the creation of speeches and statements that never took place.
- Virtual persons are completely artificial characters created by artificial intelligence and have a history of existence on the web.
- XR (Extended Reality) environments – including augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and mixed reality (MR), which combine the physical and digital worlds in real time.

These types of synthetic realities can be combined to create immersive narratives in which every aspect of the story – from text and images to dialogue and voices – is artificially constructed but appears authentic because it appeals to the human tendency to judge credibility based on visual and auditory stimuli.

The best-known and most widespread form of synthetic reality is deepfakes. The term was coined as a combination of the words 'deep learning' and 'fake', which reflects its essence – deep learning in the service of imitation (Odunlami and Banjo, 2025). Deepfake is defined as a product of using machine learning algorithms to create realistic but fake visual materials that can mislead viewers (Das et al., 2025). Most studies noted that deepfake is a form of AI- generated synthetic

media in the form of hyper-realistic images, recordings, and sounds simulating real people (Flores, 2025; Stroebel et al., 2023). Venema and Geradts (2020) focused on the legal and evidentiary aspects, recognising deepfakes as a digital manipulation of audiovisual material that challenges the justice system and the credibility of evidence. Taken together, these definitions present deepfakes as a technology with two faces; on the one hand, an innovative generative tool, and on the other, a potential source of misinformation, a crisis of trust, and threats to the integrity of information. While some applications of deepfakes are harmless – such as entertainment, education, or accessibility applications – their use for political manipulation poses a unique threat to democratic societies.

Deepfakes are exceptionally powerful because the visual signals they present, such as facial expressions and body language, trigger deeply ingrained trust mechanisms, and reinforcement through emotional resonance strengthens memory and belief in the content (Peng et al., 2025). They can therefore engage audiences at both the cognitive and emotional levels, which, combined with a convincing narrative, maximises their persuasive power (Oliullah and Murtuza, 2025). All this makes deepfakes the ideal driver for conspiracy theories, which rely on compelling narratives. By providing visual and audio 'evidence', they make conspiracy theories seem credible, as seeing and hearing something directly strongly influences the formation of beliefs, bypassing traditional scepticism and fact-checking mechanisms. Deepfakes reinforce conspiracy theories in several ways. Conspiracy theories often lack tangible evidence. Deepfakes can deliver this 'evidence', making even the most implausible claims seem authentic (e.g., a fake video showing a politician meeting with foreign secret agents can reinforce an existing narrative of betrayal). At the same time, they influence the rapid spread of conspiracy theories, as visual content is both easy to share and emotionally engaging. As mentioned, social media algorithms also contribute to this by making sensational deepfakes more visible and increasing their reach. On the other hand, the very existence of deepfakes can undermine trust in authentic evidence and allow politically or publicly engaged people to question real recordings and label them as AI-generated. This phenomenon is known as the liar's dividend (Schiff et al., 2025). Thus, synthetic reality can be considered a paradigm shift in the political landscape because it has become a powerful tool for political manipulation and conspiracy mobilisation. By creating convincing evidence, playing with people's senses, and appealing to their emotions, they blur the line between truth and fiction.

Trust and Distrust in Democratic Systems

For almost two decades, we have been witnessing a gradual but steady decline in trust in institutions in Europe (Palacios, 2025; Turska-Kawa, 2025). Trust in public institutions is defined as a cognitive-emotional relationship in which citizens attribute specific competence, intention, and predictability of actions to institutions (Hetherington, 2005). Institutional trust, therefore, presupposes a presumption of goodwill, the ability to act in the public interest, and responsibility for decisions made. A key factor differentiating the level of trust in democratic countries is the perception of the legitimacy of power – not only in a formal and legal sense, but above all in a functional and normative sense. The literature on the subject has repeatedly pointed out that trust in institutions is not a permanent category, but is dynamic in nature, subject to long-term fluctuations, rooted in civic experiences, and sensitive to political disturbances (Affairs and Perry, 2021; Didenko et al., 2020; Marien and Werner, 2019).

Disappointment with the effects of political and economic transformation and ongoing crises – from financial to health-related to military – creates a climate of permanent instability in which the erosion of trust is no longer a random phenomenon, but a systemic one. Multiple crises have contributed to the formation of societies full of uncertainty, fear, and, at the same time, distrust and frustration. All of these problems translate into growing levels of dissatisfaction in society and distrust of institutions. This distrust is fuelled by the poor condition of the entire social system, including the economy, healthcare, military, education, political system, etc. The situation is not improved by political discourse based increasingly on emotions, simplified narratives, manipulation, and even deliberate deconstruction of the concept of truth (Jacob and Milot-Poulin, 2024). In this context, the theory of political agency deserves special attention, in which trust becomes a function of perceived influence on the system. Trust grows if a citizen (or social leader) has a sense of agency. Where there is marginalisation, a lack of dialogue, and exclusion, mistrust arises.

All this, together with the erosion of the separation of powers, increasing polarisation, and the subordination of institutions to political interests, contributes to a deepening crisis of trust. In post-communist countries such as Poland, the issue of trust in institutions is particularly complex. A legacy of distrust of authority, learned political passivity, and deep polarisation of public life are the background and the cause of the observed deficit in the legitimacy of public authority. Therefore, excessive distrust of institutions is a source of disruption in the

functioning of society in a broad sense. If distrust of institutions is widespread, cooperation between individuals becomes complicated and social interactions can be disrupted.

All this pushes people to look for those 'responsible for the whole situation', for answers to why things are so bad. Many find answers in conspiracy theories, which offer a narrative that 'certain hidden groups in power' are to blame. Therefore, recent years, fraught with crises, provide fertile ground for the spread of conspiratorial narratives that offer simple explanations for difficult situations. This provides a sense of security and relief, based on the belief that those who believe in the conspiracy belong to a small group of people who see how the world really works (Adam-Troian et al., 2021; Gligorić et al., 2021).

Conspiracy theories, the dynamic development of information technology, and especially AI-generated content, including deepfakes, pose a serious challenge to trust. Social trust is the glue that holds democracy together, but for that trust to exist, citizens must believe that the information disseminated in public debate is true. When people decide that they cannot believe what they see or hear, a huge problem arises. Fabricated AI-generated content can lead to false beliefs and a feeling that all materials (even videos or audio recordings) may be fabricated. It can even undermine the justification for true beliefs. People will then begin to doubt authentic scientific evidence.

This can have irreversible consequences, including increasing distrust of the news media and delegitimising reliable journalism by associating it with potential falsification. This loss of faith in the media causes people to turn away from the primary source of information and seek information 'on their own', which in many cases pushes them into hermetic information bubbles where they are exposed to conspiracy theories.

What is more, conspiracy theories fuelled by deepfakes can intensify the already significant political and social polarisation. In many US, European, and Polish election campaigns, AI-generated content is used to discredit political opponents or provoke extreme emotions, which mobilise a party's electorate and exacerbate social divisions. Manipulation using deepfakes can influence election results, mobilise the electorate, discredit public figures, or even contribute to geopolitical tensions.

Deepfake technology used as a tool for political manipulation can also make polarised audiences more receptive to fabricated content that slanders the 'other side', while the victims of such attacks reject even justified criticism, calling it 'fake news'. The average citizen who receives conflicting information sinks into 'disbelief in everything', which translates into a lack of social engagement. Such civic apathy can also harm democracy, as it prevents rational debate and those in power from being held accountable. In other words, deepfakes and the disinformation associated with them destroy the common foundation of facts on which healthy public discourse is based and weaken the pillars of democracy – truth and trust – leading to a situation where society remains in permanent doubt. This leads to authentic information being alleged falsifications and rejected. In contrast, falsifications are accepted as probable facts, as long as they fit a particular narrative, causing the erosion of trust in public institutions. This also plays into the hands of the 'enemies of democracy', both internal radicals and external authoritarian regimes, creating ideal conditions for further manipulation and interference.

Materials And Methods

This chapter uses a qualitative research approach, combining case studies with critical content analysis, to understand how synthetic realities support the spread of conspiracy theories and influence social trust in democracies. Selected cases from 2019 to 2025 concerning the use of synthetic media in political contexts – global, European, and Polish – were analysed using media sources, fact-checking reports, and scientific publications. The research process involved identifying synthetic materials, studying their narrative and emotional context, and assessing their socio-political impact. The theoretical part was based on analysing political science, social psychology, and computer science literature. The chosen method ensured reliability and an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms of deepfake use in various political systems.

Results

To better understand how synthetic realities, especially deepfakes, support and perpetuate conspiracy theories, it is worth analysing specific cases in which fake digital materials have become 'evidence' for conspiracy narratives and affect political reality. This mechanism works in two ways: on the one hand, deepfakes can become a tool used to create seemingly credible content that reinforces conspiracy beliefs, but on the other hand, the very awareness of the existence of this technology fosters the emergence of theories about 'replaced' leaders, 'controlled' elites, and 'fake' events. Below are selected examples from recent years, covering various geographical contexts: the world (global cases), the United States, Europe, and Poland. Each case illustrates a different threat aspect – from information warfare, political provocations, and negative election campaigns to local incidents. This demonstrates that the problem of using synthetic realities in politics is multidimensional, and its implications can vary in scope.

Global examples: deepfakes as 'evidence' in theories about false leaders

Gabon (2019): the president's double (digital avatar)
Conspiracy theory: 'The president is dead/no longer in power, and the authorities are hiding this from the public'.
After the publication of a New Year's Eve speech video by the ailing President Ali Bongo, the opposition and part of the public considered it a deepfake. The material was probably authentic. Still, the belief that the government had used artificial intelligence to 'replace' the leader with his digital avatar reinforced the conspiracy narrative about the illegal maintenance of power and led to an attempted coup (Galston, 2020). Consequences of spreading this CT were increased distrust of institutions (in this case, the government), radicalisation of the opposition, and a real risk of destabilisation of the state. The very fact that part of society believed that the video was fake proves that in uncertain times marked by conflict, authoritarian rule, or populism, conspiracy theories about 'digitally generated' leaders can cause real social unrest and violence.

War in Ukraine (2022): Zelensky's capitulation
Conspiracy theory: 'The front-line war recordings are "staged" and all events are fake'.
Early on in Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the first high-profile case of a deepfake was used for propaganda purposes. It was a fake recording of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky calling for surrender that went viral worldwide, even on hacked Ukrainian television (Wakefield, 2022). The quality of this deepfake was poor (the character had an unnatural voice and stiff motions), so it was quickly exposed and removed from online platforms. Volodymyr Zelensky himself publicly denied the authenticity of the recording. But it still triggered a wave of suspicion about the authenticity of other materials from the front lines, suspecting them of being 'staged'. The consequences of this deepfake were the erosion of trust in information sources and society's susceptibility to narratives about 'Western manipulation'.

Examples from the USA: theories of 'election theft'

Deepfake audio with President Joe Biden (2024)
Conspiracy theory: 'Elections are controlled by technological fraud created by "hidden forces", and citizens' votes do not matter'.
A fake voice message was sent out *en masse* to thousands of voters in New Hampshire before the presidential primaries there. The automated message (robocall) played 'the voice of President Joe Biden' encouraging recipients to 'not vote in the upcoming election' (Matza, 2024). The voice did indeed sound like Biden, so recipients of the message could have been misled. And although the message was illogical, as Biden would be unlikely to discourage his own voters from voting, the mere shadow of doubt is enough to confuse. A mass robocall (reaching nearly 5000 voters) with a voice impersonating the president, discouraging people from voting, was immediately included in narratives about 'manipulation by the electoral elite'. This case showed that a computer-generated voice used to pretend to be a key public figure can be used to try to influence voter turnout and election results. The consequences include fuelling theories of 'stolen elections', increasing polarisation, and legitimising political violence.

Deepfakes during the 2024 presidential campaign in the USA
Due to its intense political polarisation and the importance of social media in public life, the US is particularly vulnerable to the threats posed by deepfakes. And although specific video manipulations targeting politicians had already appeared in previous years (Parkin, 2019.)., e.g., slowing down a recording of Nancy Pelosi to make her look drunk, it was really the 2024 presidential campaign that showed how widely available advanced AI tools for generating fake content would become (Bond, 2024).

Deepfakes and conspiracy theories about Kamala Harris
Conspiracy theory: 'Truth no longer exists, everything is manipulated'.

False claim #1: The Democratic presidential candidate caused an accident that left a 13-year-old girl paralysed and then fled the scene. Information appeared online that Kamala Harris had been accused of causing a car accident in 2011 in which she allegedly injured a teenager and fled the scene. Microsoft specialists discovered that a group called Storm-1516, linked to Russia, created a video, paid an actor to play the role of the alleged victim, and spread the information via a fake website of a non-existent TV station, KBSF-TV, based in San Francisco. The website was created shortly before the first article about the alleged traffic accident was published. The video circulated on social media, including on the X platform (formerly Twitter), with the hashtag #HitAndRunKamala, and was viewed over 2.7 million times.

False claim #2: Kamala Harris is a communist.
The Trump campaign released an AI-generated video showing Kamala Harris and her running mate Tim Walz appearing to pose for a selfie in front of a sign for Revolutionary Communists of America, a far-left group. The goal was not necessarily to create a realistic hoax but to provoke negative emotions among the electorate by associating Harris with communism. This was not an isolated case, as many deepfake memes on this topic were published. According to a DDIA report prepared for the BBC, posts linking Harris to communism gained significant popularity on the Internet after the presidential debate, in which Donald Trump called Kamala Harris and her father 'Marxists', and the term 'Marxist' became popular on social media. Google searches for 'Marxist' in the United States increased by 1,000% in 17 hours. In addition, Trump supporters posted a Russian Communist Party membership card online, allegedly belonging to Kamala Harris. BBC Verify determined that the photo of the membership card came from a website where fake Communist Party documents can be created. This is an example of a

propaganda tool that reinforces negative narratives, even if the audience knows the image is fake. On the other hand, after such a flood of AI-generated memes during the presidential campaign, Donald Trump also fell victim to conspiracy narratives. In response to the confusion surrounding the attempted assassination of Trump in 2024, theories emerged that the attack was a 'false flag', i.e., staged by Trump himself for political gain. The above examples show that in the US, synthetic realities are slowly becoming a common feature of election campaigns, being used both for campaign attacks and as a tool to sabotage the electoral process. Additionally, if an artificial recording can be created, it is also possible to convince one's supporters that inconvenient leaks (e.g., tapes or videos) are the result of intrigues by opponents. Following this narrative, one can question authentic materials and claim that they are fake to protect one's image or undermine the message of the opposing side. The consequences include the disintegration of the public sphere, radicalisation of supporters, polarisation of narratives, and the feeling that 'everything can be fake', leading to real scandals or evidence being ignored.

Europe: deepfakes and narratives of elite betrayal

Slovakia (2023): Šimečka recording

Conspiracy theory: 'Pro-European parties falsify elections and implement foreign interests (implied: Western)'.

During the Slovak parliamentary election campaign, a fake audio file emerged in which the leader of the pro-European party Progresívne Slovensko, Michal Šimečka, allegedly discusses election rigging (e.g., buying votes from Roma) with journalist Monika Tódová (Devine et al., 2024). The recording was published during the so-called election silence period (48 hours before the elections), so despite immediate denials by both sides of the authenticity of the recording, it legally limited the media's ability to respond quickly and refute its content. As a result, despite favourable polls for Šimečka and his party, the Smer party led by Robert Fico, which had a more pro-Russian and anti-Western rhetoric, won. Although there is no hard evidence that this recording 'made the difference' in the elections, it certainly reinforced existing societal narratives about corrupt pro-European politicians and elites' involvement in manipulating election results. It also impacted public trust, as such incidents fuel suspicion of democratic institutions, which deepens political polarisation and erodes confidence in the integrity of elections. In the media and analyses, this case has been cited as one of the first serious tests of the impact of generative technologies (AI/deepfake) on electoral processes in European democracies.

Western Europe (2025): European politicians as puppets of global elites

Conspiracy theory: 'Global elites ruling the world and Europe's subjugation to the United States'.
Disinformation campaigns in Europe increasingly use AI-generated materials (photos and videos) to 'prove' that European political leaders are insignificant and are just puppets in the hands of global elites. Such manipulations, among others, were concerned with Rishi Sunak, Emmanuel Macron, and Olaf Scholz, and were linked to the narrative that European politics is 'rigged' by invisible forces (Łabuz and Nehring, 2024). The most illustrative case occurred on August 18, 2025, when Donald Trump met with Volodymyr Zelensky and European leaders at the White House to discuss the chances of a peaceful end to the war in Ukraine. At that time, an AI-generated photo showing European leaders 'politely sitting' in the White House hallway as if they were humbly waiting for Trump was spread online (Irvine-Brown, 2025). This photo, generated by AI, was intended to ridicule and weaken the image of the EU and reinforce the narrative that European leaders are 'servants' of the US and do not have an independent political position.

Poland: fertile ground for conspiracy theories

Civic Platform spot with the voice of Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki (2023)
Conspiracy theory: 'Politicians are lying using new technologies, and voters have no chance of distinguishing truth from fake news'.
In the 2023 Polish parliamentary election campaign, the Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska[2]) published a spot using an artificially generated voice of then-Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki (Łabuz and Nehring, 2024). The spot featured original fragments of Morawiecki's statements, including those in the Sejm. The 'artificially generated voice' of the prime minister then read excerpts from emails allegedly written by Morawiecki about the difficulties of governing and conflicts with Zbigniew Ziobro, Minister of Justice and leader of the Suwerenna Polska party, a coalition partner of Law and Justice (the ruling party at

2 Polish political party fighting for power, led by Donald Tusk.

the time). It was intended to lend credibility to an ongoing email scandal and undermine the prime minister's credibility. And although the party clearly marked the material as AI-generated content, speculation immediately arose online that it was evidence of media manipulation or electoral fraud. The response to this was to generate 'retaliatory' content, this time with the voice of Donald Tusk, leader of the Civic Platform, intended to undermine the credibility of the opposition leader. The consequences are like those in the US, building the belief that all materials can be manipulated. Deepfake technology in Poland has become a tool of black propaganda, as fake photos of opposition MPs and leaders of opposition parties showing them in discreditable situations (parties, romances, gambling) are also being spread on the Internet, in closed groups and local media. Such 'face pasting' to insinuate scandals reinforces theories about the 'hidden corruption of the elites', which is intended to undermine the reputation of politicians and the parties they represent.

Overall Findings

Based on the case studies and literature review, it can be noted that synthetic realities, i.e., generative technologies based on artificial intelligence (in particular, deepfakes), have significant potential to influence both political processes and the level of public trust in democracies. They have become an integral part of contemporary politics, including election campaigns. Their impact on election results remains limited, but it is significant in social and psychological terms (Łabuz and Nehring, 2024). The use of synthetic realities is multidimensional: on the one hand, it concerns audiovisual manipulation in election campaigns, but on the other, it is part of the spread of conspiracy narratives based on false 'evidence' that exploit the emotions, fears, and prejudices of the audience. Research results show that deepfakes are increasingly used not as direct tools of deception, but as catalysts of distrust, reinforcing the belief that there is no longer any reliable information. The examples presented in the chapter reveal that even content marked as artificially generated triggers a wave of suspicion and accusations of manipulation, contributing to the erosion of standards in public debate. Other examples cited show the use of propaganda memes that perpetuate ideological divisions and reinforce social polarisation despite their obvious fictitiousness.

Another effect of the spread of synthetic media, apart from deceiving audiences, is the loss of the ability to distinguish between truth and falsehood. The consequence is that the authenticity of objective evidence is questioned and labelled as fabricated. So, fabricated material strengthens the so-called 'liar's dividend'. The result is a growing crisis of trust and the susceptibility of societies to manipulation. With this, deepfakes not only support existing conspiracy theories but also become the basis for new narratives themselves.

Encouragingly, synthetic reality technologies have not caused an 'information apocalypse'. Still, they have contributed to a systemic shift in the balance between trust and suspicion in the public domain, including the political sphere. The key challenge is not the battle against the technology itself, legal bans, or the development of detection tools, but the rebuilding of societies' epistemic resilience through media education, source transparency, and strengthening citizens' digital skills. After all, the use of synthetic realities to support conspiracy narratives can be seen as a potential erosion of the foundations of social trust in democratic processes.

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CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE: FEW FINAL THOUGHTS

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Conspiracy theories have become a persistent feature of political life across Central and Eastern Europe, where legacies of authoritarian rule, uneven state capacity, and polarised media ecosystems create fertile ground for narratives that attribute hidden plots to elites and out-groups. At the individual level, conspiracy beliefs are associated with lower support for liberal-democratic norms and greater openness to contentious, extra-institutional politics. At the (political) system level, they provide rhetorical and organisational resources for populist actors to delegitimise watchdog institutions and consolidate power. Recent comparative research shows that conspiracy beliefs about immigration and COVID-19 are linked to weaker attachment to democratic values and a preference for non-institutional forms of participation, indicating a pathway from belief to political behaviour (Herold, 2024).

These dynamics rest on a distinctive Central and Eastern Europe historical foundation. Post-communist transitions were accompanied by "re-enchanted" political imaginaries that framed privatisation, lustration, and EU accession in conspiratorial terms like "stolen transition", shadow networks, and external puppeteers, offering cognitively simple explanations for rapid and often painful change. In Hungary, for example, research has documented large segments of the public endorsing narratives that the democratic transition was a façade orchestrated by former communists and foreign interests. Such narratives did not remain marginal: they have been instrumentalised by governing parties to justify institutional overhauls and attacks on independent media (Kreko, 2019).

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At the meso-level of party competition, conspiracy talk is closely intertwined with populism. Populist styles juxtapose a virtuous "people" against corrupt "elites"; conspiracy theories provide the causal mechanism (elites collude in secret) to make that moral boundary politically actionable. Cross-national studies find robust individual-level associations between populist attitudes and conspiracist ideation, helping to explain why conspiracy claims spread efficiently through populist media ecosystems and movement networks (Christner, 2022). In Central and Eastern Europe, populist actors have leveraged conspiracies about migration, George Soros, or "gender ideology" to delegitimise courts, civil society, and independent regulators as instruments of a hostile cabal, thus weakening resistance to institutional change (Marinov, 2022).

The institutional consequences are tangible. First, conspiracy narratives erode watchdogs by casting oversight as partisan witch-hunts. A synthetic account of democratic backsliding in the region identifies state capture (especially of media and the judiciary) as an "original sin" that conspiracy theories amplify by discrediting opponents' accountability claims and normalising rule-bending as self-defence against hidden enemies (Marinov, 2022). Second, conspiracy-saturated information environments weaken public broadcasters and fact-checking capacity, making it easier for executives to restructure media governance under the pretext of restoring "balance" against alleged plotters. Country cases in the region repeatedly show proposals to overhaul public media justified by conspiratorial accusations of bias and collusion (Dragomir, Rojas-Araujo and Horowitz, 2024). Third, conspiracies undermine public policy compliance by suppressing trust in science and authorities, with downstream effects on electoral accountability and bureaucratic performance (Regazzi et al., 2023).

Hybrid threats further entrench these effects. External authoritarian actors have learned to seed or amplify local conspiracies to fracture consensus on EU and NATO commitments. Studies of Slovakia's 2023–2024 information environment document dense ecosystems of disinformation outlets and social media groups that blended domestically resonant conspiracies (about secret police legacies, "deep state" prosecutors, or fabricated scandals) with cross-border amplification, affecting campaign dynamics and post-electoral discourse (Disinfo.eu, 2023). Regional analyses warn that focusing narrowly on "online fake news" underestimates the institutional dimension: disinformation campaigns exploit structural vulnerabilities like weak regulators, captured media markets, and under-resourced civil society to achieve durable agenda-setting advantages.

The EU and member governments have responded with soft-law codes, platform co-regulation, and public-facing guidance on recognising conspiratorial content. Official materials emphasise how conspiracy frames scapegoat minorities and undermine social cohesion and urge proactive media literacy efforts. While such measures may enhance resilience, their effectiveness depends on domestic political will and the insulation of regulators from partisan interference, both of which are often weakest precisely where conspiratorial politics are strongest (European Commission, n.d.).

It is misleading, however, to treat conspiracy theories as mere by-products of credulity. They are political technologies. In Central and Eastern Europe, they serve to coordinate supporters by offering emotionally resonant master narratives; justify exceptionalism in governance (emergency rule, penal code changes, or staffing purges) by claiming the "enemy" operates from the shadows; and blur responsibility by attributing policy failures to clandestine sabotage. The result is a feedback loop: weakened institutions are less able to arbitrate fact from fiction, which in turn normalises conspiratorial governance. Comparative evidence from European samples shows that conspiracy belief predicts lower democratic commitment even after accounting for ideology and socio-demographics, underscoring that this is not simply a left–right issue but a challenge to liberal-democratic culture itself (Herold, 2024).

What, then, makes the Central and Eastern Europe context distinct? Three factors recur. First, historical memory: communist-era secrecy and the opacity of early transition bargains left cognitive templates readily activated by new crises (Kreko, 2019). Second, party-media structures: concentrated media markets and partisan capture facilitate high-volume diffusion of conspiracies with minimal reputational cost (Marinov, 2022). Third, geopolitical exposure: proximity to Russia and ongoing war-related anxieties create demand for "hidden hand" explanations and a supply of professionalised influence operations, as seen in recent regional campaigns (Disinfo.eu, 2023).

Let's now move on and see what both Polish and Slovenian authors in each of the seven presented chapters have concluded and what are their main take outs.

Tine Šteger's chapter, "Conspiracy theories in Slovenia during and after the pandemic," concludes that conspiracy theories surrounding COVID-19 in Slovenia represent both a local manifestation of global narratives and an indicator of deeper socio-political dynamics characteristic of Central and Eastern Europe. Although

the content of these theories, ranging from claims about the artificial origin of the virus to vaccine scepticism and "The Great Reset", mirrors global trends, their local adaptations reveal how pre-existing distrust in political institutions and health authorities has amplified their appeal. The findings suggest that Slovenia's socio-political context, marked by limited transparency, fragmented information flows, and the pervasive role of social media, created conditions in which conspiratorial thinking could thrive. While the political influence of groups promoting such ideas remains modest, their growing presence at the local level signals an emerging, albeit constrained, potential for conspiracy-driven populism. The author argues that conspiracy theories should not be dismissed merely as marginal phenomena but understood as reflections of broader crises of trust and communication within society. These discourses mobilise emotional responses to uncertainty, providing simplified explanations and a sense of agency to their adherents. Consequently, sustained scholarly and institutional attention is necessary to monitor how such narratives evolve and to mitigate their potential impact on democratic processes, particularly in regions with historically high susceptibility to conspiratorial worldviews such as the broader Central and Eastern European context.

Agnieszka Turska-Kawa and Patrycja Bełtowska's chapter, "Economic security and conspiracy thinking: a cross-cultural European perspective," concludes that socioeconomic conditions play a crucial, though complex, role in shaping individuals' susceptibility to conspiracy theories across Europe. By integrating data from the European Social Survey (ESS) and Eurostat indicators, the study demonstrates that economic hardship (particularly low household income and perceived financial difficulties) strongly predicts higher endorsement of conspiracy beliefs. In contrast, citizens in more affluent and economically stable countries tend to exhibit greater scepticism towards such narratives. These findings indicate that belief in conspiracies is not merely a product of cultural or cognitive predispositions but is also deeply embedded in lived material realities. The analysis supports the notion of a "conspiracy mentality," a generalised disposition towards conspiratorial thinking that transcends specific topics yet is activated by socio-economic vulnerabilities. Importantly, the study highlights that individuals respond more acutely to immediate and personal economic pressures than to abstract structural inequalities. This suggests that conspiracy beliefs often emerge as psychological responses to insecurity, powerlessness, and uncertainty in one's everyday context. Nonetheless, the research acknowledges limitations, including restricted geographical scope and the correlational nature of the findings. Future studies should therefore explore additional mediating variables and broader socioeconomic dimensions to clarify causal mechanisms. Overall, the chapter

reinforces the growing empirical consensus that structural inequality and economic precarity constitute fertile ground for the spread of conspiratorial worldviews, with significant implications for social cohesion and democratic stability.

Miro Haček's links conspiracy theories with (dis)trust in political institutions in Slovenian context. Slovenia namely exemplifies a political environment marked by persistently low levels of institutional trust, a condition that has both facilitated and been reinforced by the spread of conspiracy theories. Despite expectations that the COVID-19 pandemic might significantly alter public trust in political and administrative institutions, longitudinal data from both international and national surveys indicate that levels of trust remained consistently below the EU average, with a further decline observed in the post-pandemic period. This erosion of confidence has created a fertile context for the circulation of conspiratorial narratives, which have become embedded in the country's sociopolitical discourse. Analysis of Slovenian social media communities reveals that while followers of conspiracy theories are generally passive in their engagement, they exhibit strong belief in overarching conspiracies involving secret global elites, alongside moderate endorsement of COVID-19 and vaccine-related theories. These individuals rely heavily on informal and digital information sources, such as friends, family, and social media, rather than traditional news outlets, which reinforces echo chambers of distrust. The findings suggest that distrust in political institutions and the popularity of conspiracy theories create a mutually reinforcing cycle that undermines democratic resilience. Consequently, the author highlights the need for transparent governance, critical media literacy, and sustained civic engagement as key strategies to counteract the social and political consequences of entrenched conspiratorial thinking.

Agata Olszanecka-Marmola and Maciej Marmola analyse conspiracy stereotypes during times of war and find that intergroup conspiracy stereotypes function as potent political instruments that both reflect and reinforce social divisions, particularly in the context of Polish–Ukrainian relations. The findings reveal that endorsement of anti-Ukrainian conspiracy narratives, such as claims that Ukrainians steal jobs, is shaped less by basic sociodemographic variables like gender or age, and more by education, material situation, and especially political affiliation. Supporters of right-wing parties, notably Confederation and Law and Justice, show the strongest agreement with these conspiratorial claims, suggesting that partisan identity and ideological alignment play a central role in sustaining such beliefs. The study also highlights that psychological factors (xenophobia, paranoid ideation, collective narcissism, and belief in unique national victimhood) significantly predict susceptibility to anti-Ukrainian narratives. These variables construct a worldview rooted in

perceived injustice and the moral superiority of the ingroup, which, in turn, legitimises hostility towards the outgroup. Importantly, the research underscores the instrumental use of conspiracy stereotypes by political actors seeking to mobilise electoral bases through appeals to fear and identity-based grievances. Such narratives transcend mere misinformation, serving broader functions of political polarisation and social boundary reinforcement. The authors calls for future research integrating psychological, communicative, and discursive approaches to better understand how populist rhetoric and media ecosystems perpetuate these divisive beliefs and undermine intergroup solidarity and democratic cohesion.

Miro Haček, Simona Kukovič and Tine Šteger are seeking the answer to the question who is conspiracy theorist in the Slovenian context, and their findings are noteworthy, as they clearly demonstrate that belief in conspiracy theories is shaped by a complex interplay of political, educational, demographic, and cultural factors, with perceived political powerlessness emerging as a particularly strong predictor. Individuals who feel excluded from political influence show heightened susceptibility to narratives such as the New World Order and the notion that COVID-19 was deliberately engineered by governments or organisations, illustrating how feelings of disenfranchisement foster conspiratorial worldviews. However, this relationship varies across specific theories, suggesting that political alienation does not uniformly translate into belief across all conspiracy domains. Education proves to be the most consistent protective factor, with higher educational attainment significantly reducing support for most conspiracy narratives, especially those concerning vaccination and bioweapons. Gender and age exert more limited effects, though women over 45 show greater endorsement of 5G-related conspiracies and Generation X demonstrates higher belief in the bioweapons narrative. Religious affiliation also contributes, as Catholics are generally more prone to conspiratorial beliefs than atheists. Contrary to assumptions about urban–rural divides, geographic differences are minimal, though residents of Ljubljana exhibit comparatively greater scepticism. Finally, political participation moderates conspiracy endorsement, with voters being less susceptible to certain narratives than non-voters. Collectively, the findings underscore that conspiracy beliefs stem less from isolated demographic traits and more from broader experiences of marginalisation, distrust, and disengagement from political and institutional systems.

Paweł Matuszewski and Michał Rams-Ługowski's chapter concludes that the diffusion of conspiracy theories on X network is primarily driven by weak social ties rather than strong or moderate ones, revealing that such narratives are shared far more often than they are discussed. The study distinguishes between different

types of weak ties (fans, one-time contributors, and plain weak ties), showing that these connections dominate the transmission of conspiracy content through retweets and quotations, while replies, which indicate genuine interaction, are comparatively rare. This suggests that conspiracy narratives on X spread through passive amplification rather than deliberative exchange. Time-series analysis further demonstrates that sudden spikes in conspiracy dissemination are largely attributable to ephemeral or opportunistic accounts, including potential bot activity, rather than sustained engagement among established users. Importantly, the research finds no long-term growth in the volume of conspiracy content, implying that while these narratives resurface periodically, they do not gain lasting traction. The limited role of strong ties indicates that X functions as a broadcasting rather than a debating platform for conspiratorial ideas. Nonetheless, the constant, low-level visibility of such content may contribute to its gradual normalisation within the public sphere, reinforcing concerns about misinformation, political polarisation, and the erosion of informed democratic discourse.

Finally, Kornelia Batko's chapter on AI-generated deepfakes and conspiracy theories finds that synthetic realities pose a growing yet complex threat to democratic trust and political communication. While their direct influence on election outcomes remains limited, their broader psychological and social impact is profound. Deepfakes increasingly function less as tools of direct deception and more as instruments that amplify distrust, fostering a pervasive sense that no information can be fully trusted. This dynamic reinforces the "liar's dividend", in which genuine evidence is dismissed as fabricated, thereby eroding confidence in public institutions and factual discourse. The analysis demonstrates that synthetic media not only strengthen existing conspiracy narratives but also generate new ones, often by exploiting emotional and ideological divisions. Although fears of an "information apocalypse" have not materialised, the proliferation of synthetic realities has shifted the balance between trust and suspicion in public life. The author therefore emphasises the urgent need to enhance epistemic resilience through media literacy, transparency, and digital competence to protect democratic integrity.

To sum up, conspiracy theories in Central and Eastern Europe are not peripheral folklore but integral to contemporary political and societal power struggles. They matter because they channel diffuse grievances into delegitimisation of liberal-democratic institutions, license institutional engineering under the banner of self-defence and provide transnational authoritarians with leverage in the region's contested information space. Strengthening resilience requires more than content takedowns: it demands transparent governance reforms, independent media

financing, and civic education that inoculates against conspiratorial reasoning without sliding into paternalism. The evidence suggests that where democratic culture remains robust and intermediating institutions retain autonomy, conspiracies lose some of their capacity to reorder political life; where those buffers are weak, conspiratorial politics can become a governing mode (Herold, 2024; Marinov, 2022).

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Reviews

Conspiracy theories have long been the subject of scientific research, particularly in political science, sociology and psychology. The book Political Potential of Conspiracy Theories: A Study of Poland and Slovenia, edited by Miro Haček of the University of Ljubljana (Slovenia) and Agnieszka Turska-Kawa of the University of Silesia in Katowice (Poland), offers a detailed examination of the political implications of conspiracy theories in these two Central European countries. The studies presented in this volume contribute to a nuanced understanding of how conspiracy narratives influence political trust, public perception and voting behaviour. By focussing on Slovenia and Poland, the book offers a comparative approach to analysing the socio-political dynamics influenced by conspiracy theories, especially after major global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian-Ukrainian war. The book begins with an introduction by Miro Haček and Agnieszka Turska-Kawa, which sets the framework for the discussions that follow. The editors justify the selection of Poland and Slovenia as case studies, emphasising their shared post-communist history and evolving democratic landscapes. The introduction outlines the key questions that the book seeks to answer: How do conspiracy theories influence political processes and political institutions in general? How do they affect public trust in political institutions? What role does social media play in the spread of such narratives? How do financial and economic conditions influence belief in conspiracies? These fundamental questions are addressed in the following chapters, written by a mix of authors from Slovenia and Poland. The chapter by Tine Šteger examines the spread and development of conspiracy theories in Slovenia before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. In his analysis of (dis)trust in political institutions in Slovenia, Miro Haček examines how belief in conspiracy theories correlates with the public's dwindling trust in the government, the judiciary and the media. In collaboration with Miro Haček, Simona Kukovič and Tine Šteger, the authors analyse national survey results to identify demographic and ideological patterns among believers. Agata Olszanecka-Marmola and Maciej Marmola analyse the influence of party identification on belief in conspiracy theories related to the Russian-Ukrainian war. Paweł Matuszewski and Michał Rams-Ługowski provide a convincing analysis of the role of weak and strong ties in the spread of conspiracy theories via social media. Agnieszka Turska-Kawa and Patrycja Bełtowska broaden the scope of the book by conducting a cross-cultural analysis of the relationship between financial insecurity and belief in conspiracy theories. Kornelia Batko's chapter takes a futuristic turn by looking at the impact of AI-driven deepfakes on conspiracy

theories and public trust in democratic institutions. Finally, in the concluding chapter, both editors reflect on the wider implications of the findings presented in this book. They emphasise that conspiracy theories are not just a fringe belief, but are deeply rooted in the political cultures of Poland and Slovenia and their respective political systems.

Multi-author book "Political Potential of Conspiracy Theories: A Study of Poland and Slovenia" is a timely and well-researched contribution to the field of political science. The book successfully combines empirical data with theoretical insights to show how conspiracy theories influence trust in institutions, voting behaviour and political polarisation. One of the book's strengths is its interdisciplinary approach, which draws on political science, sociology, psychology and media studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. In addition, the comparative analysis between Poland and Slovenia offers valuable lessons for other countries, especially in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region, that are struggling with similar challenges. However, a potential limitation of the book is its focus on two specific case studies, which may not fully capture the global extent of conspiracy theories in politics. Future research could extend this work by including case studies from other CEE countries and also from Western, Southern and Northern Europe to provide a more holistic perspective. Nevertheless, this book is a must-read for scholars, policy makers, journalists and anyone interested in understanding the political impact of conspiracy theories in contemporary society. Its insights are particularly relevant at a time when misinformation and digital propaganda continue to challenge democratic stability.

prof. dr. Marjan Brezovšek

The present multiauthor book, *Political Potential of Conspiracy Theories: A Study of Poland and Slovenia*, offers insights into the dynamics of conspiracy theories from various scientific disciplines, providing a comprehensive approach to this multifaceted phenomenon. Although the authors primarily focus on the realities in Poland and Slovenia, the contributions collected in this multiauthor book offer insights into the broader phenomenon of conspiracy theories, as many of those who believe in conspiracy theories are part of transnational networks and (online) communities that facilitate the circulation of conspiracy theories across borders of countries, regions, and continents. Development of social media networks and instant messaging applications has significantly reshaped the landscape of conspiracy theories, particularly by increasing their visibility. Some describe the current era as a *golden age* of conspiracy theories or discuss about *perfect storm of conspiracy theories,* in particular during the latest pandemic. However, conspiracy theories are not a new phenomenon. They have been present throughout history, although their role in society in the past was markedly different from that of today. Historically, conspiracy theories were particularly appealing because they provided simple explanations for events that science could not fully explain. The simplicity of explanations, the clear correlation between cause and effect, and the straightforward identification of powerful culprits, even wrongly, continue to appeal to many. While current research on the factors that make individuals susceptible to conspiracy theories lacks consensus in several areas, the authors' contributions aim to bridge this gap by exploring various factors and personality traits that may critically influence whether someone believes in conspiracy theories. Crisis events are particularly important, as conspiracy theories serve as an evolved response to the existential threats that these events bring to the forefront. As such, this multiauthor book represents a timely addition to the body of knowledge on conspiracy theories in times of multiple crises.

The authors explore conspiracy theories in the context of two recent crises: the latest pandemic and still ongoing war in Ukraine. In these challenging times, conspiracy theories often emerge to fill the information void or to satisfy important epistemic, existential, and social motives in the part of the population. On the other hand, the authors approach the topic of conspiracy theories from a critical standpoint, particularly with regard to their societal effects. One key issue is the relationship between trust in institutions and belief in conspiracy theories, both of which are problematic in many countries, especially in Central and Eastern Europe. This, in turn, prompts a reflection on the underlying causes that may offer deeper insights into the dynamics between conspiracy theories and institutional trust, as well as their implications for the future of democracy. The

era of constant technological innovation and digitalization, with its both foreseen and unforeseen consequences, coupled with contemporary societal trends characterized by distrust in institutions, may once again present significant challenges for individuals trying to navigate the rapidly changing world. Artificial intelligence, in particular, represents both an opportunity and a threat, as it enables the creation of AI-driven deepfakes. As a result, people are now faced with the new challenge of distinguishing between what is true and what is simply another attempt at manipulation.

Exploration of conspiracy theories in this multiauthor book serves as a timely reminder of the complex interplay between societal trust, crisis situations, technological change, and the human need for meaning in uncertain times—highlighting the enduring relevance of conspiracy theories as both a challenge and a lens through which we can better understand contemporary social and political dynamics.

prof. dr. Matevž Tomšič

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