INTRODUCTION

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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.

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