
CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND (DIS)TRUST IN POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

Miro HAČEK¹

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.

1 Miro Haček, PhD, full professor at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. Contact: miro.hacek@fdv.uni-lj.si. This research was funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (grant code N5-0222).

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 (Bierwiazonek, 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. Bierwiazonek, 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

68

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

72

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 backlash 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

74

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	Probably not true	Not sure; cannot decide	Probably true	Definitely true	Mean value
	(1), in %	(2), in %	(3), in %	(4), in %	(5), in %	(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 current 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 Cichočka (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

80

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.

Funding

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

References

- Barkun, M. (2013). *A Culture of Conspiracy (second edition)*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bianco, W. T. (1994). *Trust: Representatives and Constituents*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Bierwiazzonek, K., A. B. Gunderson and J. R. Kunst. (2022). "The Role of Conspiracy Beliefs for Covid-19 Health Responses: A meta-Analysis." *Current Opinions in Psychology* 46 (2022): 1–4.
- Birchal, C. and P. Knight. (2023). *Conspiracy Theories in Times of Covid-19*. Oxford and New York: Routledge.
- Boin, A. and P. 't Hart. (2010). "Organising for Effective Emergency Management: Lessons from Research." *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 69 (4): 357–371.
- Brotherton, R. (2015). *Suspicious Minds. Why We Believe Conspiracy Theories*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.

- Centre for Public Opinion and Mass Communication Research. (2020). *Slovenian Public Opinion 2020/2*. Available at <https://www.adp.fdv.uni-lj.si/opisi/sjm202/>.
- Centre for Public Opinion and Mass Communication Research. (2022). *Slovenian Public Opinion 2022/1*. Available at https://www.cjm.si/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/SUM_SJM_2022_1_L.pdf.
- Centre for Public Opinion and Mass Communication Research. (2024). *Slovenian Public Opinion 2024/1*. Available at https://www.cjm.si/ul/SJM_24_1.pdf.
- Douglas, K. M., R. M. Sutton and A. Cichocka. (2017). “The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories.” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 26 (6): 538–542.
- Douglas, M. K. and R. M. Sutton. (2018). ‘Why Conspiracy Theories Matter: A Social Psychological Analysis’. *European Review of Social Psychology* 29 (1): 256–298.
- Einstein, K. L. and D. M. Glick. (2015). “Do I think BLS data are BS? The consequences of conspiracy theories.” *Political Behaviour* 37 (3): 679–701.
- European Union. (2018). *Standard Eurobarometer 90 – Autumn 2018*. Available at <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2215>.
- European Union. (2019). *Standard Eurobarometer 92 – Autumn 2019*. Available at <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2255>.
- European Union. (2020). *Standard Eurobarometer 93 – Summer 2020*. Available at <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2262>.
- European Union. (2021). *Standard Eurobarometer 95 – Spring 2021*. Available at <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2532>.
- European Union. (2022). *Standard Eurobarometer 97 – Summer 2022*. Available at <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2693>.
- European Union. (2023). *Standard Eurobarometer 99 – Spring 2023*. Available at <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3052>.
- European Union. (2024). *Standard Eurobarometer 101 – Spring 2024*. Available at <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3216>.
- Gamson, W. A. (1968). *Power and Discontent*. Homewood: The Dorsey Press.
- Haček, M. (2019). “The Difficult Look Back: Slovenian Democratic Path after European Union Accession.” *Politics in Central Europe* 15 (3): 419–441.
- Haček, M. (2023). Database on Empirical Research ‘Political Potential of Conspiracy Theories’. Ljubljana: Faculty of Social Sciences, Defense Research Centre.
- Haček, M. (2024). “(Dis)trust into political institutions and conspiracy theories: Case of Slovenia.” *Journal of comparative politics* 17 (2): 5–16.
- Haček, M. and M. Brezovšek. (2014). “The Processes of Democratization and Trust in Political Institutions in Slovenia: Comparative Analysis.” *Annales, Series Historia et Sociologia* 24 (1): 1–12.
- Koller, B. (2021). The euro and the collective identities of Central and Eastern European nationals. In *The Political Economy of the Eurozone in Central and Eastern Europe: Why In, Why Out?*, eds. Arató, Krisztina, Boglárka Koller and Anita Pelle, 56–81. London: Routledge.

- Koller, B. (2022). Re-nationalization or de-Europeanization collective identities and identity politics in contemporary Hungary. In *The Rise of Populism in Central and Eastern Europe*, eds. Kukovič, Simona and Petr Just, 67–82. London: Edward Elgar.
- Kukovič, S. (2022). “How novel coronavirus has shaken public trust in decision-making institutions: comparative analysis of selected European Union members.” *Journal of comparative politics* 15 (1): 9–19.
- Mari, S., H. Gil De Zuniga, A. Suerdem, K. Hanke, G. Brown, R. Vilar, D. Boer and M. Bilewicz. (2022). “Conspiracy Theories and Institutional Trust: Examining the Role of Uncertainty Avoidance and Active Social Media Use.” *Political Psychology* 43 (2): 277–296.
- Mintrom, M. and R. O’Connor. (2020). “The Importance of Policy Narrative: Effective Government Responses to COVID-19.” *Policy Design and Practice* 3 (3): 205–227.
- Mishler, W. and R. Rose. (1997). “Trust, Distrust and Scepticism: Popular Evaluations of Civil and Political Institutions in Post-Communist Societies.” *The Journal of Politics* 59 (2): 418–451.
- Muller, N. E. and T. O. Jukam. (1977). “On the Meaning of Political Support.” *The American Political Science Review* 71 (4): 1561–1595.
- Šteger, T. (2024). “The analysis of prevailing conspiracy theories in central and eastern Europe.” *Journal of Comparative Politics* 17 (1): 69–85.
- Toš, N. (ed.). (2021a). *Vrednote v prehodu XII [Values in Transition XII]*. Slovenija v mednarodnih in medčasovnih primerjavah ISSP 1994–2018, ESS 2002–2016, EVS/WVS 1992–2017, SJM 1991–2018. Ljubljana: FSS Publishing House.
- Toš, N. (ed.). (2021b). *Vrednote v prehodu XIII [Values in Transition XIII]*. Slovenija v mednarodnih in medčasovnih primerjavah ISSP 2017–2019, ESS 2018, SJM 2018–2020. Ljubljana: FSS Publishing House.
- Wardawy-Dudziak, P. (2024). “The political potential of conspiracy theories: the role of psychological and situational factors.” *Journal of Comparative Politics* 17 (1): 51–68.