

FROM POLITICAL TREASON TO THE METAPHYSICAL STRUGGLE BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL. LEVELS OF POLITICAL CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES FOR DIFFUSION

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This study explores the prevalence of conspiracy theories in political communication. The analysis reveals that conspiratorial political discourse deviates from non-conspiratorial discourse, displaying internal inconsistencies. Various subgroups within the conspiracy theory community have developed distinct ways of perceiving, classifying, attending, and assigning meaning to events. This study contends that the appeal of conspiracy theories is rooted in their cultural embeddedness. Utilising a dataset of tweets that mentioned, replied to, or were authored by Polish politicians and political parties, this study incorporates Thick Big Data by combining quantitative analysis with qualitative content analysis. The typology of conspiracy theories includes three levels based on their deviation from conventional knowledge. These levels have been empirically illustrated in the political context of Poland. This differentiation sheds light on the diffusion of political conspiracy theories, suggesting that the probability of adoption depends on the proximity to an individual's mindscape.

Key words: conspiracy theories; political communication; political discourse; Polish Twitter; diffusion of conspiracy theories; thick big data.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Politics and conspiracy theories have an intricate relationship. The assassination of President Kennedy is a prevalent example of conspiracy theories in popular culture. In 2021, QAnon's conspiracy theories resulted in a fatal incident at the United States Capitol building, causing the loss of five lives. Conspiracy narratives can also be found in statements made by politicians from various political backgrounds during significant events, such as elections, wars, economic crises, or terrorist attacks (Uscinski 2020; Uscinski and Parent 2014). As we write this paper in 2023, recent political conspiracy theories related to the pandemic and war in Ukraine continue to evolve, creating the perception that there has been an increase in such narratives.

However, evidence does not unequivocally support this notion. Uscinski and Parent (2014) note that beliefs in conspiracy theories among Americans are relatively consistent. According to Uscinski, DeWitt, and Atkinson (2018), the Internet and social media do not contribute to the spread of conspiracy theories. Furthermore, contrary to popular belief, a recent study found no evidence of increased conspiracism in the United States or European countries, such as Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Poland, Portugal, and Sweden (Uscinski et al. 2022).

This study analyses the prevalence of conspiracy theories in political communication. We demonstrate that conspiratorial political discourse deviates from non-conspiratorial discourse and is internally inconsistent, with various subgroups within the conspiracy theory community developing distinct ways of perceiving, classifying, attending, and assigning meaning. To explain the popularity of conspiracy theories, we contend that their appeal is rooted in cultural embeddedness. To understand the varying levels of popularity among different conspiracy theories, it is necessary to consider the unique ways in which they diverge from conventional knowledge: 'defined as shared, justified and generally accepted ("true") social beliefs and their discursive reproduction in epistemic communities and in society at large' (Dijk 2014, 93). Consequently, this leads to the following research question: Is the prevalence of conspiracy theories associated with the level of divergence from conventional knowledge?

In this study, we utilised a collection of tweets that mentioned, replied to, or were authored by Polish politicians or political parties, comprising members of the Polish and European Parliament, the Polish president, presidents of the *voivodeship* cities, and party leaders, which were published between January 2022 and April 2023 (N = 20,415,184). We used a specially designed algorithm that detected conspiracy beliefs in the dataset with an F1 score greater than 90%. The methodology employed in this research includes the use of word embedding to infer the most relevant keywords from a specific context, followed by the application of Thick Big Data, which is a mixed method that combines the quantitative analysis of large datasets with qualitative content analysis (Ganczewski and Jemielniak 2022). A quantitative text analysis was conducted to capture the context in which politicians and political parties appeared. We then divided the empirical material into four topics: the Covid-19 pandemic, LGBT, ecology, the war in Ukraine, and the four different conspiracy frames in which they are discussed: foreign agents, the New World Order (NWO), Slavians (*Sławianie*, not Slavs/Slavic; *Słowianie*), and mystic theories. We randomly sampled at least 300 documents per topic for the qualitative content analysis.

2 CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND THEIR TYPOLOGIES

We define conspiracy theories as explanations of significant events as coordinated hidden acts of at least two actors to affect society or its parts negatively (Douglas et al. 2019; Knight 2001; Moore 2018; Popper 2006). Although this general definition is a common ground for conspiracy theories, they are not homogenous. Some of the exemplary typologies include (Huneman and Vorms 2018): general (Illuminati) vs specific (9/11); scientific (vaccination autism link, climate change denialism) vs non-scientific (9/11); ideological (Jewish Bolshevism; liberal pro-environmental plot) vs neutral (Illuminati); official (propaganda about capitalist spies in USSR) vs anti-institutional (9/11); and alternative explanations (Illuminati, globalists) vs denials (fake moon landing, denial of Holocaust). However, from the perspective of investigating the popularity of conspiracy theories, such typologies are not theoretically rich and cannot explain why one type is more popular. Therefore, a different perspective is required.

The diffusion of conspiracy theories is difficult to explain if we assume that there are certain universal features that make them appealing. For instance, nearly half of Portuguese (47%) believed in 2016 that 'Regardless of who is officially in charge of governments and other organisations, there is a single group of people who secretly control events and rule the world together', while at the same time agreed to this statement 10% of Swedes and 27% of Poles (Uscinski et al. 2022). The likely factor responsible for the adoption of conspiracy theories and its changes over time are related to culture, and how well they are congruent with the shared beliefs (Byford 2011; Drażkiewicz 2022; Knight 2001). Furthermore, even in the same society, some conspiracy theories are more, and some are less believable. Therefore, we suggest theoretical frameworks that differentiate conspiracy theories based on how much conspiracy beliefs deviate from conventional knowledge. We use Zerubavel's (1999) concept of thought communities to seize this idea.

A thought community is a social environment which socialises its members to process, collect, and recall information in a specific, trans-subjective way. In other words, Zerubavel emphasises that humans are cognitively diversified because of social causes. The differences involve six major cognitive acts: perceiving, attending, classifying, assigning meaning, remembering, and reckoning the time.² These differences exist because people are members of different thought communities, such as churches, professions, nations, generations, and similar. In the following sections, we describe the social mindscapes of the thought communities of conspiracy theorists.

This framework is different from the distinction between the rationality and irrationality of conspiracy beliefs or whether the beliefs are true or false. Such classifications are difficult to implement, the reasoning process is not easy to reconstruct, and some conspiracy theories have proven true or may be accepted in the future (Birchall 2020; Huneman and Vorms 2018; Pigden 2007). Instead of assuming that conspiracy theories are silly, inferior, or unbelievable, we assume that they may be rational because people have good trans-subjective reasons to believe in them (Pigden 2007). As such, being a member of a particular thought

² Due to the insufficient data available, we were unable to provide commentary on the final two acts.

community (i.e., a specific cognitive context), people may have strong and shared reasons that make conspiracy theories believable and a rational option (Boudon 1997; Boudon 2011). Parallely, members of other thought communities may have reasons to refute the same beliefs.

3 CONSPIRACY MINDSCAPE AND POLITICS

3.1 Perception of politics and politicians

As members of certain thought communities, people learn how to perceive the world around them and which beliefs are acceptable, and which are not. For example, for some, it can be perfectly acceptable to see God's plans in natural disasters, while for others (e.g. atheists), such a view is entirely unacceptable. In the case of political conspiracy theories, the main difference is not necessarily the perception of conspiracies, because history consists of many real conspiracies (the Ides of March, Iran-Contras, Watergate, and Holocaust). The difference lies in how the conventional and conspiracy hypotheses are assessed. For Huneman and Vorms (2018), non-conspiracy theorists start with a null hypothesis that does not contain conspiracy; for instance, it relies on the pure coincidence of events. In contrast, conspiracy theorists start with a null hypothesis that explains events as conspiracies. Since such an explanation is at odds with conventional beliefs that usually offer simpler solutions (imagine how much cognitive labour is required to make a sound theory that NASA hides the truth about the flat Earth), it seems like a violation of Occam's Razor. However, this perception is context dependent. For people who believe that regimes (authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, but also governments in highly polarised democratic countries) conspire against people, it is rational to doubt the official message. For instance, in Poland, TVP, a state media corporation criticised for strong pro-government (Law & Justice) bias in 2015-2023, was assessed as good by 84% of Law and Justice voters and as bad by 90% of Civic Coalition voters (Pankowski 2023). In this context, it may not be so irrational for the members of Civic Coalition supporters thought community to doubt the content broadcasted by TVP and assume that the broadcast hides the truth about politicians and the consequences of their actions. In other words, they have reasons to suspect dishonesty; consequently, conspiracy becomes a rational null hypothesis (Huneman and Vorms 2018).

The 'view' of politics as a facade that hides real actors that do harm to society is a necessary condition to develop political conspiracy theories and is completely different than conventional views on politics, that is 'a: the art or science of government; b: the art or science concerned with guiding or influencing governmental policy, c: the art or science concerned with winning and holding control over a government' (Merriam Webster Dictionary 2023). Conspiracy theorists challenge the dominant view of politics and the understanding of political power (Sapountzis and Condor 2013). The distinctive 'mental optics' may also be themselves a cause of adopting conspiracy beliefs since they fulfil a need for being unique, both as not 'just one of the crowd' (Lantian et al. 2017) regarding citizens, but also not 'just one of the many' regarding politicians who want to stand out (Green et al. 2023). Therefore, conspiracy theories deviate from conventional knowledge and, at the same time, are congruent with beliefs shared in other thought communities. It is not only an individual matter that one accepts or rejects a conspiracy theory but also a social matter. Membership in thought communities, such as spiritual or scientific communities, affects whether

their members accept numerology, astrology, the active presence of extraterrestrials on Earth, or polls and statistically based predictions (Zerubavel 1999). Conspiracy thought communities not only develop conspiracy theories but also (as any other thought community) exert pressure to conform to their 'visions'. Those who are 'cognitive heretics' and actively fight conspiracy theories become enemies labelled as 'sheep' (do not have their own opinions), and 'manipulated'. In the case of some Polish Facebook conspiracy theory groups, even access to discussions is restricted and group administrators verify potential members if they see the world through the same mental lenses.

3.2 Attention

Conspiracy theorists deviate from conventional attention locations. For example, while mainstream media discuss political tactics, politicians' performance, political programmes, parties' interests, or citizens' political engagement, conspiracy theorists focus on political events that support their views and the role of politicians in conspiracy or elaboration of a conspiracy theory. In other words, attention location is a mental filter that distinguishes what is and what is not relevant and what to ignore. As Zerubavel (1999, 46) described it: 'Yet while our mental focusing patterns are for the most part neither natural nor logical, they are not strictly personal either. In other words, they usually characterise not particular individuals but members of particular "optical" communities.'

For conspiracy theorists, facts that are aligned with conspiracy theories are used to prove their existence, while incongruent facts are dismissed as delusions or disinformation produced by deprived sources, such as politicians and media that are pawns controlled by powerful elites. However, there are not only cognitive biases involved and a tendency to focus on things that 'fit' mental schemas of understanding the world (e.g. confirmation bias, disconfirmation bias, prior attitude effect; Lodge and Taber 2013). These schemas are social products that people learn as a part of their cognitive socialisation. Conspiracy theorists' attention deviates from the conventional, because it concerns distinctive areas. For instance, conspiracy theorists discuss the ethnicity of political actors (who is Jewish, Khazar, etc.), transcendent issues, and metaphysics (who supports Satan? Which politicians want to destroy our souls?); they search for evidence of extra-terrestrial activity, who likely conspires with foreign governments or political elites; and they enquire about the real meaning of national symbols.

3.3 Classification

Classification is an act people perform to divide the world around them into categories, for instance, 'Polish' and 'Hungarian', 'liberal' and 'conservative', 'democratic', 'totalitarian', 'authoritarian' or to distinguish 'conspiracy beliefs' from 'conventional knowledge'. As described by Zerubavel (1999, 67): 'Although it is a mind that breaks up the world into separate chunks, it is not always an individual mind. We may not all cut up the world identically, but the chunks we carve out of it are nonetheless remarkably like those carved out by others around us. Thus, when we draw lines and make distinctions, we do so not only as human beings or as individuals but also as social beings.'

As in the previous points, these separate mental compartments that organise conspiracy reality deviate from the conventional ones. For example, political elites are not classified as members of political parties or based on ideology but as traitors, useful idiots, secret agents, globalists, pawns, insiders, acolytes,

Illuminati, Satanists, Luciferians, people's protectors, Jews, Khazars, anti-globalists, and extra-terrestrials. In parallel, citizens are classified as true Polish, Slavians, sheep, manipulated, or lab rats, to name the most popular labels.

The used categories may differ in the way how sharply delineated they are. For instance, true Polish are highly different from Ukrainians or Jews, and this is supported by the developed theory regarding the number of blood channels and their alleged impact on awareness. In other cases, the same political actors can be simultaneously (in the same document) classified as globalists, Satanists, Jews, and reptiles, which suggests that definitions are not sharp, and that these categories overlap (at least to a certain point).

3.4 Assigning meaning

The last cognitive act discussed in this study is assigning meaning. We define it as 'the interpretative process whereby an individual assigns an observed stimulus with a location in a cognitively represented semantic web (e.g. when the act of child vaccination is associated with the cognitively represented concept of 'unnatural' or 'healthy')' (Goldberg and Stein 2018). Social meanings are not natural responses to a stimulus but a socially produced relation between the signifier and the signified. Therefore, it is not surprising that the same stimuli may generate different interpretations in various thought communities. For instance, a recommendation to reduce meat consumption may be understood as: 1) an element of pro-environmental behaviour by left-leaning media outlets; 2) an attack against traditional customs by right-leaning media outlets; and 3) evidence that politicians who support it follow a globalist agenda that aims to limit people's freedom by some conspiracy theories. As another example, the World Economic Forum can be: 1) 'an international non-governmental and lobbying organisation' (Wikipedia 2023); 2) an organisation of powerful elites who conspire to enslave or depopulate the world population; and 3) a Satan-directed organisation of evil (satanist) elites who aim to eradicate people's souls.

A thought community, an environment that attributes virtually unlimited meanings to stimuli, is a crucial mediator between reality and the mind (Zerubavel 1999). The interpretation heavily depends on mental 'optics'. It may be easy to interpret politicians' actions as evidence of conspiring with a foreign government, since there are many historical examples of such cooperation, and this interpretation does not violate conventional knowledge. However, the harder to adopt is the theory about globalists' conspiracy. The idea that omnipotent globalists control national politics requires the assumption that there is a group of people not only with unimaginable resources but also the power to secretly (despite the global range) influence and coordinate people, predict future complex events, and accordingly allocate their resources. Additionally, such a vision excludes the possibility that conspirators may fail because of unintended consequences or random events (Baden and Sharon 2021; Hofstadter and Wilentz 2008).

Furthermore, certain conspiracy theories necessitate the rejection of established scientific knowledge, such as flat earth theory, which not only posits the existence of powerful entities but also refutes the laws of physics and scientific facts. This perspective may provoke scepticism; however, when considering other aspects of this belief system, it becomes more coherent. By assuming that individuals possess eternal souls that serve as the foundation of their consciousness, this view challenges the notion that the Earth is merely a rock in space and that events

are random (theory of evolution), as claimed by NASA. This perspective contradicts the existence of an eternal soul and fails to explain consciousness. Therefore, NASA's stance can be seen as a conspiracy that conceals this aspect of human existence and reduces it to mere biological processes. This manipulation serves to control individuals by globalists, who imprint on them that only earthly life matters. Consequently, by controlling resources, globalists gain more power over people who focus only on material needs.

4 POLITICIANS, POLITICS, AND THE POLITICAL IN CONSPIRACY THEORIES

An essential part of conspiracy theories is their deviation from the common understanding of politics based on the categories of parties, governments, laws, and other institutions. For conspiracy theorists' followers, politics spills over into all spheres of life: it touches on their health, ethnic identity, spirituality and even interacts with supernatural forces. Such a perspective can be described by drawing on Chantal Mouffe's (2011) distinction between politics and the political. In this distinction, politics is the sphere of concrete mechanisms developed to organise collective life, such as parliamentary democracy, with its categories, as mentioned earlier. Politics is the set of institutions by means of which disputes between social groups are settled, while the political is the realm of antagonism inherent to human coexistence. According to Mouffe, the problem with politics begins when it excludes inevitable burning conflicts from the sphere of politics, either through an inadequate recognition of the social situation or through deliberate interventions of power.

Conspiracy theories seem to be attempts to respond to this situation, as they start from the premise that conflict is at the heart of politics or even social relations in general. Thus, for conspiracy theorists, politics represents just the level of appearance, while all the reasons and processes we should be interested in happening either outside, beyond, or down under: in the realm of antagonisms and power relations that Mouffe identifies as the political. For the less-deviating conspiracy theories, the political could be represented by plotting elites or conflicts between powerful cliques, and for the more deviating theories, the political lies in the sphere of divine forces or essentialist struggles between races or cultures. In general, conspiracy theories attempt to embrace the political from different levels of deviation from common knowledge using available narratives, stereotypes, or even myths.

4.1 Three levels of conspiracy theories

We differentiate conspiracy theories based on deviations from conventional knowledge. There are three main levels of conspiracies (see Table 1). Level 1 conspiracies are largely congruent with shared beliefs and serve as specific interpretations of real actors' actions. Into this category fall all theories that classify reality and focus on the same events as historians, sociologists, or political scientists. The interpretation involves conventional solutions such as motives (money, power), personal traits (evil, hateful, treacherous) or social background (relatives of secret police agents). However, the interpretation of the event does not make epistemic sense in reference to available facts or logic. For example, alleged treason of national interest is not supported by a profound analysis of the event (the outcomes are, in fact, against the interest of the alleged principal), or there is no evidence of connections between the traitor and the

principal. A non-political example of a Level 1 conspiracy is Big Pharma, which states that actual companies conspire to make higher profits; the companies are real, and it is not a big stretch to claim that they act in an ethically dubious way to earn more money because there are many real examples of companies that conspired due to such goals.

Level 2 conspiracies include elements that bend the conventional knowledge. Conspiracy theorists use classifications that include a mixture of plausible and real actors with improbable purposes. Examples of the first are NWO, Elders of Zion, secret Jewish cults or secret representations of Jews, Khazars, and Satanists. Examples of the latter are the World Economic Forum, Bilderberg meetings, or Jesuits. What differentiates these theories from conventional explanations of political events is the focus on the alleged big goals of conspiring groups, such as the enslavement of citizens (total control and removal of fundamental rights) or depopulation. As a result, political events or decisions are considered to follow or oppose these goals, and responsible actors are granted unrealistic competencies, such as omnipotence in controlling all political events.

Level 3 conspiracies are considered extreme. They deviate significantly from conventional knowledge. Conspiracy theorists classify political reality based on the classes specific to this thought community and their unconventional perception of reality, for example, into unreal and real Polish (Slavians) according to their number of blood channels and origins (Poles as descendants of blue-eyed God Thoth). The focus is on issues absent in conventional political discourses and lower-level conspiracy theories, such as human souls or secret ethnic origins. Finally, assigning meaning includes refuting basic scientific knowledge (e.g. biology, physics, and history) or other shared beliefs (e.g. meanings assigned to national symbols) and forming a new belief system.

TABLE 1: THREE LEVELS OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Conspiracy Theories	Classification	Attention	Assigning meaning
Level 1 conspiracy	Conventional distinctions between responsible actors (used by historians), e.g. traitors/non-traitors.	Who is the traitor? Whose interests do they represent?	Interpretation does not violate conventional knowledge. However, it rejects evidence incongruent with the beliefs or consists of mutually excluding elements.
Level 2 conspiracy	Classification of responsible actors bends conventional distinctions. Responsible actors are realistic (humans) and belong to groups that are real (WEF, Bilderberg, Catholic Church) or plausible (e.g. Elders of Zion, NWO, Jewish sects or undefined interest groups, Satanists). Their purposes are implausible.	How an event is congruent with the alleged evil purpose, e.g. enslaving people, depopulation.	Interpretation violates conventional knowledge, e.g. the assumption of omnipotence.
Level 3 conspiracy	Classification of responsible actors introduces unconventional dimensions. Such theories allow the existence of metaphysical, transcendent, or extra-terrestrial, improbable responsible actors, such as gods, Satan, golems, and aliens that are actively engaged in the actual events.	Is an event a sign of victory of Good or Evil? How does an event affect people's souls? Who are politicians and citizens ethnically?	Interpretation neglects conventional knowledge; it is at odds with elementary scientific knowledge (history, physics, biology) and introduces substitutional new beliefs about reality.

Below, we present three examples of conspiracy theories at Levels 1, 2, and 3.

Level 1 conspiracy theories

Level 1 conspiracy theories are congruent with conventional knowledge (conspiracies happen and are necessary for some events to happen, e.g. assassinations, coup d'état); however, in contrast to historians and political scientists, conspiracy theorists persistently prefer conspiracy hypotheses, even if the evidence rejects it. The case we want to discuss here is the belief that certain politicians are agents of foreign governments. The perception of the world in which politicians conspire to become richer or gain power is not deviational. This is consistent with the general mental landscape of Poles due to the historical context and official history curriculum. For instance, Janusz Radziwiłł, a magnate and a *voivode* of Vilna Voivodeship, abandoned (as many other noblemen) the Polish side and conspired with the Swedish king during the Swedish Deluge (1655–1660). He was then negatively portrayed as a national traitor in a famous novel (*Deluge*) by the Polish Nobel Prize winner, Henryk Sienkiewicz. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the Sejm (legislature) was frequently broken up by Russia and Prussia, which repeatedly bribed Polish deputies in order to stop Polish reforms (the *liberum veto* principle allowed any member of the Sejm to end the current Sejm session; Ekiert 1998). In 1792, Polish and Lithuanian magnates established the Russia-backed Targowica Confederation (which became the symbol of national treason), a conspiracy that led to Poland's second and third partitions. In more recent history, the Yalta Conference (1945) symbolises the treason of the Allies, who gave away Poland under the influence of the USSR. However, in the broader sense, it symbolises a situation in which a group of foreign politicians undertakes the most important decisions regarding Poland without including the Polish voice (Soral et al. 2018).

Given the Polish historical context, accusations of conspiring with the Russian or German government have a familiar background. Furthermore, the construction of narratives is common. As Radnitz (2018, 348) describes, conspiracy theories offer 'a compelling story that we can all relate to: there is a misdeed, a perpetrator, a victim, and usually a motive. The world conspiracy theories describe is one in which powerful actors cause harm to society to advance their interests. Their simple yet captivating logic enables people to self-identify as the conspiracy's victims, and to imagine solidarity with others presumed to share the same misfortune.'

The main focus of foreign agent conspiracies revolves around treason. Political decisions and events are interpreted as inspired/commissioned by foreign forces such as governments (usually German, Russian, or Israeli), politicians (usually Putin, Merkel/Scholz), or international organisations (usually the European Union). Level 1 conspiracy theories use the same categories (treason, traitor, national, and foreign interests) used in non-conspiracy thought communities, which sometimes even appear in the mainstream political discourse. For example, Jarosław Kaczyński, the Law and Justice chairman, after an unfavourable election result in 2023, accused the opposition Poland 2050 party of being founded by Russians ('Kaczyński tworzy "projekt na dalsze działania - i te ofensywne, i te defensywne"' 2023). Furthermore, the meaning assigned to responsible actors' behaviour is common and does not require the acceptance of additional deviational beliefs. Conspiracy theorists usually assign motives to money or power or try to find causes that are not reasons, for instance, by suggesting a foreign (usually German or Jewish) descent. None of these deviates from the

conventional way of thinking. For instance, there is a Polish saying, 'If you do not know what it's about, it's about money', which locates attention to the material interests of others in vague situations. Furthermore, alleged secret spies in these theories are not perfect conspirators. They are not portrayed as omnipotent members of a grand conspiracy who have the resources and skills to foresee and control reality; this belief deviates from conventional knowledge (Alsuhibani et al. 2022; Baden and Sharon 2021; Bale 2007). The scope of aims is also plausible since the responsible actors do not execute complex plans that affect entire populations and their distant futures. The actors are bribed and bad but erroneous humans, which makes such conspiracies relatively easily adoptable.

Below, we present selected illustrations of Level 1 conspiracy theories we found in our empirical material:

Who organised meetings of Russian agents on the eve of the war, who has been executing Russia's agenda since 2015 by attacking the EU and NATO, who had a programme and method of operation copied from Russia, and who includes Kaczyński, Macierewicz, Morawiecki, and Glapiński - who is a Russian agent?

Morawiecki is a secret Stasi agent, which is why he agrees with everything from Euro-Bordello. Tusk is an agent Oskar, so it's no wonder that his former advisor is an agent. PiS took Tusk's advisor, Pinocchio (Morawiecki – authors), also has a second file and the pseudonym 'student.'

I wonder if Morawiecki wants to get those billions from the EU. After all, if he and just one of his colleagues had voted in favour, Ziobro's brake act would disappear. Perhaps, it is just a PiS game, the work of Russian agents. They claim to have Poland's best interests at the heart, but they do everything to destroy them.

Level 2 conspiracy theories

The second level of conspiracy theories is characterised by a significant deviation from conventional knowledge regarding the actors responsible for a conspiracy. The leading role may be played by real people or groups such as Klaus Schwab, George Soros, Freemasonry, WEF, the Catholic Church, and the Bilderberg group or by imagined and unspecified groups, such as the Elders of Zion, NWO, globalists, secret Jewish sects or Satanists. Conspiracy theories often involve the belief that these secretive and powerful elites manipulate world events to further their nefarious agendas. In second-level conspiracy theories, actors' goals are detached from money and official political positions of power, although they may serve as a means to the actual ends. Other examples of intermediate goals include depopulation or enslavement and ultimate goals, introducing an undefined new order, the world government, and full power. Unlike first-level conspiracy theories, which focus on specific political agendas or events, second-level conspiracy theories encompass a broader and overarching worldview. They also bend conventional knowledge by attributing malevolent Others as being omnipotent and omniscient.

One of the most frequently cited second-level conspiracy theories concerns the New World Order. This theory suggests that Polish politics and politicians are subordinate to global politics and that the actual decision-making power lies within the World Economic Forum. The individual believed to have the most influence in this context is Klaus Schwab, the founder of WEF and a member of the Steering Committee of the Bilderberg Group. Schwab is also the author of several books, including 'The Fourth Industrial Revolution' and 'COVID-19. The

Great Reset,' which conspiracy theorists interpret as plans for global domination by the so-called 'globalists'. A second figure frequently mentioned in this context is George Soros. However, there is a distinct separation between the associations of Schwab and Soros. Schwab is primarily linked to events related to the economy, ecology, and the pandemic, while Soros is most often associated with social changes, such as those related to LGBT rights and his generous financing of political parties supporting liberal democracy (e.g. PO/KO, Poland 2050, and Left). It is worth noting that the globalist narrative is often linked to a Jewish or Masonic conspiracy by insinuating that globalists are of Jewish origin or are members of Freemasonry.

According to conspiracy theorists, the NWO's goal is to introduce a global government. In the new world order, people will be enslaved, and the limited space on the planet will force depopulation. All events that are currently taking place—that is, the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, inflation, LGBT movements, and pro-ecological policy—are subordinated to these goals. The relationship between Polish politicians and globalists is interpreted in several ways, considering the degree of involvement in conspiracies. The most passive relationship refers to the so-called 'useful idiots', in this case, politicians who pursue the goals of the NWO without realising their actual disastrous consequences for society or even unaware that their actions are part of the broader policy. More active dependence concerns servants or minions, that is, actors who carry out the orders of globalists. Unlike the previous category, in this case, there is allegedly a real relationship between globalist principals and executors of the orders. Virtually all prominent politicians and political parties fall under this category.

This theory portrays Polish politics as being controlled by external actors who set goals outside the country. However, there are some exceptions to this pattern. Some Polish politicians are treated as empowered members of a global conspiracy; that is, actors who create politics and do not just follow orders from the outside. On the side of Law and Justice, it is Mateusz Morawiecki (considered a Jew and a Freemason), and on the side of the Civic Coalition, it is Rafał Trzaskowski (considered a member of the Bilderberg group and a pupil of George Soros).

The perception of the main political parties as actors linked to globalist elites affects the interpretation of political events. PO/KO is treated as co-creating, together with PiS, a false dichotomy that occupies a central position in Polish politics. Consequently, their rivalry is considered fictional. It is a 'setup between Jews and Freemasons', but in reality, these parties cooperate for the benefit of the New World Order.

The conspiracy interpretation of politics places political actors on the side of ordinary citizens' opponents. Politicians are treated as an existential threat. An example is inflation, which has reached 18% in February 2023 in Poland. For conspiracy theorists, this is proof that it is deliberately kept at a high level by the government to impoverish society, which will, therefore, put less resistance to the subsequent stages of introducing a New World Order. This involves statements accusing politicians of betraying Poles and, consequently, the need to arrest them or leave politics:

The Morawiecki leader of globalists must leave Polish politics so that we can survive as the POLISH NATION. This is nonsense. You are the devil's masonic minions, introducing sustainable development, telling people about pseudo-pandemics

(murdering about 200,000 Poles), and now you are bringing in enemies of Poland, Bandera supporters... you are driving inflation to destroy human achievements and enslave us, God will punish you.

Level 3 conspiracy theories

To illustrate Level 3 conspiracy theories, we chose the two most distinguishable examples: the 'Slavians' and a psychomachian narrative. Conspiracy theorists who describe themselves as 'Slavians' (*Sławianie*) see the actors of political events among both politicians and supernatural forces. They perceive political events as the outcome of an eternal struggle against their race. Although the pseudo-scientific assumptions of various types of racism depart far from common knowledge, Slavians represent an extreme in this regard. In this narrative, biology is mixed with metaphysics: the Slavians claim that each race is characterised by possessing a mystical essence, the 'blood channels' of which the Slavians possess the most. The Slavians trace their origins to ancient Egypt, with this lineage also having a metaphysical basis – their divine good Other, who is usually invoked by listing the following or similar titles: the blue-eyed Lord of Planet Earth, the industrious and immortal God, SamOn, Atlantyder, Thoth.

In this narrative, the greatest attention is paid to ethnic origin as it is used to explain all political events. An essential part of this narrative is the already mentioned idea of the 'blood channels': the mystical essence from which the hierarchy of races assumed by the Slavians derives. Possessing the most blood channels (16), they place themselves at the top. Thus, we see this narration as an example of collective narcissism (Golec de Zavala and Lantos 2020). The Jews have eight blood channels, and the Khazars 'max thirteen after mixing their blood with the Slavs'.

Supporters of this theory pay the most attention to PiS within the Polish political scene, probably because of its current rule. They interpret the actions taken by this party during the pandemic as an attempt to exterminate the Slavs and aid to the Ukrainians as complicity in the creation of New Jerusalem. In this narrative, key PiS politicians appear as either Jews (Kaczynski, Morawiecki and Macierewicz) or Ukrainians (Duda). The PiS government is generally seen as 'Polish-speaking Khazars' who steal from 'honest Slavs' by 'illegally taking loans, in the name of the Slavian Poland' and making transfers to benefit Ukrainians.

The main antagonists for Slavians are Jews, although Khazars, Freemasons, Jesuits, and (Jewish) Ukrainians have also been mentioned. For Slavians, the criteria for dividing political parties are either racial categories derived from the concept of 'blood channels' or membership of organisations formed by particular ethnic groups (e.g. Freemasonry and the Jesuits, whom Slavians regard as organisations formed by Jews). Thus, Slavians do not divide the political scene based on ideological divisions or party affiliation but instead divide politicians into Jews, Khazars, Poles, and Polish-speaking functionaries.

Starting with geopolitical issues, the territory inhabited by the Slavians is often referred to as 'currently called Poland'. Although they consider themselves rightful rulers, they are currently under Jewish occupation, whose management is most often identified as Khazars. In their fixation on the question of origin, Slavians even give meaning to the symbols of the Polish state. As they consider themselves descendants of Egyptians, Slavians claim that it is reflected, for example, in the flag of Poland. Its white and red colours symbolise the unification of Lower and Upper Egypt, and the Polish emblem, a white eagle, symbolises the

Egyptian God Ibis. Generally, for Slavians, being Polish is merely a geopolitical tag, a historical contingency, and instead they identify themselves by referring to presumed biological (racial) traits and mythical origins.

The Slavians regard the war in Ukraine as a 'depopulation of the Goyim under the NWO' and see the Ukrainian people themselves as a 'Khazar/masonic/Jesuit #Jewry who have illegally invaded Slavian territory', perpetrators of genocide and cannibals who must answer for their crimes against the Slavians. In this context, we have come across several statements calling for violence or even genocide against Ukrainians or those that place Putin in the role of a minor good Other. Nevertheless, all the evils described by Slavians seem to have come from Israel:

#Jews on planet #Earth are represented by #israel. Therefore, it is #israel that must return to the #Slavians as the offspring of the blue-eyed, immortal Ruler of Planet #Earth—the 290 billion that the #Jewish #PiS stole from the #Slavnians, as the #talmud thieves in #Slavian #Poland!

At this level, we have also identified a CT narrative with a central theme of psychomachy – the metaphysics of the struggle between Good and Evil for human souls. This narrative's collective 'we' are the 'people with souls', whose side God and the Holy Spirit stand. The evil Others, on the other hand, are globalists and the servants or descendants of Satan. In this narrative, political events are interpreted as a game for human souls: the politicians sell them to Satan for profit and power, and the globalists' conspiracy leads to the 'gutting' or 'erasure' of the souls of ordinary people who must save them from perdition. One statement explains politicians' motivation to serve globalists as follows:

[...] It is the soul and the will to live, the joy of existence, that the golems created by globalists want to take away from us. They do not possess a soul; they are empty shells, imitations of human beings.

Here, we see that the place of 'useful idiots' is taken by golems, that is, beings brought to life but deprived precisely of a soul. When the psychomachian narrative discusses politicians, it always does so in a negative context and contrasts them with 'ordinary', 'innocent', or 'good'. Thus, two main categories were used in this narrative. The collective 'we' are usually 'free people', 'people with souls', 'Poles', 'Slavs', and followers of God. In contrast, the malicious Others in these narratives are the Freemasons and globalists: primarily 'Wall Street, the Rothschilds, the Morgans, the Rockefellers, BlackRock, Vanguard, the Schwab agenda, and the NWO'. This may seem like Level 2 theories, but the interpretation of their role is different. In these narratives, they merely carry out orders of supernatural forces such as demons or Satan, and they do so for different reasons. According to this narrative, they 'sell their souls for mammon' or enjoy making ordinary people miserable. The following example (a comment on the involvement of Trzaskowski, President of Warsaw, in the C40 agenda) shows that in these types of narratives, supernatural forces are attributed to direct engagement in politics:

Let the voters of the PO finally see through their eyes that behind that pretty, educated face lies pure evil with contempt for the ordinary person. This entire agenda is written by Lucifer personally.

As the name we have given to this narrative suggests, the most important category for its followers is the soul. Because it is the highest good that must be protected – the essence of one’s identity or humanity – the followers of this CT seem to focus primarily on events that restrict people’s freedom (e.g. pandemic or environmental restrictions) or implicate them in corruption and power relations (serving foreign interests, conspiratorial organisations, or Satan himself). In the former case, conspiracy theorists see a threat of destruction or erasure of one’s soul, while in the latter, it is selling it out or ‘contaminating’ it with Evil. In the following example, we can see the significance of the soul in this narrative, as its perdition is not only a concern for ordinary people, but also something to be wished upon the worst enemies:

Lucifer will make such a scraping [abortion] for you so that you will feel it all your wicked eternity. The globalists are playing God by transforming human beings into transhumanoids regardless of the deadly side effects, but you are no better than them, and I hope your souls will undergo total erasure.

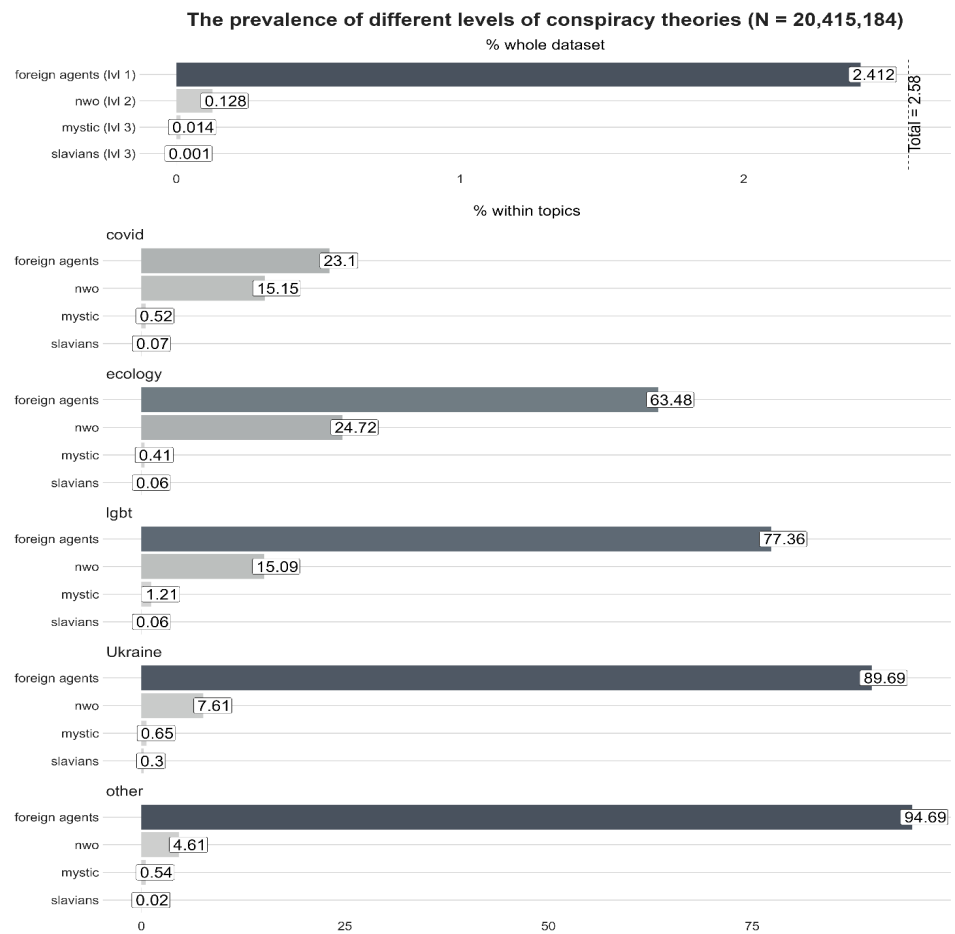
4.2 Findings from quantitative analysis

Quantitative analysis revealed that conspiracy theories in the context of Polish political discourse are relatively rare. In our dataset, conspiracy theories represent 2.58% of the overall content. This low percentage suggests that conspiracy theories are not widely embraced or discussed in the Polish political sphere but are noticeable. The results also show that conspiracy narratives have gained diversified attention (see Figure 1).

We divided the dataset into five topics: covid pandemic, ecology, LGBT, war in Ukraine, and other (usually discourses related to specific politicians, political parties, and minor events). For every topic, we automatically coded documents regarding the level of conspiracy theories. The general pattern was clear. The most popular are Level 1 conspiracy theories, which interpret events in frames of treason or the influence of external political forces (2.4%). Less frequent are Level 2 conspiracy theories that highlight the role of omnipotent, malevolent actors (0.13%), and the least frequent are Level 3 theories which undermine basic scientific knowledge (mystic 0.014%; Slavians 0.001%). Additionally, this pattern is consistent within every isolated topic. This supports the positive answer to the research question: The prevalence of conspiracy theories is associated with the level of divergence from conventional knowledge. Conspiracy theories that deviate more are discussed less than those that are not distant from conventional knowledge.

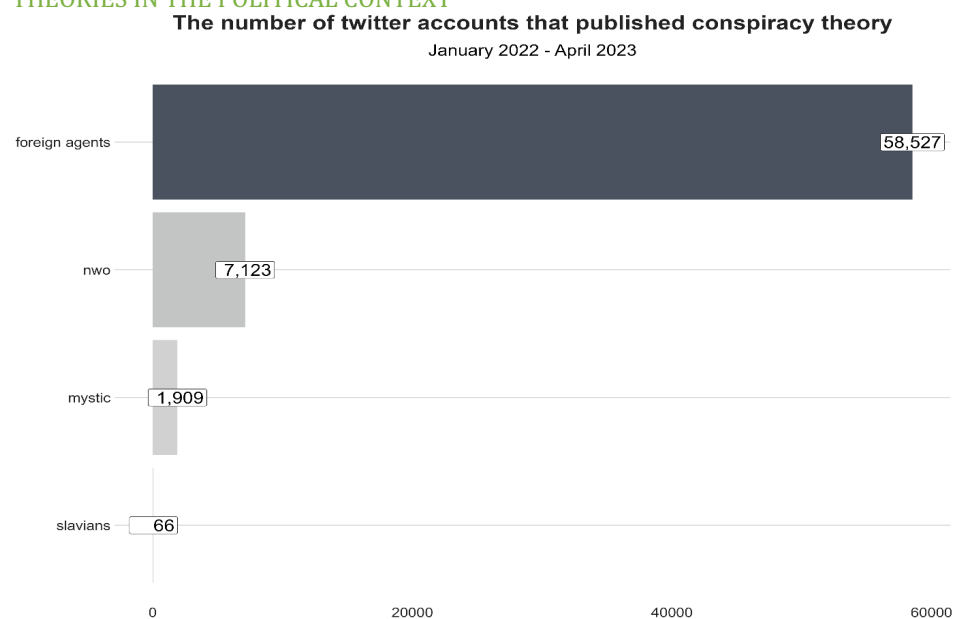
The prevalence of conspiracy theories in political discussions may be affected by hyperactive accounts that disproportionately publish their content (Matuszewski and Szabó 2023). Therefore, we verified the number of accounts that published conspiracy tweets. These results are congruent with those of the previous studies. The higher the level of conspiracy theory, the smaller the number of accounts that popularise it: about foreign agent theory wrote 58,527 accounts; about NWO’s impact, 7123 accounts, mystic interpretation involved 1909 accounts, and 66 accounts wrote about Slavians.

FIGURE 1: THE PREVALENCE OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN THE POLITICAL CONTEXT



Source: data collected by Twitter REST API.

FIGURE 2: THE NUMBER OF TWITTER ACCOUNTS THAT PUBLISHED CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN THE POLITICAL CONTEXT



Source: data collected by Twitter REST API.

5 CONCLUSION

The primary purpose of the text is to present a typology of conspiracy theories based on their extremity. We used Eviatar Zerubavel's theory of mindscape to show that conspiracy theorists do not form one but several distinctive thought communities that perceive the political reality around them differently, use different categories to classify it, focus their attention on different elements of reality, and assign a specific meaning to political events. We suggest three levels of conspiracy theories, based on their deviation from conventional knowledge.

These levels include fringe theories, which are congruent with commonly shared beliefs but accept conspiracy despite a lack of evidence or ignoring the presence of incongruent evidence; medium theories, which deviate more significantly from conventional knowledge by accepting the presence of secret groups and assigning them omnipotence and vague motives; and extreme theories, which deviate heavily from conventional knowledge by rejecting scientific and common beliefs about reality and introducing their cognitive scheme. In addition to providing this typology, this study also provides an empirical illustration of every level in the Polish political context.

The theoretical differentiation of political conspiracy theories into three levels provides additional insight into conspiracy theory diffusion. We may find a discrepancy in the literature regarding how widely these theories are spread or how quickly they diffuse, especially on social media. There is a group of studies that show that the thesis about the pervasiveness or outburst of conspiracy theories is exaggerated, while at the same time, the other studies find evidence that supports it. We form the working hypothesis that the diffusion of political conspiracy theories varies depending on the level of extremism. The probability of adopting conspiracy theories depends on how close they are to someone's mindscape and macro-level conditions. Thus, Level 1 conspiracy theories are relatively easy to adopt because they do not challenge conventional beliefs, especially if they appear in an enhancing context such as war, economic crisis, or pandemics (van Prooijen and Douglas 2017). In contrast, Level 3 conspiracy theories are unlikely to be adopted because of their radical departure from conventional knowledge and the cognitive barriers they present. If the propensity to adopt ideas is conditional on how these ideas are interpreted, individuals exposed to the same information may behave differently. We highlight that this is due to cognitive, not structural, barriers (Goldberg and Stein 2018). As a result, Level 3 conspiracy theories are adopted by members of specific thought communities (e.g. those that accept transcendent beings) and do not penetrate society.

Although there are differences between the various levels of conspiracy theories regarding deviation from conventional knowledge, there is one common point. In all theories, Polish politicians are usually painted as lacking agency. They are often portrayed as puppets controlled by hidden forces, such as foreign governments, secret societies, or global elites. There are only a few exceptions in which it is suggested that a Polish politician may play a less subordinate role in more powerful groups (that is, Rafał Trzaskowski in the Bilderberg group) or fights against secret groups (Confederation's member Grzegorz Braun, but often both Braun and Confederation is accused of representing Russian or Jewish interests). In this sense, Polish politics is a spectacle for people who do not see real hidden forces. This common thread suggests that Polish political conspiracy

theories undermine the legitimacy and autonomy of the political establishment, fuelling mistrust among citizens (Jolley and Douglas 2014).

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OD POLITIČNIH IZDAJ DO METAFIZIČNEGA BOJA MED DOBRIM IN ZLIM. RAVNI POLITIČNIH TEORIJ ZAROT IN NJIHOVE POSLEDICE NA RAZŠIRJENOST

Študija raziskuje razširjenost teorij zarot v političnem komuniciranju. Analiza razkriva, da konspirativni politični diskurz odstopa od nezarotniškega diskurza in kaže notranje nedoslednosti. Različne podskupine znotraj skupnosti teorij zarote so razvile različne načine zaznavanja, razvrščanja, spremljanja in dodeljevanja pomena dogodkom. Študija ugotavlja, da je privlačnost teorij zarot zakoreninjena v njihovi kulturni vpetosti. Z uporabo nabora podatkov o tvitih, ki omenjajo poljske politike in politične stranke, nanje odgovarjajo ali so njihovi avtorji, študija vključuje t.i. velike podatke s kombinacijo kvantitativne in kvalitativne analize vsebine. Tipologija teorij zarote vključuje tri ravni, ki temeljijo na njihovem odstopanju od konvencionalnega znanja. Te ravni so empirično ponazorjene v političnem kontekstu Poljske. Tovrstna diferenciacija osvetljuje širjenje teorij politične zarote, kar nakazuje, da je verjetnost posvojitve odvisna od miselnosti posameznika.

Ključne besede: teorije zarot; politično komuniciranje; politični diskurz; Twitter; razširjenost teorij zarot; veliki podatki.