
CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN SLOVENIA DURING AND AFTER THE PANDEMIC

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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

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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.

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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

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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 derivatives 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 (Kuźelewska 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

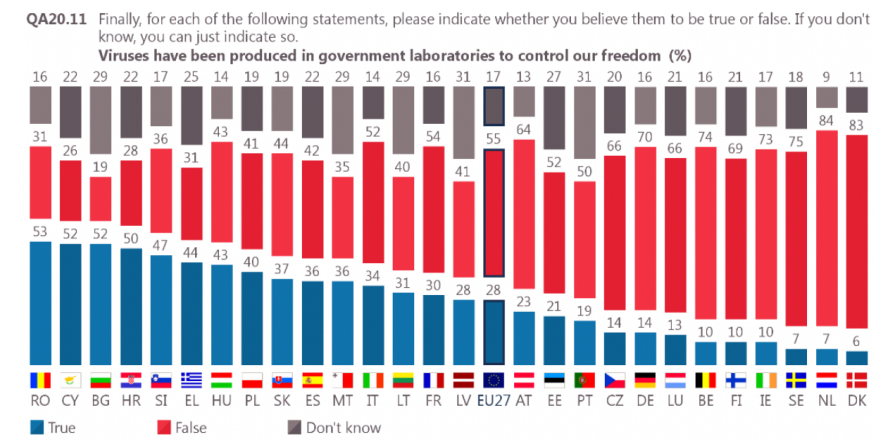
countries of Central and Eastern Europe ranged from relatively plausible explanations, such as the accidental release of the virus from a laboratory in Wuhan, to more far-fetched ideas suggesting that the virus was artificially created as a biological weapon, genetic treatment, or military experiment 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 Vučković, 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.

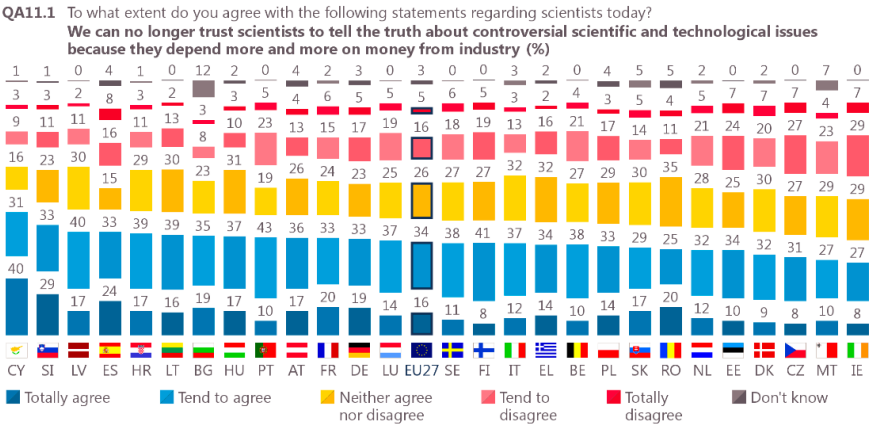
Anti-Vax Conspiracy Theories

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).

Suspicious 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 Mikloušić, 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 (Kuzelewska 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

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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.

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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 Eastern Europe and countries in the Western Balkans.

Funding

This research was funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (ARRS-NCN research grant N5-0222).

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