

# THE ANALYSIS OF PREVAILING CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

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*This article aims to shed light on the phenomenon of conspiracy theories prevalent in Central and Eastern Europe. Countries in the region share several common characteristics while also having distinctive historical experiences. The focus of our study is to identify global, regional, and local conspiracy theories that are currently circulating in the region. We aim to explore the prevalence of such conspiratorial beliefs among the population, with particular attention given to the impact of the recent coronavirus pandemic, which has given impetus to many conspiracy theories, especially in times of near ubiquitous social media, not helped by the rise of populist politics. As conspiracy theories can be understood as a dynamic set of arguments, images, and interpretations that are continuously used, adjusted, discussed, and applied to novel circumstances in the course of the ongoing events (e.g. Byford 2014), we seek to identify the key elements of COVID-19 conspiracy theories in Central and Eastern Europe considering conspiracy theories that have circulated in the region in the recent past.*

**Key words:** Conspiracy Theories; Central Europe; Eastern Europe; Balkan; COVID-19.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Countries in Central and Eastern Europe share several common characteristics while also having some distinctive historical experiences. Most of these countries bear within themselves the legacy of communism or socialism, the experience of democratic transition and the process of integration into the European Union. At the same time, each country in Central and Eastern Europe carries fragments of its own historical experiences, and social and cultural peculiarities, which are manifested in different ways, including through various conspiracy theories.

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Conspiracy theories have a long history and are widespread (Goertzel 1994); one can even argue that they are omnipresent (Bale 2007), which is also the case in Central and Eastern Europe (e.g. Astapova, Colacel, Pintilescu and Schneibner 2021; Onnerfors and Krouwel 2021). In this article, we highlight some of the most widespread conspiracy theories that have circulated among the population of Central and Eastern Europe in recent years. The crisis times during the global pandemic of the virus COVID-19, with the simultaneous boom of social networks, as well as the rise of populism and widespread distrust in various countries of Central and Eastern Europe (e.g. Kukovič 2022), represented a fertile ground for the spread of existing and development of new conspiracy theories. Such political and media factors along with a global health emergency represented ideal conditions for the *perfect storm of popular conspiracism* (Birchall in Knight 2023). At the same time, the pandemic period gave an impetus to more in-depth research in the field of conspiracy theories in contemporary realities in countries of Central and Eastern Europe, even in countries with no research tradition in this field.

The purpose of this article is not to evaluate or even judge the truth of the theories discussed but to examine which conspiracy theories are circulating in countries of Central and Eastern Europe and how widespread such conspiracy theories are in the beliefs of people living in this area. This article is based on reports, expert opinions, and scientific articles written by researchers who focus their research work on the field of conspiracy theories in this part of Europe.

## 2 THEORY ABOUT CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Conspiracy theories can be understood as alternative explanations for important past and present political processes, major social events, and crises, the true background of which some people believe is deliberately hidden from the public. Conspiracy theories are usually presented in opposition to generally accepted wisdom or official explanations of events (Bale 2007; Imhoff and Bruder 2014, 26; Birchall and Knight 2023, 17). This fits with part of Barkun's (2003) definition of conspiracy theories, stating that everything is connected, and nothing is as it seems. Conspiracy theories rarely appear individually but instead connect various individual conspiracy claims into overarching *superconspiracies* (Barkun 2013; Birchall and Knight 2023, 79). Despite the diversity of conspiracy theories, they often divide the world into good and evil, insiders and outsiders and basically explain that *they* (usually high-power individuals or groups, such as governments, international organisations, the mainstream media, the global elite, or even minorities, which are perceived as powerful) are either trying to control or lying to *us* (the ordinary people, the members of a specific nation, etc.) with usually some specific, generally harmful and malevolent goals (Butter and Knight 2023, 6; Butter 2020, 10). As Barkun (2013) stated, nothing happens by accident but is part of a larger, hidden plan.

Conspiracy theories could be seen as symptoms and indicators of wider societal troubles and turbulences (Blanuša 2020, 597). Although such alternative theories may be overly simplistic and rarely prove to be true (Fenster 2008, 90), they often reveal real tensions, concerns, fears, anxieties and perceived injustices as consequences of past and present untrustworthiness (Turza 2023, 223; Birchall and Knight 2023, 107; Butter 2014, 3-4) that preoccupy people especially in times of crisis (Radomirovič Maček 2023, 40) and at the same time significantly contribute to the co-shaping of the dynamics of life in the

communities. The tendency to believe in conspiracy theories reflects a relatively stable mindset (Uscinski, Klofstad and Atkinson 2016) or a broader, deeply held worldview (Birchall and Knight 2023, 79). Various researchers note that those who believe in one of the conspiracy theories tend to believe in others as well (Douglas and Sutton 2018), which has also proven to be true on the basis of the analysis of conspiracy theories related to the recent COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. Blanuša, Tonković and Vranić 2022, 11). However, not everything dismissed as a conspiracy theory deserves this label. We emphasise the importance of precision in addressing various conspiracy theories. It is important to note that many politicians, journalists, and researchers tend to categorise certain assumptions or ideas as conspiracy theories, even when they may not exhibit all the defining characteristics associated with the definition (Butter and Knight 2023, 10).

### 3 BEFORE THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The history and tradition of conspiracy theory research in Central and Eastern Europe have not been as prolific as in some other parts of the world in the past, as most influential works on conspiracy theories, especially before the pandemic, were written based on the reality in the United States (e.g. Goertzel 1994; Butter 2014). However, we argue, based on the in-depth studies of various researchers who focus on conspiracy theories in this part of Europe (e.g. Astapova, Colacel, Pintilescu and Scheibner 2021; Blanuša 2020, Soral et al. 2018; Onnerfors and Krouwel 2021), that the conspiracy theories around Central and Eastern Europe are by no means a new phenomenon either. Moreover, the region is proving to be a fertile environment for creating, modifying, and disseminating various conspiracy theories. Such theories in Central and Eastern Europe have been widespread before the COVID-19 pandemic. The alleged evils of various powerful internal and external enemies have often been at the centre of conspiracy narratives in that part of Europe. Some of those narratives focused on the European Union, which has been often perceived as a plot of hidden powers with the intention to undermine the sovereignty of countries on that part of the continent and drastically change the world as we know (Astapova, Colacel, Pintilescu and Scheibner 2021). Similar conspiracy beliefs can be traced on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, especially Croatia, where Blanuša (2009; 2013) investigated the existence of such beliefs in two different studies in 2009 and 2013. As noted by Blanuša, almost a third of the population of Croatia believed that the European Union is a conspiracy of big business, the aim of which is to *destroy* nation-states.

Such conspiracy narratives about constant worries and warnings against internal and external enemies resonate well with traditional self-perceptions and historical experiences of some smaller nations that can quickly find themselves under the domination or exploitation of great powers and whose existence can be questioned at any moment (Kundera 1991, 124). Such theories can also serve to strengthen common identity and national belonging. According to Soral and colleagues (2018), the primal role of conspiracy theories is to point to other groups, nations, or institutions as malevolent and willing to conspire against their own group. This notion is further explained by Blanuša (2013, 18), who argues that conspiracy theories often serve as a tool for defining a threat to collective values and interests to maintain the identity of one's own group or society. Conspiracy theories function as a mode of interpretation to define the enemy in order to define oneself as the opposite of that enemy. We will attempt

to elucidate this in more detail with practical examples, especially the reality of the situation in Central and Eastern Europe.

One of the most exposed conspiracy narratives is one about the malicious and hidden intentions of the Jews (Astrapova, Colacel, Pintilescu and Scheibner 2021). Although Jewish conspiracy theories date back to the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they still exist, circulate among citizens, and play an important role in political realities in countries of Central and Eastern Europe (Bulska, Haska, Winiewski and Bilewicz 2021, 130). Even though Jews are generally a minority in terms of their relative numbers in various countries, they are often perceived as one of the high-power groups in people's subjective perceptions, making them an interesting target for various conspiracy narratives (Imhoff and Bruder 2014, 30). Conspiracy theories depicting Jews are, for example, still endorsed by almost half of the Polish society (Soral et al. 2008). At the same time, antisemitic stereotypes are endorsed by a significant proportion of people in Slovenia, Croatia (Blanuša 2020, 603), Hungary, and the Czech Republic (Bulska, Haska, Winiewski and Bilewicz 2021, 134).

With the rise of populism (e.g. Kukovič and Just 2022), democratic backsliding (e.g. Agh 2022) and vibrant times of migrant crisis in Central and Eastern Europe, discourse with elements of anti-Semitism has gained a new momentum in mainstream politics, especially considering conspiracy theories about the alleged evil, destructive grand plan of Hungarian American billionaire George Soros. In contrast to the historical conspiracy theories surrounding the Jewish community, a notable distinction in contemporary narratives is the amalgamation of allegations of clandestine and malevolent intentions of Jews (and George Soros in particular) with a supposed collaboration of human rights activists, migrants, and refugees. Such conspiracy claims assume that these groups are actively engaged in undermining Europe's traditions and sovereignty through intentional and planned Muslim invasion, all in accordance with a covert agenda to promote the Islamisation of the continent while simultaneously eroding its Christian heritage. In such theories, we can detect a mixture of different conspiracy narratives, especially the Jewish conspiracy theories and the Eurabia<sup>2</sup> conspiracy theory. This was particularly pronounced in the case of Hungary, while it was not an exception in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe, especially when such conspiracy theories were responding well to the changed circumstances brought about by the refugee crisis (Astrapova, Colacel, Pintilescu and Scheibner 2021; Turza 2023; Kreko and Enyedi 2018, 47; Kalmar 2020, 186; Langer 2021, 165).

Conspiracy theories in countries of Central and Eastern Europe are not restricted solely to the fringes of society, as we have indicated but can be permanent contenders in mainstream political discourse as well, as shown by Turza (2023), Kreko and Enyedi (2018) or Kalmar (2020) in the case of Hungary, where such conspiracy narratives about Soros were incorporated into official governmental communication for a long time. The Hungarian government under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán splattered posters of Soros all over Hungary, saying 'Soros wants to transplant millions from Africa and the Middle East. Stop Soros' (Bergmann 2020, 169; Langer 2021, 167). A similar reality cannot be confirmed in other Central and Eastern European countries, not even in countries where politicians known

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<sup>2</sup> The central theme of Eurabia conspiracy theory is the belief that Muslims, often with the support of domestic elites and leaders, are working to transform Europe into an Islamic society (Bergmann 2021, 36).

for their populism were in power, such as Kaczynski in Poland (Szabo 2020, 36). However, other Central and Eastern European countries did not escape the spread of such ideas, with an important difference. Such conspiracy theories had a different status in most of the other countries of Central and Eastern Europe, where such theories tended to be stigmatised, such narratives that fit the characteristics of conspiracy theories were not spread by elected politicians, but, rather, by fringe social groups or (in some cases) by alternative, pro-Russian media (Ižak 2019, 66), which also reflect the proliferation of various conspiracy theories during Cold War geopolitical struggles<sup>3</sup> (Birchal and Knight 2023, 75).

Conspiracy theories about the European Union, Jews, or the billionaire Soros are just some of the various theories that focused on perceived high-power individuals or groups and circulated in Central and Eastern Europe before the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to the above-mentioned conspiracy theories, we can trace the existence of many other global theories, which include conspiracies of various influential individuals or groups, such as Bill Gates, groups of scientists, large pharmaceutical companies, international organisations (e.g. the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund) or other (secret) organisations that supposedly spread viruses, poison people, undermine the power and importance of nation-states, all with the aim of harming people, reducing the world's population, gaining profit, imposing a New World Order, or achieving other sinister goals. Researchers examined this based on empirical studies or literature reviews in countries of Eastern Europe (e.g. Astapova, Colacel, Pintilescu and Scheibner 2021), or more specifically in the case of countries such as Croatia (e.g. Blanuša, Tonković and Vranić 2022), Poland (e.g. Rachwol 2023; Soral et al. 2018), or Hungary (e.g. Turza 2023). However, owing to the paucity of empirical data and a dearth of scientific research in the realm of conspiracy theories, we can assume but are unable to definitively affirm this in countries such as Slovenia, the Czech Republic, or Slovakia, where in-depth investigations into the domain of conspiracy theories are in their nascent stages.

In addition to the various derivatives of conspiracy theories mentioned, which we could see in similar versions in most countries of Central and Eastern Europe in the past, the reality in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe is subject to individual characteristics, historical distinctive features, and large-scale political events of individual countries, as it was the case with controversial events since at least the French Revolution (Onnerfors and Krouwel 2021).

In Poland, a country where the Catholic Church holds significant moral authority, researchers have noted the prevalence of conspiracy theories far beyond those related to Jewish populations. Before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, a distinct set of conspiracy theories often referred to as gender conspiracy theories emerged. These conspiracy theories primarily revolved around the notion that gender studies were perceived as a threat to the Catholic Church, with an alleged objective to facilitate the establishment of a totalitarian regime, promote sex mania, or even impose a form of genocide (Soral et al. 2018; Rachwol 2023, 284). These theories often attribute sinister motives to shadowy powers whose primal objective is to sow discord and inflict harm upon the population in Poland, with aims ranging from the erosion of traditional Catholic values to controlling the world's economy (Soral et al. 2018).

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<sup>3</sup> During the Cold War, it is alleged that the KGB, in conjunction with the East German secret service Stasi, discreetly disseminated rumors regarding the possible origins of the HIV virus. According to these rumors, HIV was purportedly engineered as a biological weapon in Fort Detrick in the state of Maryland, US (Birchal and Knight 2023, 75).

As exemplified by Blanuša (2009; 2013), the centre of conspiracy beliefs in Croatia often revolves around contentious events and processes within the context of the recent Croatian history, particularly during the period of the independence war. Similarly, in Poland, conspiracy narratives often draw from historical experiences at the core of numerous conspiracy theories, with the Smolensk Airplane Disaster in 2010 standing out as a notable example. It is certainly one of the most powerful conspiracy theories in contemporary Polish history and is frequently the subject of political discourse in Poland (Rachwol 2023, 289). According to data from 2017, approximately 27% of the residents in Poland believe that the accident was part of a larger conspiracy (Soral et al. 2018).

Tragic events, such as the death of prominent public figures, provide a fertile ground for the emergence of conspiracy theories. The more tragic an event, the greater the likelihood of various alternative theories emerging in connection with it. This is because people are naturally inclined to explain such important events by attributing them to proportionately significant and momentous causes (McCauley and Jacques 1979). The conspiracy theories mentioned above further reinforce these assumptions.

#### 4 THE MAIN TOPICS OF COVID CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN THE CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

The following chapter provides an overview of the various conspiracy theories that circulated among the population in Central and Eastern European countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings come from a comprehensive content analysis of various reports and scientific articles dealing with such theories in the particularly challenging context of the recent pandemic. We examine a range of conspiracy theories that have emerged in one or more countries in the region, acknowledging that this collection may not be definitive and that other alternative explanations may have also circulated among the population during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conspiracy theories have been a constant presence throughout human history and are generally more likely to emerge during impactful societal crises, characterised by widespread uncertainty, concerns, and fears. Crisis events such as the global economic crisis, a wave of migration or a recent pandemic have triggered a wave of concerns among part of the population about the real background of various crisis events. People generally need to understand what is happening. This is especially evident when confronted with negative or unforeseen consequences because of various crisis events and changed circumstances. For complex events that are difficult to understand, such as the developments during the recent pandemic, stories that explain the developments of events in a simple way become especially convenient. Many of these stories have the characteristics of conspiracy theories (Van Prooijen and Douglas 2017, 324), which often fill the information void in times of uncertainty. It should be noted that in difficult times adequate crisis communication has been identified as a crucial aspect of crisis management (Malešič 2021, 75), as the need for information is high but the amount of information available is usually low, with appealing (mis)information appearing quickly, which are simplifying complex events (Birchall and Knight 2023, 8-17); this has occurred in similar crisis situations in the past (Butter 2020, 108; Byford 2014, 8).

Conspiracy theories about COVID-19 started to emerge immediately after the first information about the new virus became available (Douglas 2021). Part of the population immediately started by searching for alternative explanations about how the pandemic had started and who was to blame. WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus quickly warned that we were not only facing a pandemic but *an infodemic* as well (Birchal and Knight 2023, 67). The chapter presents the most widespread conspiracy theories about COVID-19 that circulated in Central and Eastern European countries while highlighting some distinctive local features.

#### 4.1 Origins of the virus

As noted by Birchall and Knight (2023) in their work devoted exclusively to conspiracy theories related to COVID-19, various speculations about the actual origin of the virus appeared on various social networks immediately after the first news about the emergence of a new infectious virus in China. Given prior insights into the patterns of virus emergence and the situational factors that prompt people to seek alternative explanations, we can assert that the emergence of conspiracy theories in similar situations is no new phenomenon (Malešević 2022; Douglas 2021). We argue that there is a common tendency among people in Central and Eastern Europe to exhibit a degree of scepticism regarding the actual origins of the viruses. As found by a Eurobarometer survey from 2021, the claim that *viruses have been produced in government laboratories to control our freedom* is believed by a higher percentage of people in countries of Central and Eastern Europe, on average, compared to the European Union as a whole. In Croatia, this percentage stands at 50%, Slovenia at 47%, Hungary at 43%, Poland at 40%, and Slovakia at 37%. Meanwhile, the average percentage of people in the European Union who believe in such a theory regarding the origins of viruses is 28%. In Austria, 23% of the population believes in such an explanation, while in the Czech Republic, 14% hold this belief (European Commission 2021). The spectrum of theories regarding the origin of the COVID-19 virus that have circulated in countries of Central and Eastern Europe ranges from relatively plausible explanations, such as the accidental release of the virus from a laboratory, to more far-fetched ideas that suggest that the virus was artificially created as a biological weapon, genetic treatment, or military experiment, and was either accidentally or intentionally released from a laboratory (Radomirović Maček and Babič 2022; Butter 2023; Political Capital 2020; Rachwol 2023; Blanuša, Tonković and Vranić 2022). These theories regarding the origin of the virus do not significantly differ in content from conspiracy theories about the virus's origin that have circulated in other parts of the world (e.g. Birchall and Knight 2023). Approximately 40% of Poles believe in the theory that COVID-19 was artificially created in a laboratory as a biological weapon (Oleksy et al. 2021, 5), while around 35% of Austrians hold a similar belief (Eberl, Huber and Greussing 2021, 276).

Different versions of theories about the origin of the virus and its nature tend to blame different culprits. Some theories point fingers at various countries, most commonly China or the United States, while others implicate influential individuals, such as Bill Gates. In countries where citizens believe that the United States poses a relatively significant threat to their nation, there is a greater likelihood that they would attribute the deliberate creation of the COVID-19 virus to the USA (GLOBSEC 2020). The motivations behind intentional virus spread range from desires for economic and political dominance or weakening of certain

countries to aspirations for population control or depopulation (Radomirović Maček 2023; Radomirović Maček and Babič 2022, 37; Butter 2023; Turza 2023; Rachwol 2023; Political Capital 2020). As many as a quarter of the population in Croatia believes that the purpose of the virus created by global elites is to reduce the global population (Blanuša, Tonković and Vranić 2022, 8).

#### 4.2 Virus as a hoax

At the same time, conspiracy theories suggesting that the virus does not exist and is essentially a hoax or a part of planned manipulation have emerged (Radomirović Maček 2023; GLOBSEC 2020). A significant portion of the Polish population, approximately a quarter, expressed that they would not be surprised if it turns out that COVID-19 does not actually exist, based on the latest data from December 2020 (Oleksy et al. 2021, 5). A similar percentage of the population in Poland, 32%, along with 39% in Slovakia, 36% in the Czech Republic, and 21% in Hungary, believes that COVID-19 is fake and created for the purpose of manipulating the population (GLOBSEC 2020). Such 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 or COVID-19 virus testing. In some countries of Central and Eastern Europe, narratives claiming that patients in hospitals are crisis actors have emerged, as detailed by Rachwol (2023, 283), particularly in the case of Poland. These narratives resemble various conspiracy theories from the past regarding mass school shootings in the United States, which label victims as 'crisis actors' hired by the U.S. government to promote stricter gun control laws (Birchall and Knight 2023, 85; Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019, 4).

#### 4.3 Anti-vax

As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, accompanied by different government responses and actions to limit the spread of infection, conspiracy theories followed in response to these developments. Conspiracy theories related to vaccination emerged early in the pandemic, but they began to circulate far more widely as COVID-19 vaccines started to roll out, coupled with vaccination and the introduction of immunity certificates (Turza 2023, 222; Radomirović Maček and Babič 2022, 40; Birchall and Knight 2023, 102). As noted by Birchall and Knight (2023, 106), conspiracy theories about the dangers of vaccines have become intertwined with numerous other conspiracy theories in the United States and the United Kingdom. Based on an analysis of the situation in Central and Eastern Europe, we further note that a similar reality existed in that part of Europe, as we will show in the subchapter about 5G conspiracy theories. In some countries, health and vaccine conspiracy theories consequently gained much greater visibility than ever (Turza, 2023, 224). These theories did not primarily focus on the virus per se but on the supposed dangers and conspiracies associated with vaccine development and population vaccination.

Conspiracy theories about vaccination were mostly built upon pre-existing beliefs about the hidden dangers of the vaccine, which were likely exacerbated by the rapid development of the vaccine and were perceived to have been intentionally hidden from the public. Many of the conspiracy theories related to vaccination assume that the virus was intentionally developed by Big Pharma or by individuals like Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg in the background, primarily with the aim to profit from the sale of the vaccine. This is a common finding of



various studies analysing the conspiracy theories prevalent in Central and Eastern Europe (Radomirović Maček 2022, 36; Blanuša, Tonković and Vranić 2022; Political Capital 2020) and is consistent with the perception of conspiracy theories prevalent in other parts of the world, such as the United States, the United Kingdom (Birchall and Knight 2023, 106), and in the Baltic countries (Madisson and Ventsel 2023). Other variations of conspiracy theories include claims that vaccines could negatively affect women's fertility, with the alleged intention of reducing population growth, or even that the purpose of vaccines is to carry out genocide against the population (Birchall and Knight 2023, 107; Radomirović Maček and Babič 2022, 35-39). In contrast, in countries of Central and Eastern Europe, there was not a strong perception of conspiracy theories suggesting that vaccines have been unethically tested, particularly on people of African descent, which had been actively circulated in the United States (Birchall and Knight 2023, 107).

#### 4.4 Conspiracy theories about 5G networks

The notion that the purpose of vaccination is to insert various microchips into people to monitor and control their behaviour was a common theme in various alternative theories prevalent in Central and Eastern Europe. According to recent data, about 8% of the population in Croatia believe in such theories (Blanuša, Tonković and Vranić 2022, 8), while it reaches 20% in both Poland and Slovakia, 19% in the Czech Republic, and 15% in Hungary (GLOBSEC 2020). Similar theories were also circulating in various other parts of the world (Birchall and Knight 2023, 107). These theories often existed independently or as components of broader, overarching conspiracy theories (Radomirović Maček 2023; Turza 2023; Political Capital, 2020). Theories about microchip implantation were often interwoven with pre-existing conspiracy theories about deliberately hidden dangers of the 5G mobile network. The claim that the 5G network was one of the first to be established in Wuhan, the city where the COVID-19 virus originated, was anything but a coincidence (Birchall and Knight 2023, 96). Many variations of conspiracy theories claim that 5G radiation weakens the immune system, making the body more susceptible to COVID-19 infection (Radomirović Maček and Babič 2022, 35), or that COVID-19 is spreading (more rapidly) with the assistance of 5G networks (Butter 2023). Between 3% and 10% of the population in Croatia believe in such claims, depending on the questionnaire used (Banai Pavela, Banai and Mikloušič 2021; Tonković, Dumančić, Jelić and Biruški 2021; Blanuša, Tonković and Vranić 2022). As Birchall and Knight (2023, 98) 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. Conspiracy theories related to 5G networks often included traditional culprits, with the owner of the tech giant Microsoft, Bill Gates, being a particularly frequent target.

#### 4.5 Great reset and infinity of other conspiracy theories

Part of the extensive corpus of various theories that circulated around the COVID-19 virus and the accompanying pandemic, also in Central and Eastern European countries, were narratives about the so-called *Great Reset* conspiracy theory. This theory is about an alleged plan by Klaus Schwab. At the core of the theory is a supposed desire for total dominance of the global elite and the concern for the complete restriction of human freedom (Birchall and Knight 2023, 112; Turza

2023; Political Capital 2020; Blanuša, Tonković and Vranić 2022; Butter 2023, 216). Conspiracy theories related to the Great Reset encompass familiar tropes in other conspiracy narratives related to COVID-19, including ideas about 5G and microchips, which are perfect tools for population control. 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 the Czech Republic, 27% in Poland and Hungary, and 10% in Austria, according to a GLOBSEC 2021 survey. Less prevalent narratives included ideas about the food industry's secret plans to deliberately conceal evidence that genetically modified crops can lead to genetic contamination, which, in turn, allows viruses like COVID-19 to proliferate and spread. There were also theories suggesting that COVID-19 was a camouflage for the redeployment of the US Army to the Russian borders (Political Capital 2020).

#### 4.6 Local variants

Reality in Central and Eastern European countries is subject to individual characteristics, distinctive historical features, and large-scale political events of individual countries. In Central and Eastern European countries, various local versions of conspiracy theories have emerged among the population, combining local specificities with global conspiracy theories. In that regard, some characterise conspiracy theories as a phenomenon of 'glocalisation' (Butter and Knight 2023, 6). Local elements that significantly differed from conspiracy theories circulating in other countries in the region mainly pertained to the alleged culprits behind the situation. Local variations often implicated national health experts as culprits, as evidenced by the situation in Croatia. In Croatia, some conspiracy theories depicted Krunoslav Capak, Head of the Croatian Institute for Public Health, as one of the creators of the 'plandemic' (Grbeša Zenzerović and Vučković 2022, 16). One could assume that this was also the reality in other Central and Eastern European countries.

Among those who believe in conspiracy theories, there is often no shared belief regarding who is responsible for the situation or what the purpose of such crisis situations is. Indeed, there is a great diversity of content among different conspiracy theories. However, conspiracy theorists generally agree on at least two points: the official version is a lie, and the pandemic has been staged for sinister reasons (Butter and Knight 2023, 5).

#### 4.7 Conspiracy theories as an interplay between history and present reality

For those who study conspiracy theories from a historical perspective, many variations are well-known, as they did not emerge out of thin air. Many conspiracy narratives about COVID-19 have their origins in conspiracy theories that we mentioned earlier in this article or in other conspiracy theories that have emerged in the past as a response to various events, technological innovations, outbreaks of diseases, wars, or stories originating from fictional literature or films (Birchall and Knight 2023). Many conspiracy theories about COVID-19 are, therefore, the product of the collision of long-standing conspiracist beliefs with the emerging COVID-19 crisis (Bruns, Harrington and Hurcombe 2020, 26; Butter 2023, 210). Various conspiracy narratives were often already in place with previously known conspirators, such as Soros, Big Pharma or Bill Gates, and merely adapted to fit the specific circumstances of the pandemic (Butter and

Knight 2023, 5; Rachwol 2023, 283). As stated by Byford (2014, 12). We can consider conspiracy theories 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 (ibid.), which is evident in the case of conspiracy theories related to the recent crisis period during the COVID-19 pandemic as well.

## 5 GLOBAL VILLAGE OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

As we can observe, many of the same conspiracy narratives were shared worldwide, often spread via social media, which has an increasing global reach (Stano 2020). Many of these ideas might have faded away in earlier, pre-internet times (Birchall and Knight 2023, 24). It is worth emphasising that information containing elements of conspiracy theories spreads very rapidly on social networks and typically knows no national borders (Bruns, Harrington and Hurcombe 2020, 26). Additionally, posts containing conspiracy claims generally spread faster and reach a wider audience than information containing scientifically verified and provable facts (Sharma et al. 2017), especially within networks of like-minded individuals, the so-called *echo chambers* (Stano 2020). That is consistent with confirmation bias, where people generally seek information confirming their existing views rather than challenging them (Bruns, Harrington and Hurcombe 2020, 26). As many of those who believe in conspiracy theories belong to various transnational networks and (online) communities, conspiracy theories travel fast among countries (Butter and Knight 2023, 6). Especially fast and efficiently among countries that share similar languages (e.g. former Yugoslavia) or among countries with the same language and the same conspiracy entrepreneurs (e.g. German-speaking countries) (e.g. Butter 2023, 209). In Croatia, a significant portion of the content shared by people inclined to conspiracy theories originated from websites based in Serbia and, to a lesser extent, from websites that primarily originated in Slovenia (Grbeša Zenzerović and Vučković 2022). Within groups predominantly composed of Slovenian speakers, there were also posts in Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian languages (Radomirović Maček 2023, 39), while the origins of specific narratives circulating in Slovenia can be identified in the Balkan region (Radomirović Maček and Babič 2022, 38). However, we cannot generalise this to all countries belonging to the Slavic language group. Network analysis does not indicate such intense exchange of various posts among all Slavic-speaking nations as observed among Western Balkan countries (Bruns, Harrington and Hurcombe 2020, 25), where conspiracy beliefs are particularly prevalent among people (European Commission 2021; GLOBSEC 2020; Fotakis and Simou 2023). These findings are important because they imply that certain issues surpass nationality and political views, with certain distinctive characteristics depending on the specific circumstances of each specific region. However, as demonstrated in the analysis of the spread of various COVID-19-related conspiracy theories on the Facebook network by Bruns, Harrington, and Hurcombe (2020, 25), posts in the English language occupy a central position within the interconnected web of conspiracy theory content. This is attributed to the fact that English serves as the *lingua franca*, while the culture and politics of the US also have a global impact (Astapova, Colacel, Pintilescu and Scheibner 2021; Butter and Knight 2023, 6). Consequently, these theories propagate rapidly worldwide and undergo regional and local transformations (Bruns, Harrington and Hurcombe 2020, 26).

In recent years, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, there seems to have been a notable increase in the prevalence of conspiracy theories. Some have even referred to those times as the golden era of conspiracy theories. According to Butter (2020), the share of people who believe in conspiracy theories is not increasing. Instead, the pandemic has empowered individuals who once kept their beliefs private to express them more openly in public (Butter and Knight 2023, 5). As the pandemic period recedes, people's concerns and preoccupations also evolve. Researchers in Croatia have observed a gradual decline in the percentage of people who believe in COVID-19-related conspiracy theories as the pandemic has progressed (Blanuša, Tonković and Vranić 2022, 12). This finding is supported by similar findings from a study that measured support for various COVID-19-related conspiracy theories among the Polish population across four waves of surveys (Oleksy et al. 2021, 5).

## 6 CONCLUSION

We can conclude that narratives assuming that nothing is as it seems, that everything is connected, and nothing happens by accident actively circulate among the population of Central and Eastern Europe. Unsurprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic has given rise to numerous conspiracy theories in the contemporary era of the internet and widespread use of social media, coupled with the simultaneous presence of populism and growing distrust. Conspiracy theories have become an important part of public discourse worldwide, including in Central and Eastern European countries. Indeed, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has, in fact, led to a more intense scientific focus on the topic of conspiracy theories as well. Compared to the pre-pandemic period, we now have a wealth of scientific literature addressing the subject of conspiracy theories, even in countries such as Slovenia, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic, where the presence of antecedent studies in this field was either non-existent or notably limited.

Although research on conspiracy theories in Central and Eastern Europe is largely scattered and fragmented, certain patterns can nevertheless be discerned across different countries of the region under consideration. Fragments of past experiences are reflected in the perception of the present, with various conspiracy theories about external and internal enemies allegedly threatening the way of life circulating in the region. Many conspiracy theories about various influential groups and organisations are connected to the traditional beliefs and historical experiences of nations in Central and Eastern Europe, which can quickly find themselves under the domination or exploitation of great powers and whose existence can be challenged at any moment. Conspiracy theories about Jews are not unknown to Central and Eastern Europe either. These conspiracy theories have taken on new dimensions with the rise of authoritarian leaders and populist discourse, especially in vibrant times of migrant crisis, as was particularly the case in Hungary, where conspiracy theories were not limited solely to the fringes of society but were also present in mainstream politics. What distinguishes contemporary conspiracy theories about Jews from their historical counterparts is the integration of narratives about the sinister activities of George Soros with allegations that human rights activists, migrants, and refugees are also part of a secret plan to destroy the tradition and independence of Europe through a Muslim invasion, in line with a secret plan to Islamise and de-Christianise Europe. Conspiracy theories about the European Union, Jews, or

billionaire Soros are just a few examples of the conspiracy theories that circulated in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe before the outbreak of COVID-19. In addition to the various derivatives of conspiracy theories mentioned, the reality in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe is subject to individual characteristics and historical peculiarities of various countries, such as the significant moral role of the Catholic Church in Poland, the period of the independence war in Croatia, or tragic events such as the Smolensk airplane disaster. Moreover, this region is proving to represent a fertile environment for creating, modifying, and disseminating various conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy theories are particularly convenient and popular during times of various crises, often serving as a means of coping with uncertainty, concerns, and fears. Various narratives incorporating elements of conspiracy theories began to emerge immediately after the first information about the outbreak of the new virus was released. These narratives continued to evolve and adapt throughout the course of the pandemic in response to changing circumstances. Based on the analysis of numerous studies on COVID-19-related conspiracy theories, we find that the main thematic characteristics of these theories, which ranged from theories about the virus origin, claims of deception, vaccine dangers, dangers of 5G networks, and the Great Reset theories, were largely similar across countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Additionally, certain local peculiarities surfaced, primarily related to alleged culprits who, in various national contexts, placed different national experts at the forefront as those responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the analysis of prevalent conspiracy theories circulating in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, particularly considering the recent COVID-19 pandemic, it can be observed that these theories are mostly thematically like conspiracy theories circulating elsewhere in the world. Different conspiracy theories often intersect and combine with one another to form what is commonly referred to as *superconspiracies*. It is noteworthy that among those who believe in conspiracy theories, there is typically no common consensus on who is to blame for the situation or what the goal of such crisis situations might be. A significant diversity in the content of conspiracy theories exists. However, those who believe in conspiracy theories generally agree on at least two points: the official version is a lie, and events have been orchestrated for sinister reasons.

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

We can conclude that conspiracy theories circulate vigorously worldwide, especially with the help of various social media platforms with global reach. It is worth emphasizing that information containing elements of conspiracy theories spreads very rapidly on social networks. Such information typically spreads even faster and reaches a larger audience than scientifically verified and proven information. Many individuals who believe in conspiracy theories are engaged in various transnational networks, further facilitating the spread of different

conspiracy theories. In Central and Eastern European countries, these theories are particularly effective at spreading among countries that share a similar language, such as the countries of the former Yugoslavia.

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## ANALIZA PREVLAJUJOČIH TEORIJ ZAROT V DRŽAVAH SREDNJE IN VZHODNE EVROPE

*Cilj prispevka je osvetliti fenomen teorij zarot prevladujočih v državah Srednje in Vzhodne Evrope. Države v Srednji in Vzhodni Evropi delijo številne skupne značilnosti in hkrati nosijo drobce sebi lastnih zgodovinskih izkušenj. Prispevek se v svojem jedru osredotoča na različne globalne, regionalne in lokalne različice teorij zarot, ki krožijo na obravnavanem območju ter ponuja vpogled v razširjenost takšnih prepričanj med prebivalstvom. Posebno pozornost namenja vplivu nedavne pandemije virusa COVID-19, ki je dala zagon številnim teorijam zarot, zlasti v času vsesplošne razširjenosti socialnih omrežij, obdobju ni prizanesel niti vzpon populizma. Ker lahko teorije zarot razumemo kot dinamičen nabor argumentov, predstav in razlag, ki se nenehno uporabljajo in prilagajajo v luči spremenjenih okoliščin (npr. Byford 2014), skušamo identificirati ključne elemente teorij zarot, ki so v državah Srednje in Vzhodne Evrope krožile v preteklosti in se ob enem pojavljajo v teorijah zarot, ki so vzniknile skupaj z nedavno pandemijo COVID-19.*

**Ključne besede:** teorije zarote; Srednja Evropa, Vzhodna Evropa, Balkan, COVID-19.