CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE: FEW FINAL THOUGHTS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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