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● **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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THE EUROPEAN COURT OF JUSTICE AS POLITICAL ACTOR IN INTERGOVERNMENTAL COORDINATION

János FAZEKAS¹

The European Court of Justice (ECJ) isn't a political actor, nonetheless, can play a role in solving political debates. ECJ makes rulings on political issues decided by EU bodies. Although ECJ has never elaborated a comprehensive political question doctrine, it did decide case-by-case whether a political problem is justiciable from the 1970's up to now. ECJ legally reviews the operation of the Executive on EU and national level. Besides, courts usually refrain from cases of directly political substance because they cannot take over the role of political actors. The aim of the research is to examine how ECJ has tried to balance between these requirements, and in which cases did it shape European intergovernmental relations. The analysis is mainly based on court cases and their political context. Main conclusion of the research is that ECJ can make a valuable contribution to Europe on becoming a real political community.

Key words: European Court of Justice; political question doctrine; conditionality mechanism; rule of law; judicialization.

1 INTRODUCTION

The European Court of Justice (ECJ) is not a direct political actor, but it can play a key role in solving political debates and policy issues within the European Union (between member states or between EU bodies or member states and EU bodies). This significant role may manifest itself when the court decides individual cases, interprets EU law and gives opinions on drafts of international treaties. As a result, the ECJ must make rulings on political - policy-related - issues decided by EU bodies, or issues with strong political overtones but which are legal ones. The ECJ has always been vigorously guarding its power of review, protecting its right to apply legal rules to political questions. Although the ECJ has never elaborated a comprehensive political question doctrine, it has had to decide on a case-by-case basis whether a political problem is justiciable. Doing so, the Court has stepped into the European political arena in several cases from the 1970's (e.g., the Lothar Mattheus-case) up to now (see the so-called conditionality mechanism later). The ECJ, as every court, must conduct the principle of rule of law and review the operation of the Executive including the

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EU bodies and the member states' governments from a legal point of view. On the other hand, courts usually refrain from cases of directly political substance which are not subject to clear legal standards, because if they did, they would take over the role of the political actors (see the critics of judicialization later). The aim of the research is to examine how the ECJ has tried to balance between these requirements, and in which cases did it shape European intergovernmental relations through its adjudicating powers.

2 METHODOLOGY

The paper, using jurisprudential method, analyses concrete court cases and their political context. It also covers the legal background and the theoretical-dogmatical foundations of governmental actions and their judicial control. In addition, the research examines the theoretical background of the variations of the political question doctrines in Europe from a comparative point of view. Moreover, the research uses the toolkit of institutional approach: it focuses on the relevant statutory regulation of the law of the European Union and the institutional framework of the EU. The paper first outlines the theoretical foundations of political question doctrine, and then discusses how the doctrine, which is essentially of American origin, has emerged in the main European legal systems (German-Austrian, French, and British). This is followed by an analysis of the relevant cases before the ECJ from the point of view of political question doctrine. In the Conclusions, I answer the question, whether and how the ECJ can contribute to the creation of a real European political community.

3 GOVERNMENTAL ACTS AND POLITICAL QUESTION DOCTRINE

Taking governmental actions or governing itself is a complex activity that is regulated by law but is a political activity in essence. There is a distinction between government and administration. Government essentially involves setting strategic goals related to leading the country and providing the necessary resources and means to achieve them. It is a political activity which typically involves choices between alternatives that express values (Marosi and Csink 2009, 115), so it is not neutral in an ideological sense. Its essence is taking discretionary actions with political content, setting priorities and oversee their implementation. Doing so, governing politicians are accountable to the people (Hague and Harrop 2004, 268). This is true even if we use the term governance instead of government due to the New Public Management approach, which emphasizes not the hierarchical but the network character of this activity (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011, 21–23).

Implementing political programs is the main assignment of public administration, which is the 'engine room' of the state (Hague and Harrop 2004, 290; Moynihan and Soss 2014). This is a bureaucratic administrative apparatus described by Max Weber (Weber 1947, 329–341), which is far more strictly regulated by the law than the political sphere.

Despite the obvious differences, it is often difficult to distinguish between government and public administration because of the overlaps in organizational and personnel matters e.g., in ministries (Hustedt and Salomonsen, 2014; Körösényi 1996). But why is it important to distinguish between the spheres? The importance of distinction lies in being able to decide which decisions can be challenged before a court and which cannot. If a decision concerns longer-term

issues of political significance, then it is called government, done by politicians, and controlled only by politicians (e.g., Parliament). But if it concerns the management of daily “business” done by the legally bound public administration, then control shall be carried out by those who themselves carry out this activity or are otherwise professionally qualified to do so, e.g., public administrative bodies or the courts (Ereky 1939, 120–123, 180).

Governmental actions have two conceptual elements: (1) their primarily political character and (2) the broad discretionary powers (free deliberation) performed by the decision-makers.

Political question doctrine is a theoretical framework which describes the connection between governmental actions and law. Namely, it defines whether an act of government may be challenged before the court. It is a substantial problem in the era of globalisation, when resilience and flexibility of governmental and administrative systems are common themes (Hoffman and Fazekas 2019, 286–297). To maintain resilience, modern legal systems provide agencies with broad deliberation, even discretionary powers, as the absence of detailed decision-making criteria and constraints laid down in legislation can enable administrations to respond quickly and effectively to continuously changing challenges (Warren 2003, 35–38). On the other hand, to maintain effectiveness, governments also need constant feedback on the quality of their work, both in legal and political terms, and to be subject to external scrutiny in the system of democratic checks and balances. In fact, the Anglo-Saxon doctrine of political questions is nothing other than a theoretical framework for the resolution of the conflict between these two opposing demands, the conflict between broad political discretion and accountability (and, within this, legality).

Government decisions on political questions have a special relationship with the body of law. They are usually governed by constitutional law or administrative law, but sometimes they have essentially no clearly identifiable legal basis. By their very nature, they are adopted on political questions, and it is not unprecedented that they have no legal effect (Barabás 2018, 86–90). Consequently, governmental actions cannot be challenged in court, since judges may only adjudicate legal disputes but not political disputes, they cannot assume governmental responsibility, since they have not been empowered by the sovereign people to govern. On the other hand, governmental actions may not violate the principle of the separation of powers (Fazekas 2019, 811). In other words, the doctrine of political questions is a tool in the hands of the court to prevent itself from deciding on the merits of issues where it would be imprudent to do so (Tushnet 2002, 1204).

The roots of the political question doctrine stems from American public law. The United States Supreme Court laid down the criteria for political issues and thus governmental actions in the famous *Baker v. Carr* landmark decision, in which the Court ruled on a case involving the boundaries of a constituency. In its decision, the Supreme Court set out the alternative criteria for a case to be considered a political question, which cannot be decided by the court: e.g., a ‘lack of judicially discoverable and manageable standards for resolving it’ or the ‘impossibility of deciding without an initial policy determination of a kind clearly for nonjudicial discretion’. The Supreme Court or other courts, invoking the political question doctrine, are often reluctant to take part in deciding such political questions, e.g., when the President and the Congress clash over the exercise of wartime authority (Porčnik 2019, 72).

Since governmental actions are not legally bound, decisions-makers, as I mentioned before, enjoy broad competence of deliberation or discretionary power regarding the political content of the decision. This free deliberation is a mandate for a political actor to act in a specific case in accordance with the objectives of government, within the general framework of the law. Discretion in this context means that statutory law provides a wide array of possibilities how a state body will decide. The legislator leaves it to the agency to determine the content of that decision. However, with the rise of civil constitutionalism, the principle of public administration being bound by law has become emphasised. This means that the administration cannot act in the absence of a legal mandate and that the law must also determine the content of the action (Rozsnyai 2017, 132). As a result, free deliberation seems to be problematic regarding the rule of law principle. That's why the relationship between free deliberation and legality has become a fundamental issue in European and American jurisprudence (McHarg 2017; Sowa and Selden 2003).

4 POLITICAL QUESTION DOCTRINE IN EUROPE

In European legal systems, political question doctrine cannot be found either in theory or in judicial practice in the form in which it surfaced in the United States. Constitutional courts in Europe are generally not part of the ordinary court system and are much more likely to be regarded as political bodies than the US Supreme Court. In Europe, the separation between law and politics is less strict. Consequently, while in the US the Supreme Court only rules on the specific issue of law that it is presented with (see the famous case or controversy clause), a European constitutional court examines the legal issue in a broader context, when, for example, it reviews a statutory law instrument abstractly in the light of the Constitution (Paczolay 1995, 22).

Nevertheless, political question doctrine has its own European antecedents and versions. The first theoretical doctrine to associate it with is the reason of state (*raison d'état*), with the pivotal thought that the interest of the state is more important than the legality of a state act (Miller 1980, 587; Vatter 2008).

In the German-Austrian jurisprudence governmental acts (*Regierungsakt*) are decisions of the state on matters of fundamental importance (e.g., in the field of foreign affairs and defence) and therefore subject to limited review of legality. The government must be given wide discretion in making decisions in these areas, as they are influenced by several external factors that are not dependent on the will of the government. In many of these matters, government must be able to respond to changing circumstances in the most flexible way, especially when risks associated with decisions are difficult to assess. (Schmidt-Aßmann 2019, 81-83).

The German Federal Constitutional Court (*Bundesverfassungsgericht*) made important decisions in some landmark cases as the Pershing case (1983) and the CERN case (2010). In both cases it ruled the constitutional complaints non-justiciable, because deciding on the merits the Court would have overruled the Government's political considerations (Barabás 2018, 88; Blumenwitz 2002, 103; Quint 2007).

The French jurisprudence, when dealing with the concept of *acte de gouvernement*, does not draw a sharp distinction between governmental and

administrative actions in terms of judicial review. As a rule, the court may review all decisions of the executive branch, with the exception of acts of government, for which there is no general definition. It soon became clear, however, that institutionalised control mechanisms were needed to ensure the legitimacy of public power. The Council of State (Conseil d'État) has emerged as an instrument for this purpose, initially acting as an advisory body to the government. Only later, while retaining its original function, became the guardian of the legality of government action, due to the principles of the Enlightenment. In the practice of the Council of State, the requirement of a constitutional state became increasingly important: the Executive must act in subordination to the law and the Constitution. However, there have been non-justiciable cases with direct political substance, e.g., initiating legislative proceedings or a government decision on the position to be taken by a French minister in the European Union's decision-making body, the Council. Nevertheless, the concept of *acte détachable* has helped to extend the scope of judicial review when detaching justiciable acts from non-justiciable ones. E.g., when the French state authorises another state to open an embassy in France, this constitutes an act of government which is not subject to judicial review. On the other hand, granting of a building permit for the construction of an embassy building is not a governmental act, but an administrative act of public authority, which is subject to judicial review (Marosi and Csink 2009, 118-123; Barabás 2018, 86).

In the common law of the United Kingdom, we find another historical precedent, the institution of the royal prerogative. These prerogatives have traditionally played a role in foreign policy, declarations of war and military affairs, and their importance has of course declined sharply under the parliamentary form of government. Decisions taken under the royal prerogative are treated in theory and practice as acts of state that cannot be challenged in court but are governed by statutory law (Bradley and Ewing 2011, 250-251; Mello 2017). From the 17th century onwards, however, there were also cases of disputes between Parliament and the King in areas, such as economic policy, concerning the content of a royal prerogative. Such issues included whether the King could impose duties without the approval of the legislature, thereby raising extra revenue, or whether he could prohibit certain building works in London. The latter was the subject of the famous Case of Proclamations (1611). The decisions in later cases such as *Entick v Carrington* (1765), *Attorney General v De Keyser's Royal Hotel Ltd* (1920) and *Fire Brigades Union* (1995), if not explicitly political, have also established that decisions of the legislature clearly constraint the exercise of royal prerogative.

5 POLITICAL ISSUES IN THE CASE LAW OF THE ECJ

The jurisprudence of ECJ, unlike that of the US Supreme Court, has not developed a clear set of criteria for dealing with cases of political nature. Therefore, it is not possible to speak of a uniform political question doctrine in this context (Butler 2018). In addition to the theoretic and historic specificities we have seen, it is because the law of the European Union was originally developed to promote economic integration rather than to enforce broader constitutional considerations or values. On the other hand, one of the key issues of EU law is to promote effective judicial review and legal protection, so only a narrow limitation of this is conceivable. According to Article 19(1) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) the Court of Justice of the European Union ensures that the law is respected in the interpretation and application of the Treaties. The

interpretation of this provision is a matter for the Court of Justice, which in essence defines the limits of its jurisdiction.

Therefore, the Court of Justice's power of review should extend not only to the narrow legal issues but also to the relevant facts beyond those issues, including the political circumstances, if necessary for the assessment of the case. The Court of Justice also plays a wide range of roles: it exercises jurisdiction at first and second instance, interprets EU law for national courts and gives opinions on draft international treaties. It therefore must give its legal opinion on a very wide range of issues, including political decisions made by EU bodies, or on essentially legal questions with strong political overtones. In doing so, the Court has always been jealously guarding its power of review, protecting its right to apply legal rules to non-legal questions, which leaves room for the application of a kind of political question doctrine, since it must be able to decide which cases it can and cannot rule on (Butler 2018, 334).

However, there are also views that the Court of Justice should exercise restraint in cases where decisions of the EU institutions on policy issues are challenged before it. However, the Court of Justice has ruled on a few such cases, even when the position of these institutions was unanimous. For example, in its Opinion No 2/13, it expressed reservations about the EU's accession to the European Convention on Human Rights, even though it was supported by most of the EU institutions and the Member States. Or, for example, in Opinion 1/60, the court took the view that the proposed amendment to the Treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community was a political and not a legal issue, as it could lead to additional costs and hence tax increases - again showing that it was aware of the seriousness of the issue and the danger of bringing political disputes into the judicial arena (Butler 2018, 335). However, in the context of the 1995 Intergovernmental Conference, the court made it clear that disputes that could be satisfactorily resolved at the political level should be resolved there and not brought before the Court of Justice (Butler 2018, 336).

Of course, there are also contrary approaches in the Court's practice, pointing towards a kind of specific political question doctrine. Thus, relatively early on, in *Lothar Mattheus v Doego Fruchtimport und Tiefkühlkost*, 1978 (Butler 2018, 336), the Advocate General explained that the Court's decision depended on the amendment of primary EU law, which was itself the subject of hard political bargaining, and therefore recommended that the Court should reject the application for lack of jurisdiction. The Court did so, stating that 'the question raised was not of a judicial nature', thus in a way acknowledging the existence of the political question doctrine (*ibid.*, 336-337).

Following Butler, it is worth briefly examining the legal regulation of the European Union's external relations and how the Court of Justice deals with political questions in cases of this nature. The question is also of great interest because of the growing importance of the European Union as a global political actor and the growing importance of its external relations, which is reflected in the increasing number of cases brought before the Court of Justice. Several EU bodies have competences in this area, and as a result, there are disputes of jurisdiction which must be decided by the Court of Justice. Consequently, the scope of judicial review and the limits of jurisdiction are more in focus than ever (*ibid.*, 337-345).

Along these lines is the case of the *Commission of the European Communities v Hellenic Republic*, 1995, (*ibid.*, 338-339), which concerned the embargo imposed by a Member State on Macedonia. The Advocate General's Opinion explained that

certain aspects of the case were political and not specifically legal issues, and that the application of the relevant legal rules was therefore not a simple task. At the same time, the court added that the Court of Justice cannot be seen as entirely subordinate to the political power of the Member States, since it must ensure that Member States do not exercise their wide margin of discretion in the field of security policy in a careless manner. In Butler's interpretation, the Advocate General has in fact given a kind of extract from the political question doctrine in EU law.

The Court of Justice also applied a not comprehensively developed political question doctrine in *NF and Others v. Council of the European Union*, 2017 (*ibid.*, 339). In this case, the Court had to examine a joint declaration by the European Union and Turkey, but in its view, it was a political declaration and, even if it could have legal effects and be binding, it could not be considered as an act adopted by the European Council or another EU body.

A separate category of cases is those in which the Court of Justice has had to answer the question of the margin of manoeuvre of the Member States in ensuring their own external and internal security, maintaining their armed forces, choosing their personnel and organising their structures (*Angela Maria Sirdar v The Army Board and Secretary of State for Defence, Tanja Kreil v Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Alexander Dory v Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Alfredo Albore*, see Butler 2018, 339-340). The Court has concluded in these cases that it is essentially for the Member States to answer these questions, in line with EU law. In the *Alfredo Albore* case, the Court also stated that national discretion cannot be uncontrolled, so that entire national sectoral policies may not be outside the scope of judicial review. However, the Court did not set out any generally applicable criteria to be able to draw the line between justiciable and non-justiciable issues in the future.

Political questions are also raised in the context of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, CFSP (Butler 2018, 341-348). This is another area where political discretion has traditionally played a significant role in decision-making. In essence, the Treaties themselves, e.g., the Art. 24 and 40 of Treaty on European Union (TEU) and Art. 275 of Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), provide basis for a kind of political question doctrine by exempting decisions taken in the CFSP from judicial review. Nevertheless, the Court of Justice tries to act whenever possible, taking advantage of borderline situations in the context of its own jurisdiction. However, it finds it more difficult to make a sufficient case on substantive issues than on procedural issues, the former being more political in nature and therefore more likely to be rejected based on some sort of political question doctrine argument. Thus, in many cases, the Court's main task is to distinguish between substantive and procedural issues (*ibid.*, 343).

On a substantive issue, the Court of Justice ruled on a violation of fundamental rights in the *Kadi* case (2008), which concerned the implementation by the Commission and the Council of a UN Security Council resolution. The Advocate General's Opinion underlined that the fact that a measure is necessary to maintain international peace and security, e.g., to achieve an essentially political objective, does not mean that general principles of law need not be respected and that individuals may be deprived of their rights. Thus, even here the Court has not elaborated a coherent set of criteria for cases with a political content but has referred to their dual nature (*ibid.*, 339-345).

On a different matter altogether, the case of *Lukáš Wagenknecht v. European Council* (2020) (Brusenbauch Meislová and Marek 2023) was brought by Lukáš

Wagenknecht, a member of the Senate of the Czech Parliament. The claimant had previously asked the European Council to exclude then-Prime Minister Andrej Babiš of the Czech Republic from the European Council meeting of 20 June 2019 and from future discussions on the negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework for the period 2021-2027. The request was based on the grounds that the Prime Minister Babiš had, personally and through his family, several interests in the food industry, which gave rise to a conflict of interest. The Council rejected the request, arguing that its composition is laid down in Art. 15(2) of the TEU, from which no derogation is possible. The question as to who represents a Member State at a Council meeting is a matter for the national constitutional law of that Member State, and the European Council or its President has no discretion in this area.

Wagenknecht then sued the European Council before the Court of Justice, asking the Court to declare that the European Council had unlawfully rejected her application (*Lukáš Wagenknecht v European Council*). The Court of Justice, however, dismissed the action as non-justiciable and manifestly lacking any foundation in law, essentially accepting the reasoning of the European Council. It explained that, in addition to the fact that it is for the Member State to decide whether it is represented in the European Council by the Head of State or Government, it is also for the Member State to decide whether it should regulate the cases in which that person may not represent it at European Council meetings.

6 CONCLUSIONS

It is striking that the Wagenknecht case did not arise in the usual foreign and security policy area but relates to the internal functioning of the EU's organisational system and the participation of Member States in the EU's decision-making mechanisms. The Court does not refer to any overarching doctrine here either, merely stating that the issue falls within the broad discretion of the Member State and is therefore, it may be added, not a problem of European Union law on its merits. If it is a legal question at all, it is a question of national (Member State) law. Consequently, from the EU's point of view, it is practically a political issue. Hence, this case is political, therefore non-justiciable by the Court of Justice, because it falls within the jurisdiction of another legal system or legal dimension, that of national law.

From this point of view, Graham Butler's observation is interesting: the significance of the political question doctrine in the case law of the Court of Justice is whether the Union's institutions or the Member States can be left to control themselves, or whether the Court of Justice can do so. If the Court of Justice cannot exercise judicial control due to the political question doctrine, it would result in contradiction to the principle of the rule of law. And if Member States are completely free to enter contracts with third parties, this would completely undermine the single internal market and EU law itself (Butler 2018, 347-348). In fact, that is the significance of the Wagenknecht case: by refusing to rule on the merits of the case, the Court of Justice has effectively left one Member State without legal control over a key aspect of the functioning of one of the Union's main decision-making bodies, the European Council, namely who is entitled to represent a Member State at its meetings and under what rules. That is, of course, a matter for the Member State to decide on the political content, but the decision-making process and the merit of the decision itself depend mostly on whether the rules on conflicts of interest and exclusion exist and how they function. It is clear from this case that the Union itself could not, and did not wish

to, influence the internal functioning of one of the Union's supreme bodies on a matter of major importance for the rule of law. Only the Member State, which does not necessarily have a direct interest in the effectiveness of this control, could do so.

However, the case also raises the issue of national sovereignty. It depends on the form of government and the division of powers between the constitutional bodies of the Member State concerned who is entitled to represent the Member State at European Council meetings, the head of state or the head of government, and on the rules of that very representation. From this point of view, it is logical that the rules for this, including the provisions on conflicts of interest and disqualification, and possibly substitution, should not be laid down by the European Union but by the Member State itself in its national constitutional law and implemented by it. From another point of view, this does not solve the problem that the European Council is after all one of the main decision-making bodies of the European Union, and that the sovereignty of the Member States therefore deprives the Union of the possibility of controlling the decision-making process in its own body, free from influence.

There would therefore seem to be a strong case for the Court of Justice to develop and, of course, apply its own coherent political question doctrine, as this would draw a clear line between what is and is not justiciable on the borderline between law and politics. There is, however, a view that this may not be so desirable. A recent study by Alexandra Mercescu and Sorina Doroga, examining the practice of the Court of Justice, concludes that in the Court's practice, doctrine is used at most as a rhetorical element in certain decisions, and that its content varies from case to case. In their opinion, the development of a coherent doctrine would be neither possible nor desirable, given the complexity of the Union's legal system. Furthermore, the Court's practice is based on several doctrines and case-law strategies, and it would not be appropriate to add a system of principles with uncertain content to them (Mercescu and Doroga 2021, 28).

Whatever the fate of the doctrine in the Court's practice, politically sensitive issues will not be avoided in the future. One need only think of the procedure concerning the so-called rule of law or conditionality mechanism, which affects both Hungary and Poland. The purpose of this procedure is to enable the EU to ensure, or even to enforce, the rule of law in the Member States and scrutiny the usage of the EU's financial sources. The EU is walking on the borderline between law and politics since the application of these values depends on the political decisions of the governments of the Member States. It was clear from the outset that the Court of Justice would have to intervene in this matter at some point, as it was also suggested that the European Parliament could even take the European Commission to court if it did not initiate proceedings against Hungary and Poland (HVG 2021; Holesch and Kyriazi 2022).

In the end, the two Member States concerned, Hungary and Poland, brought legal action against the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, seeking the annulment of the EU legislation governing the rule of law mechanism (Regulation (EU, EURATOM) 2020/2092 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 2020 on a general regime of conditionality for the protection of the Union budget). The Advocate General's Opinion, presented in December 2021, proposed to dismiss the actions. And the Court did so in February 2022: in judgments C-156/21 Hungary v Parliament and Council and C-157/21 Poland v Parliament and Council dismissed the actions and stipulated that the legal basis for the mechanism is appropriate, and it is compatible with the procedure laid down in Art. 7 of the TEU and respects the limits of the powers

conferred on the EU and the principle of legal certainty. As a result, the European Commission triggered the mechanism against Hungary in April 2022 (Bayer 2022).

The Court ruled the legal actions justiciable and did not consider the conditionality mechanism case to fall under the scope of the political question doctrine. Consequently, the Court has decided on the merits of the case. It is fully understandable because the case had clear legal basis in EU law, so the Court had to carry out its adjudicative power.

If the Court continues down this path, it seems that will follow some kind of prudential theory of political questions (Birkey 1999). This means that the Court carefully considers whether a politically sensitive case is justiciable and draws as narrowly as possible the boundaries of the political question doctrine and seeks to ensure that as many acts of the Executive as possible are subject to judicial review, provided, of course, that the legal (constitutional) conditions for doing so are met. It is highly desirable, especially in view of the recent trends on limiting judicial power throughout Europe and the whole world. A theoretical (Hirschl 2013) analysis of the process of judicialization (judges taking over the role of elected politicians when deciding on political matters) provides the theoretical basis for this displacement. Furthermore, certain political moves tend to limit the scope of judicial review. For instance, in Hungary with the amendments to the Fundamental Law overruling certain decisions of the Constitutional Court (CC), the CC has less and less power to interfere in the decision of cases that the legislature and the constitutional branches want to keep to themselves (Fazekas 2022, 17-20; Sonnevend 2021, 175). In the United Kingdom, several government officials, including then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson said regarding the Miller/Cherry case in connection with Brexit that the courts got involved in politics, which is a matter for ministers and Parliament (BBC News 2020). If the political cohesion within the European Union is going to get stronger, it is vital that the Court as the main body of the European judiciary can rule on politically sensitive cases. The judiciary can namely take the case out of the current political context, which means that the impact of the decision will go beyond the specific case. In this way, the Court can decide issues on which it is very difficult or impossible to reach political consensus, or even cool the heat of political conflict (Sólyom 2006, 334). Doing so, the Court could help Europe to become a cohesive and organic political community. And maybe decide on the merits of disputes like the Wagenknecht case in the future.

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EVROPSKO SODIŠČE KOT POLITIČNI AKTER V PROCESU MEDVLADNEGA USKLAJEVANJA

Evropsko sodišče ni politični akter, kljub temu pa lahko igra vlogo pri reševanju političnih problemov. Evropsko sodišče odloča o političnih vprašanjih, o katerih odločajo organi Unije. Čeprav Evropsko sodišče nikoli ni razvilo celovite doktrine o političnem vprašanju, je od 70. let prejšnjega stoletja do danes odločalo od primera do primera glede vprašanja, ali je nek politični problem sploh mogoče obravnavati. Evropsko sodišče pravno preglejuje delovanje izvršilne oblasti na ravni EU in nacionalni ravni. Poleg tega se sodišča običajno vzdržijo primerov neposredno politične vsebine, ker ne morejo prevzeti vloge političnih akterjev. Cilj prispevka je preučiti, kako je Evropsko sodišče poskušalo uravnotežiti med temi zahtevami in v katerih primerih je aktivno sodelovalo v oblikovanju evropskih medvladnih odnosov. Analiza temelji predvsem na sodnih primerih in njihovem političnem kontekstu. Glavna ugotovitev je, da lahko Evropsko sodišče pomembno prispeva k temu, da Evropa postane prava politična skupnost.

Ključne besede: Evropsko sodišče; doktrina političnega vprašanja; mehanizem pogojevanja; pravilo zakona; judicializacija.

E-VOTING AS A TOOL TO REDUCE UNEQUAL VOTER TURNOUT IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Ondrej KUBA and Jan STEJSKAL¹

Electronic voting is one of several tools that have the potential to reduce the cost of voting for citizens and thus motivate them to vote. However, the results of previous research have shown that this effect is not achieved in every case. Our research examines the potential consequences of the introduction of e-voting in the Czech Republic, where the introduction of this tool is the topic of public discussion. More specifically, we examine whether the introduction of this tool has the potential to increase voter turnout and for which groups of citizens the potential is highest. For this purpose, we use data from a survey conducted on a representative sample of respondents. To test the hypotheses, we employ binary and multinomial logistic regression models. The results of the analysis show that the introduction of electronic voting, compared to other tools facilitating voting, has the highest potential to increase voter turnout in the Czech Republic. The increase in voter turnout is particularly noticeable among groups of citizens that usually do not participate in voting.

Key words: e-voting; voter turnout; Czech Republic; vote-facilitating rules.

1 INTRODUCTION

Declining voter turnout (Alvarez et al. 2009), citizen convenience (Henry 2003) or the development of e-government (Anane et al. 2007) contribute to the political discussion on e-voting. While in some countries this rule facilitating voting has been an integral part of the electoral system for several years, in other countries politicians are still discussing the introduction of e-voting. This discussion is also taking place in the Czech Republic. In this country, which is part of the Central and Eastern European countries, there are still no tools to make voting easier for citizens (e.g., postal voting, proxy voting, early voting) and the

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introduction of e-voting is now offered as one of the options to motivate citizens to vote.

The arguments for the introduction of electronic voting can be seen in the savings in travel costs associated with the traditional method of voting at polling stations. Another advantage of e-voting may also be the possibility for a citizen to vote from work or on holiday without having to significantly change his or her scheduled programme. However, the results of research examining the consequences of e-voting suggest e-voting may not increase citizens' interest in voting (Chevallier 2009; Goodman and Pyman 2016). Moreover, it may cause deeper differences among voters because only some citizens use this rule (Alvarez and Nagler 2000; Gibson 2001).

The conclusions of the previous literature on e-voting are often ambiguous and limiting. This research has examined the implications of the introduction of e-voting using the ex-post method in countries where e-voting has been introduced in combination with other voting facilitation tools (e.g., postal voting), such as Switzerland and Canada. In contrast, research using the ex-ante method to examine the effects of e-voting is poor, especially in countries where no voting facilitation instrument has been introduced.

This paper aims to address gaps in current research by providing an ex-ante analysis of the potential impacts of introducing e-voting in the Czech Republic. No similar studies have been conducted in the country, which has recently faced low voter turnout (Bláha 2023; Maškarinec 2023). The country was under a totalitarian regime with a centrally planned economy until 1989, and it transformed into a market economy during the 1990s. At the turn of the millennium, the Czech Republic became a member of international organizations like NATO and the European Union. Since 2010, there has been a polarization and extremization of citizens' political preferences (Rolník 2023; Kuba et al. 2022), leading to a gradual decline in voter turnout and uneven distribution among different social groups (Linek 2013; Stanley 2017). E-voting has been suggested as a potential solution to reverse these trends and improve voter turnout (Gerlach and Gasser 2009; Kensi 2005).

The paper is arranged as follows: Section 2 presents theoretical background and hypotheses, followed by the methods in Section 3. Then, Section 4 details the results followed by the discussion and conclusion in Section 5.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

E-voting is one of the ways in which a citizens can vote in an election without visiting a polling station. The introduction of this vote-facilitating rule reduces the direct and objective voting costs of citizens (Berinsky 2005), but also the costs perceived by citizens individually (Blais et al. 2019). Subjectively perceived costs may differ from actual costs. E-voting facilitates voting for citizens by reducing the time and effort required to vote (Gainous and Wagner 2007; Kensi 2005; Powell et al. 2012). The advantages of e-voting can be seen primarily in the removal of some barriers to the citizen's entry into the political market. It eliminates obstacles to voting for citizens with reduced mobility or citizens living abroad. However, it also offers flexibility and convenience for all other citizens to vote (Henry 2003). Citizens can vote at any time and from anywhere - for example, from home, from work, and even while on vacation. In addition,

electronic voting can encourage voting by young citizens who traditionally show low interest in elections (Smets and van Ham 2013).

Although e-voting reduces citizens' voting costs, the results of empirical observations have not clearly confirmed the increase in citizens' turnout since the introduction of e-voting. The reason for this trend can be seen primarily in the interest of voting. If voters voted regularly in the form of paper ballots in polling stations, some of them began to vote electronically. Citizens who did not participate in the elections regularly did not participate even after the introduction of e-voting. This is confirmed by evidence from Canada, Switzerland, and Estonia (Chevallier 2009; Goodman and Pyman 2016; Goodman and Smith 2017; Solvak and Vassil 2016; Vinkel and Krimmer 2017). The increase in interest in voting after the introduction of e-voting can be observed especially among citizens who have ever participated in previous elections (Madise and Martens 2006). From the above, e-voting could increase overall turnout by facilitating voting for irregular voters. In this context, we have established hypotheses that examine the effects of the introduction of electronic voting on citizen participation in elections. The hypotheses are as follows:

H1: Introducing electronic voting in the Czech Republic will boost the total turnout.

H2: Voter turnout rises among irregular voters after introduction of e-voting.

However, e-voting is not the only way to make voting easier for citizens. Studies show that, for example, optimal location of the polling station can increase voter turnout (Haspel and Knotts 2005; Orford et al. 2011). Bringing the polling station closer to the citizen's residence by 0.245 miles can increase voter turnout by up to 4-5 % (Cantoni 2020). For citizens, who are often busy, changing the opening hours of polling stations may be a suitable rule to facilitate voting. Extending polling station opening hours by 10 % may increase voter turnout by 0.5-0.9 percentage points (Potrafke and Roesel 2020). Garmann (2017b) postulated the conclusion that extending the opening hours of polling stations in the Saarland and Rhineland-Palatinate by 3 hours would increase citizens' turnout by 2.1 percentage points. Sometimes, however, even extending the opening hours of polling stations may not make it possible for workers to vote in elections, so Bradfield and Johnson (2017) recommend introducing a special "election day" when the whole nation should have time off and thus the opportunity to vote.

Although in many studies the factors of polling station location, polling station opening hours, or election dates have been shown to be significant, researchers prefer the technical conduct of elections. One of the possible measures to increase voter turnout is to combine multiple elections at the same time. There is evidence that many elections negatively affect voter turnout (Franklin 2001; Rallings et al. 2003). According to Garmann (2017a), there can be several reasons for this trend: citizens' fatigue from voting; high voting costs; saturating interest in politics; the feeling of fulfilment of civic duty after the first vote; less media coverage of individual elections; lower mobilization efforts of political parties. If two elections are scheduled in a relatively short period of time, turnout in later elections is significantly reduced. The concurrence of several elections increases turnout (Björk 2017). In addition to the concurrence of several elections in one term, turnout can be increased by introducing two consecutive voting days (Kaplan and Yuan 2020), or by introducing other instruments, such as: postal voting, proxy voting, special polling booths, transfer voting, and advance voting (Norris 2004).

However, the above-mentioned tools facilitating citizens' voting in elections do not sufficiently reduce citizens' costs. It is obvious that a citizen who votes by postal voting must complete the journey to the post office, a citizen voting proximally must authorize another citizen. Voting at a different time or place reduces costs, but citizens still must go to the polls. In addition, as the Internet and social networks are gradually becoming the main communication tool (Gerlach and Gasser 2009; Germann 2020; Oostveen and van den Besselaar 2004), we consider e-voting to be the most effective way to increase voter turnout and we establish the following hypothesis:

H3: In the Czech Republic, e-voting will increase voter turnout more than the implementation of additional vote facilitating rules.

Although e-voting can be an effective rule for increasing turnout (Svensson and Leenes 2003), it should be noted that it undermines voter representativeness by disadvantaging already disadvantaged groups (Alvarez and Nagler 2000; Gibson 2001). E-voting is preferred primarily by citizens who are regular Internet users. These citizens are mainly educated and wealthy (Gainous and Wagner 2007; Norris 2001; Oostveen and van den Besselaar 2004). Another determinant of e-voting is the age of the citizens. Young citizens are typical users of e-voting, while the oldest voters use this method of voting the least (Alvarez et al. 2009; Goodman 2010; Kenski 2005). Differences in the use of e-voting services can also be seen between the gender of citizens. Although the difference in studies is not statistically significant, men are more interested in e-voting than women (Solvak and Vassil 2016). This is because men often have a higher socio-economic status (including education and income) than women but are also more technologically proficient (Bimber 2000). However, other researchers see e-voting as a positive societal impact because it reduces inequalities in turnout by motivating young citizens or irregular voters to vote (Gerlach and Gasser 2009; Krueger 2002; Kenski 2005; Vassil et al. 2016). Based on these findings, we define the following hypothesis:

H4: The introduction of e-voting in the Czech Republic will have a positive effect on the reduction of disparities in voter turnout.

As noted in the previous section, research on electronic voting has some limitations. It typically uses an ex-post method to investigate the consequences of introducing e-voting in countries where it has already been introduced - Switzerland, Estonia, Norway, Canada, the UK (Binder et al. 2019; Clarke et al. 2012; Petitpas et al. 2021). In Central and Eastern European countries, the issue of e-voting has not received sufficient attention, although the introduction of this tool can have positive social impacts. However, Poland is an exception, where researchers Musiał-Karg and Kapsa (2021, 2020) have recently started to look more closely at the issue of e-voting. In this context, our research will focus on another Central and Eastern European country, the Czech Republic.

3 DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The input data of the analysis are the responses of the respondents, which were obtained through a questionnaire survey in the Czech Republic. Respondents' answers were collected through an online web survey. The questionnaire was prepared by sociological company Sociores. A representative sample of respondents (n = 807) was selected from users of the Czech National Panel. The

quota selection of respondents (gender, age, education) ensures that the sample is representative. The answers were obtained in May 2020. The questionnaire survey was preceded by a pilot survey in which the comprehensibility of the questions asked, and a sufficient range of answers were verified. The description of the sample of respondents is described in Table 1.

TABLE 1: SAMPLE OF RESPONDENTS

Category	Frequency
Age	18-29 years: 127; 30-49 years: 301; 50-64 years: 188; 65 years and over: 191
Education	Primary: 119; lower secondary: 296; higher secondary: 281; university: 111
Sex	Male: 395, Female: 412

Source: Sociores research (2020).

The analysis is based on basic statistical methods, but also on multinomial logistic regression and the Parson chi-square test (Ramsey and Schafer 2002). These methods are applied to verify the significance of the relationships between dependent and independent variables. A list of variables, information on their calculations and basic statistical data is provided in Table 2.

TABLE 2: LIST OF VARIABLES

Variable	Comment	Frequency/Mean ± St. Dev.
Dependent variables		
PVOT	Citizen since 2010: participated in all elections (Regular voter), only some elections (Irregular voter), did not participate in any elections (Non-voter), could not participate (First-time voter)	Non-voter: 110; Irregular voter: 196; Regular voter: 449; First-time voter: 52
FVOT	The citizen expects to participate in the next parliamentary elections in 2021	Definitely yes: 430; Probably yes: 219; Undecided: 68; Probably not: 62; Definitely not: 28
Independent variables		
AGE	Age of the citizen	48.315 ± 17.184
SEX	The citizen is a female: no (0); yes (1)	(0): 395; (1): 412
EDU	Highest completed citizen education: primary (1); lower secondary (2); higher secondary (3); university (4)	(1): 119; (2): 296; (3): 281; (4): 111
RURL	Size of the municipality in which the citizen lives: less than 1,999 (1); 2,000-4,999 (2); 5000-9999 (3); 10,000-99,999 (4); more than 100,000 inhabitants (5)	(1): 182; (2): 127; (3): 90; (4): 240; (5): 168
INFO	The citizen is watching the news. Measured in the interval 0-1, where 1 express that the citizen watches on all media channels (television, internet, radio, newspapers) and 0 expresses that the citizen does not watch news at all. Each media channel is expressed on a scale of 0.25.	0.459 ± 0.310
KNOW	The citizen can recognize differences in the programs of political parties: definitely not (1); probably not (2); I do not know / I did not watch these elections (3); probably yes (4); definitely yes (5)	(1): 26; (2): 208; (3): 152; (4): 283; (5): 138
UNEM	The citizen is unemployed: no (0); yes (1)	(0): 774; (1): 33
MODE	A comprehensive index of citizen satisfaction in the 2017 elections, created from 4 categories: satisfaction with life, personal financial situation, economy and political situation of the country. Each category measured using a scale (-2.2), where -2 means strongly dissatisfied and +2 strongly satisfied. For each category, a value in the interval (-1.1) is added, which considers whether the citizen's situation has changed for the better (+1) or for the worse (-1) from the elections to 2017. Subsequently, an average is calculated from the resulting values.	-0.094 ± 1.193
RVOT	The citizen voted in the previous elections: no (0); yes (1)	(0): 237; (1): 570
EVOT	Citizen requests electronic voting: no (0); yes (1)	(0): 272; (1): 535

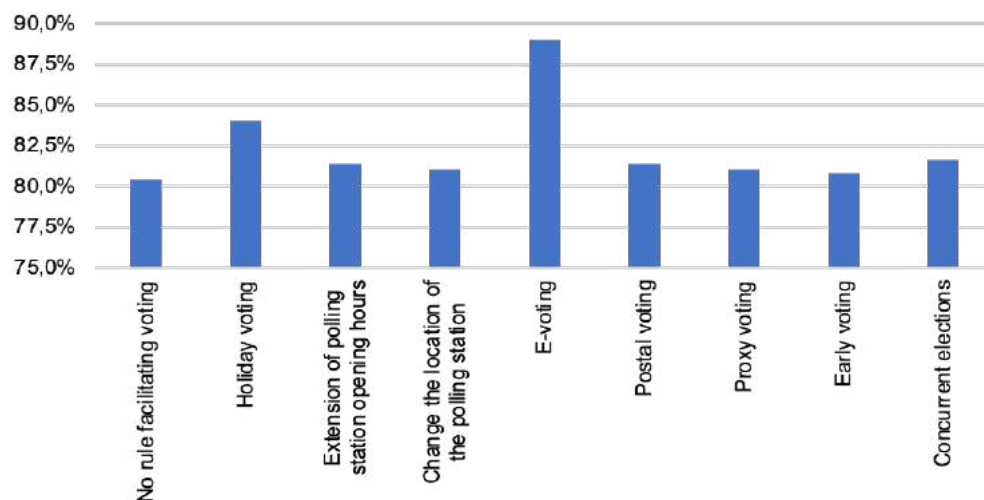
Source: Sociores research (2020).

Selected independent variables were identified as significant for voter turnout by previous literature (Smets and van Ham 2013; Trechsel 2007; Brady et al. 1995; De Vreese et al. 2006; Tuorto and Blais 2014).

4 RESULTS

The aim of the first phase of the analysis is to determine whether the introduction of electronic voting in the Czech Republic would have a positive effect on increasing voter turnout. Furthermore, a comparative assessment of the effect of e-voting in comparison with other selected tools that facilitate the electoral process for citizens is conducted. The results of the analysis are shown graphically in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1: DECLARED VOTER TURNOUT AFTER THE INTRODUCTION OF SELECTED FACILITATION RULE



Source: own processing based on Sociores research (2020).

The figure shows that the declared participation of citizens in the system without facilitation tools is 80.4%. This declared turnout is higher than the actual turnout over the last 10 years. Actual turnout during this time has been above 60%. Although the declared turnout is higher than the actual turnout, it can still be seen that there are rules that have a positive effect on the turnout of citizens. The latter is calculated as the difference between citizens who do not plan to participate in the next elections (or are undecided) but would be willing to participate if the chosen instrument were implemented. As can be seen, turnout increases the most with the introduction of e-voting (by 8.5 percentage points). An increase in turnout can also be achieved with the introduction of holiday voting (5.0 percentage points). Other rules facilitating voting are less effective. In addition to the question of the effect of e-voting on turnout, it is also necessary to look at who is motivated to vote by this rule. This is described in Table 3.

The results show which individual characteristics of citizens influence the regularity of their participation in elections. The basic group is non-voters. The table shows that irregular voters are older, more educated and have a higher level of political knowledge than non-voters. The same is true for regular voters. It should be noted here that regular voters are also employed and more satisfied with their lives. However, the variable under study, "e-voting", is important for this analysis. This variable is significant only for regular voters. It shows that compared to non-voters, regular voters do not ask for e-voting. In other cases, e-voting is not significant.

TABLE 3: DEMAND FOR E-VOTING BASED ON VOTER TURNOUT IN PREVIOUS ELECTIONS

	Irregular voter	Regular voter	First-time voter
INTERCEPT	-2.625*** (0.784)	-4.427*** (0.783)	176.887** (69.979)
AGE	0.033*** (0.009)	0.059*** (0.009)	-8.505** (3.381)
SEX	0.325 (0.265)	-0.193 (0.252)	5.454** (2.707)
EDU	0.398*** (0.153)	0.749*** (0.151)	1.539 (1.177)
RURL	-0.030 (0.088)	-0.021 (0.084)	-1.176 (0.765)
INFO	0.179 (0.425)	0.694* (0.404)	-8.039 (5.276)
KNOW	0.272** (0.115)	0.471*** (0.110)	-2.061 (1.267)
UNEM	-0.657 (0.495)	-0.982** (0.489)	19.612 (12.759)
MODE	0.015 (0.106)	0.315*** (0.101)	3.492 (2.275)
EVOT	-0.262 (0.273)	-0.578** (0.261)	2.496 (2.319)
N	807		
Cox & Snell	0.486		
Nagelkerke	0.544		

Notes: *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01; Logit Coefficients/ Standard errors in parentheses; dependent variable PVOT. Source: own processing based on Sociores research (2020).

The next part of the analysis focuses on the declared turnout and the impact of e-voting. The results are presented in Table 4.

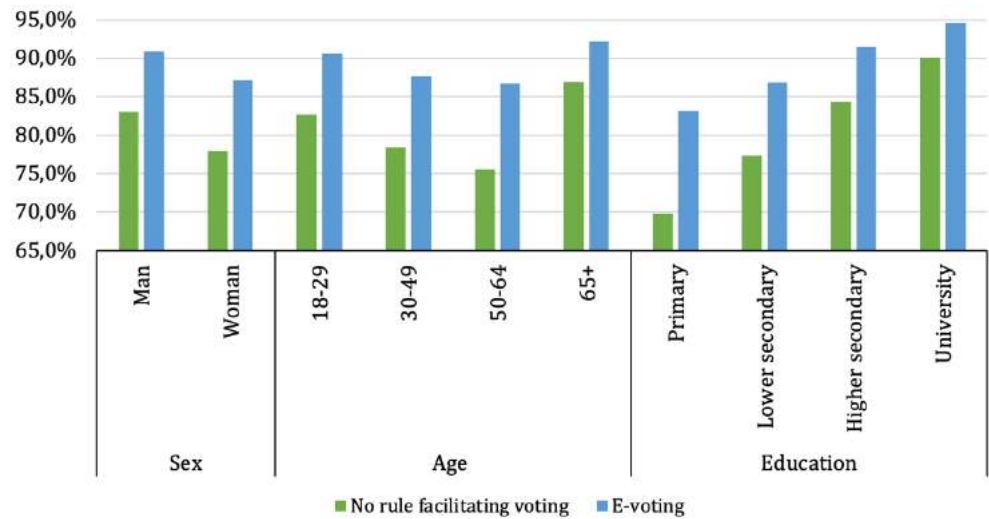
TABLE 4: DEMAND FOR E-VOTING BASED ON THE EXPECTED TURNOUT IN THE NEXT ELECTIONS

	Probably yes	Probably not	Definitely not	Undecided
INTERCEPT	0.282 (0.520)	0.877 (0.839)	-0.054 (1.080)	-0.370 (0.812)
AGE	0.011* (0.006)	0.036*** (0.011)	0.036** (0.014)	0.045*** (0.010)
SEX	0.472** (0.193)	0.294 (0.341)	-0.049 (0.449)	0.622** (0.314)
EDU	0.050 (0.106)	0.308* (0.187)	0.072 (0.258)	-0.249 (0.180)
RVOT	-1.203*** (0.245)	-3.914*** (0.421)	-4.002*** (0.584)	-3.100*** (0.366)
RURL	-0.015 (0.061)	-0.174 (0.113)	-0.031 (0.155)	0.015 (0.106)
INFO	-0.905*** (0.293)	-2.729*** (0.601)	-1.753** (0.760)	-1.635*** (0.521)
KNOW	-0.216*** (0.077)	-0.607*** (0.161)	-0.446** (0.212)	-0.373*** (0.140)
UNEM	-0.530 (0.594)	0.694 (0.720)	1.504** (0.730)	0.934 (0.621)
MODE	-0.117 (0.076)	-0.348** (0.143)	-0.350* (0.188)	-0.414*** (0.128)
EVOT	0.520*** (0.193)	0.251 (0.344)	-0.427 (0.438)	0.394 (0.318)
N	807			
Cox & Snell	0.357			
Nagelkerke	0.391			

Notes: *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01; Logit Coefficients/ Standard errors in parentheses; dependent variable FVOT. Source: own processing based on Sociores research (2020).

The results show what individual characteristics determine that a citizen chooses an answer (probably yes, probably no, definitely no, undecided) other than "definitely yes". Age, participation in previous elections and level of political knowledge or information are the main determinants of the answer. These variables are significant in all cases. Citizens who declared that they will participate in the elections are younger, have a higher level of political knowledge and information and have previously participated in elections. This is evidenced by the beta coefficients, which are the same for all other responses. However, for this analysis it is important to find out which citizens demand electronic voting. This variable is significant only for the "probably yes" response. This means that e-voting is mainly demanded by citizens who plan to vote but are undecided about voting. In the last part of the analysis, attention is paid to the effects of the introduction of electronic voting on the turnout of selected social groups. The change in turnout between different sexes, age groups and levels of education is examined. The results are shown in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2: DIFFERENCES IN TURNOUT BETWEEN SOCIAL GROUPS



Source: own processing based on Sociores research (2020).

As shown in the figure, the introduction of e-voting as a complementary measure to facilitate voting is expected to have a positive impact on voter turnout across all demographic groups. However, the question remains whether this approach can effectively mitigate differences in turnout rates between different groups. The figure does not provide conclusive evidence on whether differences in turnout rates between groups are statistically significant and, if so, whether the adoption of e-voting would reduce these differences. The statistical significance of the differences is shown in Table 5.

TABLE 5: SIGNIFICANCE OF DIFFERENCES IN VOTER TURNOUT BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL SOCIAL GROUPS

	No rule facilitating voting			E-voting		
	Pearson Chi-square	df	Significance	Pearson Chi-square	df	Significance
Sex	3.364	1	0.067	2.890	1	0.089
Age	9.151	3	0.027	3.762	3	0.288
Education	19.699	3	0.000	10.789	3	0.013

Source: own processing based on Sociores research (2020).

Table 5 shows whether the differences in voter turnout between social groups are significant. In an electoral system without e-voting, the differences in participation of all social groups studied are significant but differ only in the level of significance. However, even after the introduction of e-voting, there are

statistically significant differences in participation between men and women or between citizens with different educational backgrounds. It should be noted, however, that these differences are less pronounced than in a system without e-voting. However, the significant differences in participation between age categories have disappeared after the introduction of e-voting. This suggests that e-voting may eliminate some of the inequalities in participation.

5 CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the analysis indicate that the implementation of electronic voting has the potential to increase voter turnout in the Czech Republic. These results support hypothesis H1 and are consistent with previous research conducted by Gerlach and Gasser (2009). However, they contradict the findings of other studies such as those by Breuer and Trechsel (2006). Electronic voting is considered effective primarily because it is currently the only alternative to traditional voting methods in the Czech Republic. It is an innovative solution that can streamline and expedite the voting process, making it the most effective option for facilitating voting (H3). When compared to other voting facilitation methods, e-voting incurs minimal costs for voters. This is because individuals who cast their votes via mobile phone or computer are not required to visit a polling station, post office (in the case of postal voting), or office (in the case of proxy voting).

According to some studies (Alvarez and Nagler 2000; Gibson 2001), e-voting may exacerbate the unequal distribution of voter turnout among different demographic groups, as it is primarily used by young and educated citizens. However, this claim is only partially supported. If e-voting were introduced as a complementary tool to the current system, it could reduce turnout differences between social groups. Results from our research (H4) suggest that this effect could be expected in the Czech Republic, which is consistent with some previous studies (Gerlach and Gasser 2009; Kenski 2005; Vassil et al. 2016).

Nevertheless, it is also interesting to examine who demands the introduction of electronic voting in terms of historical and expected turnout. Our findings show that regular voters do not request e-voting, whereas non-voters do. This contrasts with research conducted in Estonia, Canada, and Switzerland (Chevallier 2009; Goodman and Pyman 2016; Solvak and Vassil 2016; Vinkel and Krimmer 2017), where electronic voting has been found to be primarily used by citizens who have previously voted. Based on our results, we reject hypothesis H2, as it appears that those who are truly interested in voting do not require vote-facilitating measures. Moreover, our results indicate that e-voting is mainly requested by citizens who are contemplating participating in the upcoming elections but have not yet made a final decision. Thus, e-voting could encourage these individuals to vote.

6 LIMITATIONS

In conclusion, it is important to acknowledge some limitations of the study. Previous research has demonstrated that questionnaire-based data collection can be biased, and declared turnout rates tend to be higher than actual turnout. This distortion occurs for two main reasons: either voters do not answer truthfully for various reasons, or only citizens who habitually participate in elections respond to questionnaire surveys (Ansolabehere and Hersh 2012;

Burden 2000; Deufel and Kedar 2010; McDonald 2003). Similarly, when asked if they would vote if e-voting were introduced, citizens may answer in the affirmative, even if they have no intention of doing so (Alvarez et al. 2009). We are aware of these limitations, but a questionnaire survey currently represents the only feasible method to conduct an ex-ante analysis.

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E-GLASOVANJE KOT ORODJE ZA ZMANJŠANJE NEENAKE VOLILNE UDELEŽBE NA ČEŠKEM

Elektronsko glasovanje je eno izmed orodij, ki lahko državljanom znižajo stroške glasovanja in jih tako motivirajo za glasovanje. Vendar pa rezultati prejšnjih raziskav kažejo, da ta učinek ni dosežen v vseh primerih. Prispevek preučuje morebitne posledice uvedbe e-glasovanja na Češkem, kjer je uvedba tega orodja tema javne razprave. Natančneje, preverjamo, ali ima uvedba tega orodja potencial za povečanje volilne udeležbe in za katere skupine državljanov je potencial največji.

V ta namen uporabljamo podatke ankete, ki smo jo izvedli na reprezentativnem vzorcu anketirancev. Za preverjanje hipotez uporabljamo modele binarne in multinomske logistične regresije. Rezultati analize kažejo, da ima uvedba elektronskega glasovanja v primerjavi z drugimi orodji, ki omogočajo glasovanje, največji potencial za povečanje volilne udeležbe na Češkem. Povečanje volilne udeležbe je še posebej opazno pri skupinah državljanov, ki se običajno ne udeležijo volitev.

Ključne besede: e-glasovanje; volilna udeležba; Češka; pravila za olajšanje glasovanja.

EARLY POST-WAR EUROPEAN INTEGRATION AND YOUTH POLICIES: EXPLORATION OF THE EUROPEAN YOUTH CAMPAIGN AND YOUTH INITIATIVES IN THE COMMON ASSEMBLY OF THE COAL AND STEEL COMMUNITY

Marinko BANJAC¹

Paper focuses on two relevant post-war frameworks for early European integration processes in the field of youth: the European Youth Campaign initiated by the European Movement in the 1950s and the Common Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community and its youth-related discourses and initiatives. Using a policy analysis approach based on Foucault's concept of the dispositif, the paper aims to critically interpret and compare the intricacies and dynamics of these specific settings at the European level, thereby providing insights into the early stages of youth policies in post-war Europe. By analysing the early configurations in a particular historical context in which certain problematisations of youth emerged, and in an interplay and dynamics of power between different actors, including the emerging European movements and institutionalised forms of intergovernmental cooperation at the European level, we critically interrogate the formations of strategic and conceptual frameworks through which young people in Europe were addressed.

Key words: youth; policy; post war Europe; European Youth Campaign; European integration.

1 INTRODUCTION

Youth policy at European Union level has gained recognition and importance in recent years. To address the needs, difficulties, and opportunities of young people across Europe, the EU has been actively working on numerous youth-

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related initiatives, activities and policies. For example, the European Youth Strategy, which covers the years 2019 to 2027, outlines the EU's youth policy objectives and implementation mechanisms. The EU's commitment to the needs and concerns of young people is also illustrated by the designation of 2022 as the European Year of Youth. As the relevance of youth policies continues to grow, it has sparked scientific debates concerning the development and evolution of this policy field (Williamson 2007; Wallace and Bendit 2009; ter Haar and Copeland 2011; Dibou 2012; Banjac 2014). Much of this discussion has focused on official EU documents and the period since 2000 (ter Haar and Copeland 2011), following the publication of the Commission's White Paper "A new impetus for European youth" (European Commission 2001) and the subsequent adoption of the European framework for cooperation in the youth field (Council of the European Union 2002). Some scholars, however, have taken a more historical view and traced the roots of youth policy back to earlier periods and the adoption of relevant treaties, such as the 1957 Treaty of Rome establishing the European Economic Community (Dibou 2012; Williamson 2007). Further, for instance, Pušnik and Banjac (2022, 5–6) argue that youth policies at the European level emerged in response to the social and political challenges posed by young people in the 1960s, especially in the context of the student protests of 1968.

However, the early years after the Second World War, which are relevant to understanding the emergence of youth policies in Europe, have received limited attention in the debate (for notable exceptions see Roos 2021b; Norwig 2014). This paper focuses on two relevant post-war frameworks for early European integration processes in the field of youth: The European Youth Campaign initiated by the European Movement in the 1950s (Richard 1982; Aldrich 1999; Norwig 2014) and the Common Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community and its youth-related discourses and initiatives (Shaev 2019; Roos 2021b). By unravelling the complexities and dynamics of these historical frameworks, we aim to provide insights into the early stages of youth policy at the European level in post-war Europe. The aim is not to identify the exact starting point of a coherent policy framework, but rather to uncover and compare initial formations of discourses, actions and interventions within two different institutional settings aimed at addressing and tailored to young people. These early developments laid the foundations for the later development of an increasingly comprehensive policy framework at European level.

To address this, I adopt an approach inspired by Bailey (2013), who proposes a method of policy analysis based on Foucault's concept of *dispositif*. Foucault (1980) employed the term to describe a heterogenous range of institutional, physical, and administrative mechanisms, as well as knowledge structures, that serve to reinforce and sustain the exercise of power within society. As Peltonen (2004, 206) clearly states, for Foucault, *dispositif* is a kind of amalgamation of "historically specific [...] discourses and practices." By analysing youth policy as *dispositif*, the paper aims to address the ways in which various power relations between different actors and institutions have contributed to novel perceptions about youth and to measures targeted at them. In addition, we examine the early formations of youth policies via production and dissemination of knowledge and discourses about young people and their needs and identities. Our understanding of policy extends beyond formal legislation and institutional frameworks to encompass a broader range of processes, such as policy enactment, advocacy, influence, and heterogenous political practises. This approach allows us to examine how policy is enacted and carried out in diverse and contingent ways in a variety of historically specific discursive and material sites.

The structure of this article consists of five sections. The first section elaborates Foucauldian *dispositif* framework for policy analysis and methodology used. The second section provides a contextual background to 1950s Europe. It includes an overview of the post-war reconstruction efforts, the evolving perceptions of youth, the geopolitical tensions of the Cold War, economic cooperation and European integration processes in which youth played significant part. This framework helps to understand the socio-political climate in which youth-related discourses, strategies, actions and practises have evolved. The third section looks at the European Youth Campaign in the 1950s. It examines the aims, strategies and initiatives of the campaign and highlights specific approaches that addressed the needs and aspirations of European youth in the post-war period. This analysis offers insights into the early perceptions and approaches that addressed youth at the European level after the World War II. The fourth section focuses on the Common Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community in the 1950s. It examines the Assembly's actions and initiatives that addressed youth concerns and aspirations. By examining specific measures, programmes and strategies, this section demonstrates the emergence of youth policy within the early institutional governing framework and formation at the European level. The conclusion summarises the findings of the study, highlighting and comparing insights from the analysis of the European Youth Campaign and the European Assembly youth policy in the 1950s. It reflects on the broader implications of the study and emphasises the importance of understanding the historical origins of youth policy in shaping contemporary discourse and practises related to European youth.

2 THEORETICAL-METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR HISTORICAL EXAMINATION OF POLICY FORMATIONS

Within political science, policy analysis as a field of inquiry is, broadly speaking, prevalently applied as a supposedly objective study of government activities and policy decisions (Fischer et al. 2015). It deals with the complexities of the policy process, including its formation, implementation and evaluation (see Goodin 2009). Moreover, it investigates the organisations and structures that provide the framework within which policies are defined and policy decisions are made (Orsini and Smith 2011, 4).

However, traditional policy analysis is constrained by its narrow focus on actors, institutions, and documents. It implies a research focus on state institutions, the laws and other forms of state regulation, the actions of political and institutional actors, and the elements of the policymaking and implementation processes (deLeon and Vogenbeck 2007; Orsini and Smith 2011; Antwi-Boasiako 2017). This focus tends to overlook the multiple influences of social and political relations on policy that go beyond the immediate political arena (Thissen and Walker 2013, v). It also neglects the historical dimensions of policy formations, which are not static or fixed, but rather dynamic and contingent.

Therefore, critical scholars have proposed alternative perspectives and approaches that go beyond traditional policy analysis (see, inter alia, Ball 1993; Hawkesworth 1994; Rizvi and Lingard 2009; Fischer et al. 2015). Among these, an approach that is particularly sensitive for historical examination of policy formations is proposed by Bailey (2013), who draws on Foucault's concept of the *dispositif* to conceptualize an approach to policy analysis. According to Foucault

(1980, 194), a *dispositif* is “a heterogeneous ensemble of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements and philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions” that shape and regulate human behaviour. Foucault (1980, 194–95) additionally argues that *dispositif* has a dominant strategic function since it is a “formation which has its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an urgent need” (Foucault 1980, 195). From this perspective, the *dispositif* is a specific and concrete response to a particular socio-political issue or problem that exists in a specific historical formation and combines “very heterogeneous elements” whose interplay “produces both power structures and knowledge” (Kessler 2007, 2–3). Bailey (2013, 811) emphasises that the *dispositif* is at the same time a broader heterogeneous productive formation of discursive and non-discursive elements at the level of structure but is also formed by and through “individual mechanisms, such as organisations, programmes or events, within this ensemble” (P. L. J. Bailey 2013, 811).

Foucault's approach to *dispositif* can therefore serve as an interpretive key to understanding the historical dimensions of policy analysis. Namely, it allows us to consider policy formation as always in a process of becoming, constituted in different ways at different times according to the differential multiplicity of forces, discourses and knowledges that act upon it and constitute it both as an idea and as a material and governable field of practices, culture and meaning (P. L. J. Bailey 2013). In our case, then, the emergence of youth policy at the European level is not a clear, fixed event or setting defined by documents, established institutional frameworks, centralised policy makers, and so on. Its logic, meaning, and materiality are all a construction and product of reciprocal articulations that have emerged historically between discursive and non-discursive practises in response to problematisations. This does not mean that there are no consistencies, overarching trajectories and commonalities of meaning and practice in framing youth and policy related to young people over periods of time. Policy frames, including those related to youth, can become relatively stable formations. However, our point is that youth policy both depends on a range of forces and is always a contested space of meaning, practice, and the exercise of power through which young people are governed in a particular way.

Following the orientations of the approach, the analysis of two formative frameworks of youth policies at the European level, the European Youth Campaign and the Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community consisted of several methodological procedures. The analysis included a baseline analysis of secondary sources that offered insights into the broader socio-political and economic landscape of post-war Europe as “conditions of possibility in which knowledge” (McLeod 2001, 97), narratives and discourses about youth are produced. This preliminary research provided a contextual understanding of the historical period under study and laid the groundwork for a more informed and nuanced analysis of early formations of youth policies at the European level. To explore the European Youth Campaign and the European Coal and Steel Community Assembly as frameworks and formative venues of youth policy at the European level, the research draws from historical archives that contained relevant documents. Specifically, the Historical Archives of the European Union (EUI 2023) and the Archives of European Integration (AEI 2023) were consulted. These online archives are recognised repositories of historical materials that shed light on the development of European policies and initiatives (Wilkin 2009; Audland 2007). The archival research involved identifying and locating documents and a systematic approach was used to find primary sources directly

related to the youth policies studied. A thematic approach (Wilbraham 1995) to “analyse classifications and present themes” (Alhojailan 2012, 10) related to youth was adopted, which made it possible to further identify the main narratives, discourses and actions related to youth policies. Furthermore, attention was drawn to the different definitions of “youth” in the documents, reflecting the evolving understanding of youth in the European context. The documents studied were examined along with existing interpretations (Preda 2014; Palayret 1995, 2014; Norwig 2014; Shaev 2019; Roos 2021b) of both frameworks, the European Youth Campaign and the Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community to identify the strategic and conceptual dimensions that have been developed and used to deal with young people in Europe.

3 RESHAPING NARRATIVES: YOUTH IN POST-WAR EUROPEAN SOCIETY, THE ONSET OF THE COLD WAR, AND THE EVOLVING EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

The end of the Second World War brought profound change to European societies as nations faced the consequences of immense devastation and loss. The destructive effects of war became a catalyst for post-war ideas of unity and cooperation aimed at ensuring lasting peace and stability in Europe (Milward 1984).

In rethinking Europe, its status, orientation, and its identity, young people have often been a reference for what Europe essentially is. Young people emerged as a powerful force symbolizing renewal, progress, and the way forward. In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, various European countries began to talk of the “younger generation” playing an important role in the reconstruction and spiritual renewal of post-war European societies (Wienand 2016). These discourses were partly in line with traditions and concepts already developed by youth movements but were also the result of the specific post-war situation. As all of Europe rebuilt, young people as a group were the object of countless debates and government policies as they represented the “hope of the future” (Wienand 2017). This discourse was aligned with existing traditions and concepts developed by youth movements, but it was also a response to the specific post-war situation. Young people became a focal point around which elements of the new society were built, and which came to the fore in social and political discussions (Jobs 2007) and practices. This was visible through youth’s cultural internationalism in the form of mobilities, backpacking (Jobs 2015), while another relevant example of transforming youth’s attitudes in the post-war period is the profound and philosophical movement of Lettrism, which emerged in France and stimulated the artistic expression and imagination of the youth (Jobs 2007).

Young people were also active in European movements for European unity (Preda 2014). These movements, at least most of them, were inspired by the vision of a united and peaceful Europe that would overcome the nationalist divisions (Boer, Wilson and Dussen 2005). As such, they received support from the United States, particularly through the implementation of the Marshall Plan. The latter, formally known as the European Recovery Program, was a U.S.-sponsored program that “transferred \$13 billion in aid from the United States to Western Europe in the years from 1948 to 1951” (De Long and Eichengreen 1991, 2; see also Holm 2016). The USA supported the idea of a united Europe for both economic and political reasons (Rappaport 1981; Lundestad 1986).

Economically, the US wanted to help rebuild Western Europe as a market for American goods and services and as a source of raw materials and trading partners. Politically, the US aimed to prevent the spread of communism in Europe, especially after the Soviet Union established its sphere of influence in Eastern Europe (Messenger 2014). In this state of geopolitical tension and ideological rivalry between the United States and its allies, on the one hand, and the Soviet Union and its allies, on the other, the Cold War context further heightened the significance of European movements that sought to stimulate, promote, and advance the idea of European unity (Schwabe 2001; Rappaport 1981). Thus, the movements, not just those supporting the European unity, but in movements general, became part of the wider ideological battlefield (Kotek 2004). Both sides involved in the Cold War financed youth organizations, utilizing them as platforms to disseminate their own value systems among young people while discouraging alternative perspectives (ibid.).

The European Unity Movements, in which young people played an active role, made various attempts to shift the institutionalization of cooperation at the European level (CVCE 2016a). The International Committee of the Movements for European Unity, arising from the Union of European Federalists and other related movements, surfaced as the predominant organization in Europe. This committee played a pivotal role in orchestrating the influential Congress of Europe, held in 1948 in the Hague (Guerrieri 2014). This congress deliberated on various possibilities of European cooperation.

For our purposes, it is important to emphasise that the Hague Congress stimulated more concerted efforts to organise and deepen European cooperation. As a result, "the International Committee of the Movements for European Unity [...] became the European Movement on 25 October 1948" (CVCE 2016b). The European Movement, under the leadership of influential politicians like Robert Schuman and Paul-Henri Spaak, was instrumental in advancing the political process of European integration and swaying public opinion in favour of a united Europe. As Aldrich (1995) points out, the movement received considerable support from the United States, both financial and otherwise: "Substantial campaign funds to promote the message of unity in Europe" (ibid., 159) were directed at various audiences, including youth.

Another significant push for European cooperation and deeper integration arose from the relationship between France and Germany. One of the major obstacles to Franco-German reconciliation after the war was the question of coal and steel production (Petzina, Stolper and Hudson 1981; Gillingham 1991). Coal and steel were the two most vital materials for developed nations; the backbone of a successful economy. Coal was the primary energy source in Europe, accounting for almost 70% of fuel consumption. Steel was a fundamental material for industry and to manufacture it required large amounts of coal. Both materials were also needed to create weapons (NEU 2018).

In response to this pressing issue, the Schuman Plan, originally proposed by the President of the European Movement and French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman, was designed to promote deeper European integration (Alter and Steinberg 2007). Although a political initiative, the Plan was also driven by significant material and economic factors. Its outcome was the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1951, which established the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) (Gillingham 1991). The ECSC consisted of the six countries, including France, Italy, the Benelux and West Germany, and was intended to

create a unified framework for producing and trading coal and steel (Mason 1955). The United Kingdom, however, decided not to participate in the ECSC because it opposed a supranational authority (Blair 2005, 22). The institutional structure of the ECSC was centred around the High Authority, the forerunner of today's European Commission, which was responsible for carrying out the Community's tasks. The Council of Ministers represented the governments of the member states, with the presidency rotating between states every three months. In addition, the Common Assembly, which later became the European Parliament, consisted of representatives elected either by national deputies or by directly elected individuals who had the power to supervise the activities of the executive (Gillingham 1991).

The Common Assembly, as Rittberger (2005) shows, was established based on very diverse ideas about whether and how to include a parliamentary body should be included in the ECSC's institutional framework. It became clear that its inclusion in the institutional structure served the purpose of ensuring democratic accountability (Rittberger 2005, 98). Consequently, the Treaty of Paris states that "The Assembly, which shall consist of representatives of the peoples of the States brought together in the Community, shall exercise the supervisory powers" (European Coal and Steel Community 1951, 30). Obviously, the assembly was intended to provide a democratic counterweight and act as a check on the High Authority, possessing formal powers to remove the High Authority from office following investigations of abuse (Polin 2014). Basically, there was a common agreement that "a parliamentary assembly was considered an acceptable part of the Community's institutional architecture as long as it did not cause any form of interference with domestic economic objectives" (Rittberger 2005, 104) of member countries. From this position, with a rather weak role from the outset, it has managed to develop into a relevant institution, helping to identify various relevant issues and formulating ideas, initiating plans, programmes and projects in various fields that are also relevant to young Europeans (Guerrieri 2008).

4 FRAMEWORK FOR CHANGE: EUROPEAN YOUTH CAMPAIGN AND SHAPING YOUNG PEOPLE'S SUBJECTIVITIES

The post-war European society was characterized by a rich diversity of social, confessional, and political backgrounds among the youth population (Wienand 2016, 57). This diversity was reflected in various forms of collective organization adopted by young people. For instance, the establishment of the World Federation of Democratic Youth (WFDY), a left-leaning organization founded after the Second World War, provided a platform for youth with shared ideologies to come together. As Kotek (2004, 169) explains, through the WFDY and the International Union of Students (IUS), another similar international youth organisation, "the Soviets had a monopoly in international youth and student affairs. [...] [A]s they were led by the communists, this meant that from 1945 to 1950 the representation of young people at the international level was a Soviet monopoly; and it was exercised along Stalinist lines, attacking the Marshall Plan and the European movement [...] and so on." One of the events under the auspices of the Soviet regime that particularly caught the attention of Western governments, officials and the United States amidst the escalating Cold War tensions was the 3rd World Festival of Youth and Students organized in Berlin by the WFDY in 1951 (Kotek 1996). This youth festival, which was exceptionally

well attended, served as a wake-up call, highlighting the potential influence and appeal of socialist values among young people (*ibid.*).

For liberal Western governments, two significant problematizations emerged in relation to the youth organising in Europe, requiring strategic intervention in the form of governmental responses at various levels including European. The first was the urgent need to reduce the spread of socialist ideas and Soviet influence, which was a critical concern for liberal Western governments and US officials. Recognizing the necessity to redirect young individuals away from these ideological frameworks, efforts were made to address this issue effectively. The second challenge was to create a strong sense of European identity despite the ongoing process of European integration through different movements, political actions and discourses. Young people were identified as a pertinent target group because of their perceived receptiveness to different ideas, necessitating initiatives to promote a cohesive European identity among them.

One important framework through which these youth-related challenges were addressed, and solutions were sought was the European Movement (Hick 1991; Preda 2014; McKenzie 2016). As already shown, the European movement had a strategic objective to “inform and mobilise public opinion in favour of European integration” (CVCE 2016b) and brought together influential elite figures such as Winston Churchill, Paul-Henri Spaak, Duncan Sandys, Joseph H. Retinger, and Major Edward Berrington-Behrens (Aldrich 1999). In the summer of 1948, the European movement's international executive arrived in New York to advocate for the formation of an American committee to support their efforts for European unification. This mission was led by Duncan Sandys, the president of the European movement's international executive, and Joseph H. Retinger, the Secretary-General, among others (Aldrich 1997, 190).

To facilitate support and assistance from the United States, the American Committee on United Europe (ACUE) was established. Directed by prominent figures from the American intelligence community, including Allen Welsh Dulles and William J. Donovan, the ACUE was organized as a fundraising and lobby organization in New York (Aldrich 1995, 160). It presented itself as a group of “private citizens in the United States” who are “devoted to aiding groups of private citizens in Europe working for unity, informing Americans of progress toward European unity, and achieving a better understanding of the common responsibilities shared by the peoples of free Europe and the United States” (American Committee on United Europe 1953, 3), a significant number of ACUE's leading members were affiliated with U.S. intelligence services (Aldrich 1995). The ACUE covertly provided financial contributions to the European Movement, injecting over three million dollars between 1949 and 1960, primarily from U.S. government sources (Aldrich 1997, 185).

Regarding youth, in 1949, the ACUE initiated discussions with the leaders of the European Movement, particularly Paul-Henri Spaak and Joseph Retinger, “assuring their support for initiatives aimed at sensitizing young people to the European ideal” (Preda 2014, 78). These talks about potential cooperation in this respect led to the establishment of contacts between the European Movement and various youth organizations, including international youth movements tied to political parties and the World Assembly of Youth (Palayret 1995, 48; Campagne Européenne de la Jeunesse 1949). As a result, and as a response to the Berlin Youth festival, the organization of the Campagne Européenne de la Jeunesse in 1951 was established. The central coordination office of the

Campaign was based in Paris and staffed by an international team with experience in youth work (*Campagne Européenne de la Jeunesse* 1951b; see also Preda 2014).

Initially intended to last for one year (Palayret 1995, 48), the campaign's scope expanded, resulting in the establishment of national secretariats in the 15 member countries of the European Council, under the coordination of an international secretariat, as already mentioned, in Paris (Preda 2014, 79; *Campagne Européenne de la Jeunesse* 1952). The ACUE provided significant financial support to the campaign, with costs reaching \$200,000 per year by the end of 1953. While the exact impact on mass opinion is difficult to determine, senior Europeans credited the campaign's mass outreach efforts for their successes (Aldrich 1997, 208). As Norwig (2014, 255–56) argues, the campaign focused on sustained educational programs, avoiding grandiose mass events initially proposed by the ACUE. In this regard, director Jean Moreau stated: “[I]f we wanted to focus our attention on youth because it represented the future and because it could be won over to the idea of European unification more easily than the older generations, which are fixed in their habits, we could not think about making youth play the role that is usually assigned to them by anti-democratic regimes like Nazism or Communism” (Moreau in Norwig 2014, 256).

Instead, therefore, the campaign aimed to increase the knowledge of young people about Europe, the objectives of the European integration and efforts for the European unity (*Campagne Européenne de la Jeunesse* 1951a). As Palayret (1995, 50) explains, the programs were designed with a specific focus: to study the economic, social, political, and cultural challenges that European countries were facing, the solution of which would determine their future. For the leading persons behind the campaign, it was important to ensure that young people understood that the establishment of Europe represented progress and a chance for peace. The focus on promoting European unification amongst the youth was mirrored in the development of the idea for the bulletin: “After the special emphasis on European propaganda, we will not forget to give this publication an educational aspect and an interest in the problems of young people's lives, an aspect that can be the best way to interest our public” (*Campagne Européenne de la Jeunesse* 1951a, 20).

Between 1952 and 1954 The Campaign also promoted the plan for a European Defense Community (EDC) (*Campagne Européenne de la Jeunesse* 1953), which envisioned the creation of a common European army as a starting point for supranational European authority (Norwig 2014, 256–257). The European Movement advertised the EDC as a crucial step towards a more integrated Europe, gradually extending its competencies to political, economic, and social domains. To garner support for the EDC among young people, the Campaign launched “special actions known as operations de pïonnage” (Norwig 2014, 257). As organisers themselves explain: “By this name we mean incursions into gathering points for workers (factory exits), students (universities and schools) and places where people meet, markets, fairs, church exits etc. These groups of young people go to these places in a spectacular way (flag-bearers, small processions) and put-up posters and billboards with European propaganda and distribute leaflets and flyers” (*Campagne Européenne de la Jeunesse* 1953, 35). Young ambassadors organized spectacular promotional events advocating for the European Defense Community, acting as advocates among their peers. Furthermore, the Campaign, from 1952 onwards, took a more political direction organising various events and activities, such as “demonstrations during major

events, the setting up of internships and camps for the selection and political training of future cadres [...]” (Preda 2014, 79). The campaign, especially in 1954 and 1955, also focused on fostering a European civic spirit (Preda 2014).

Looking at the European Youth Campaign of the 1950s from the perspective of policy as a *dispositif*, it can be interpreted as an elite multifaceted project that was at least partly intended as a reaction to the spread of socialist values among youth in Europe. Furthermore, during this period, youth across Europe demonstrated agency and actively participated in political activities (Campagne Européenne de la Jeunesse 1953). They formed collectivities and expressed their political will and established themselves as a political force. Youth’s active behaviour is crucial to understanding why they became the target of various incentives such as the European Youth Campaign. The campaign received political backing from the United States and, more importantly, financial support that enabled its various strands of activities.

At the European level, the European Youth Campaign proved to be a form of power that permitted, stimulated, and produced desirable behaviour among young people. The discourse used in the campaign took a dual form. On the one hand, it aimed to capitalize on the perceived malleability of postwar youth and position them as the vanguard of a new political generation capable of overcoming hostility, prejudice, and nationalism. On the other hand, pro-European activists of the time strategically employed nationalist terms and references to mobilize support. It is difficult to assess the impact of the campaign during its existence until 1959. However, it can be stated that in its composition, structure, and configuration, it responded to the specific problematizations at the European level concerning youth. Young people became the target of interventions, and concerted efforts, including financial and human resources, were made to shape them. The ultimate goals of the campaign transcended national boundaries and political divisions and aimed at the integration of all European countries and the formation of a European generation (Palayret 1995, 59–60).

5 COMMON ASSEMBLY’S COMMITMENT TO YOUTH: NARRATIVES AND FIELDS OF ACTION

In September 1952, the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) Common Assembly convened its first meeting in the distinguished Palais de l’Europe in Strasbourg (CVCE 2014). Despite its initially modest powers, the Common Assembly demonstrated a desire to assume a more prominent role (Guerrieri 2013). It surpassed the Treaty’s prescribed procedures, which primarily involved a posteriori control through the, as already indicated, examination of the High Authority’s annual report. Instead, the Assembly adopted a proactive approach: “It set up a system of standing committees: four large committees with 23 members (common market; investment, financing and development of production; social affairs; political affairs and external relations), and three small committees with nine members (transport; accounts and administration; rules of procedure, petitions and immunities)” (Guerrieri 2008, 185). In addition to ordinary sessions, the Common Assembly conducted extraordinary sessions to delve into pressing matters and engage in in-depth discussions. This dynamic structure facilitated a continuous and constructive dialogue with the High Authority. For our discussion, it is relevant that the Assembly influenced Community’s “policy on a broad range of issues” (ibid., 186). In this sense, the

committees played a pivotal role in shaping initiatives, providing a platform for parliamentarians to express their observations, criticisms, and proposals. Members of the High Authority frequently attended these committee meetings, presenting the Community's programming lines and actively seeking input from parliamentarians (Guerrieri 2008).

Of all the committees, the Social Affairs Committee assumed particular significance, especially concerning youth-related issues (Shaev 2019, 11). While the ECSC primarily focused on economic objectives, aiming to boost productivity, the Social Affairs Committee members, as Shaev (*ibid.*) argues, expressed divergent views that challenged the governing "productivity-focused" rationale of the ECSC. Thus, in the early meetings, committee members recognized that neglecting social policy could undermine the legitimacy of the European project. They therefore sought to increase the weight and importance of social policy within the ECSC framework. By actively participating in discussions and advocating greater emphasis on social policy, the Common Assembly's Social Affairs Committee played a crucial role in shaping the ECSC's youth policy (*ibid.*, 12).

In their work and discussions in the 1950s, the committee members delved into specific topics related to youth, recognizing that young people represented a vital segment of society with unique needs and aspirations. As highlighted by Roos (2021b, 30–31), the Assembly recognised the need to gain the support of the public and to identify with the Community project and devoted much time and effort to promoting community action for young people. The aim was to foster a sense of belonging and a pro-European attitude among young people, with the ultimate aim of raising generations who would actively participate in efforts towards closer integration (Roos 2021b).

The Assembly already focused on youth issues in 1953, just one year after its foundation. During a joint meeting of the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe and the Common Assembly of the ECSC on 22 June 1953 (Common Assembly of the European Community of Coal and Steel 1953), the unification of Europe was discussed. Mlle Klompe, a member of the Common Assembly of the ECSC, expressed concern about the uncertain political situation in Europe and stressed the responsibility to work together for the development of the Community: "In doing this, we shall contribute tremendously towards bringing peaceful conditions to the world. We shall thus live up to the standard which we set ourselves of bringing to our peoples, especially the younger generation, peace, prosperity and freedom" (Common Assembly of the European Community of Coal and Steel 1953, 17). This quotation shows the deep concern of the Assembly member for the unification of Europe. It signifies the Assembly's recognition of existing obstacles that hindered the unification process. Moreover, the quotation underlines that the goal of unification was important not only for the broad European population, but also for the young generation.

Another Assembly member, Gunter Henle from the Federal Republic of Germany, addressed the Community's external relations, particularly with the United Kingdom (Common Assembly of the European Community of Coal and Steel 1953, 49). He metaphorically referred to the Community as a young man being courted by older rivals. This metaphorical use of youth underlines the status of the community as a relatively new formation, showing both uncertainty in relationships and a determination to build new ones.

Moreover, in the Assembly's discussions youth-related issues were intertwined with significant matters such as the European Defence Community. Pierre-Henri Teitegen (Common Assembly of the European Community of Coal and Steel 1953, 103–4), an Assembly member, highlighted the importance of the Italian younger generation's support for the European cause. In his statement, Teitegen highlights the important role that young people must play in reaching a consensus on the European Defence Community in Italy. However, he notes that the younger generation does not sufficiently recognise the importance of European integration. Teitegen identifies one of the reasons for the reluctance of Italian youth: the slow pace of European integration. There is thus a cyclical relationship in which the lack of youth commitment to Europe hinders progress, while the slow progress itself contributes to the lack of youth commitment to the European project.

The Social Affairs Committee of the Assembly served as a platform to address various areas of potential cooperation, and one important area that received attention was vocational training. It is widely acknowledged, as stated in Luce Pépin's frequently cited paper (2007), that a common vocational training policy at the European level emerged in 1957 with the establishment of the Treaty that formed the European Economic Community. However, this statement is problematic as it overlooks the proactive efforts undertaken by the Assembly, particularly the Social Affairs Committee, as early as 1954, to explore and promote vocational training opportunities for young individuals.

The committee engaged in discussions, research, and exploration of various possibilities to enhance vocational training opportunities. For example, the Social Affairs Committee's Report on labour issues (Common Assembly of the European Community of Coal and Steel 1954a) highlighted the lack of mutual learning and benefit from vocational training experiences among the countries. It called for greater emphasis on systematic vocational training and comprehensive basic education with special attention to young people in the coal and steel industries.

Additionally, the Committee acknowledged and supported the European movement's organization of courses for young steelworkers and miners from the Community's six countries (Common Assembly of the European Community of Coal and Steel 1954a, 18). Vocational training remained a consistent policy focus for the committee during the entire decade of the 1950s (see Common Assembly of the European Community of Coal and Steel 1955a, 1957). However, the Assembly focused its attention on young people not only in the context of vocational training, but also, via its discussions, plans and initiatives, in other fields. For example, the members of the Social Affairs Committee actively addressed young individuals in relation to crucial matters such as work safety, occupational diseases (Common Assembly of the European Community of Coal and Steel 1955b), and the issue of worker housing (Common Assembly of the European Community of Coal and Steel 1954b).

Interpreting the activities of the Assembly, with a particular focus on its Social Affairs Committee, through the lens of the concept of *dispositif* sheds light on a complex network of interrelated elements that contribute to the shaping and management of youth-related issues. In this context, the Assembly's approach to young people demonstrates a dynamic engagement with the concept of youth in multiple dimensions. A core aspect of this is the Assembly's efforts to address the multiple challenges faced by young people in society. These challenges are

approached through different segments or socio-political problematisations, illustrating a deliberate attempt to categorise and target different concerns affecting young people. By segmenting youth-related issues, the Assembly demonstrates its awareness of the need for specialised interventions. Youth are portrayed as a powerful force with the potential to influence social progress and change. This narrative, however, is coupled with the recognition that youth need continuous guidance and training.

Although concrete programs and policy orientations were not yet fully developed during this period, the Assembly's engagement with youth issues underscored their recognition of the importance of constructing a specific approach to youth within the European society. The Assembly's focus on youth policy aligns with the notion of policy as a *dispositif*, wherein policy formations are never fully complete and evolve through multiple sources and heterogeneous lineages (D. J. Bailey 2006). In this context, the Assembly's initiatives and discussions surrounding youth policy can be seen as part of an ongoing process of shaping and refining the policies and programs aimed at young people.

6 CONCLUSION

A comparison of the European Youth Campaign of the 1950s and the commitment to youth of the Common Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community in the same decade, in particular the Social Affairs Committee, sheds light on the intricate dynamics of actors, approaches, principles, discourses, and strategies at play in the early formations of youth policy in post-war Europe. By analysing the early configurations in a particular historical context in which certain problematizations regarding youth emerged, and in a complex interplay and dynamic of power between different actors, including the emerging European movements and institutionalised forms of intergovernmental cooperation at the European level, we were able to identify the formations of strategic and conceptual frameworks through which young people in Europe were addressed.

The European Youth Campaign, initiated by the European Movement with a strong financial and political support from the US, emerged as a multifaceted undertaking aimed at countering socialist values circulating among younger generation, fostering a unified European identity, and shaping the attitudes and values of young individuals as European subjects (Norwig 2014). The European Youth Campaign and its leaders envisioned, organised and implemented highly diverse strategies among which an important one is to consider youth not as a passive target of initiatives, programs, etc. but as active agents. Thus, the Campaign actively involved young people as agents of change and positioned them as vital contributors to political objectives (Palayret 1995). Simultaneously, the ECSC Common Assembly went beyond its formal tasks and prescribed responsibilities, proactively addressing youth concerns through discussions and initiatives. Comparing Assembly's attitude and strategy towards youth in Europe with that of the Campaign, Assembly members also addressed young people as the bearers of Europe's future and pursued the goal of youth recognising themselves as Europeans (Roos 2021a).

Furthermore, it is important to note that both the ECSC Assembly and the European Youth Campaign addressed youth issues in the broader context of various initiatives to deepen European integration, including a plan for a European Defence Community. The EDC was an ambitious initiative aimed at

creating a supranational European defence structure. By including youth in the narratives about the importance of the EDC and seeking support among young people for this particular European project, the ECSC Assembly and the European Youth Campaign recognised the crucial role that young people play in shaping the future of European defence and security. By involving youth in discussions about defence and security, the ECSC Assembly and the European Youth Campaign fostered a sense of ownership and responsibility among young Europeans, instilling in them a commitment to collective defence and a shared European identity (Norwig 2014; see also Dean 2010).

By deconstructing these historical contexts, we have gained valuable insights into the intricate mechanisms through which power relations, knowledge production, and discursive practices influenced the perceptions, needs, and identities of young people in postwar Europe. The youth-focused responses at the European level in the post-war period, both by the European movement through the Youth Campaign and by the ECSC Common Assembly, must be therefore understood as a strategic and deliberate response to certain problematisations, albeit with rather contingent results. As Lövbrand and Stripple (2015) argues, such “situated historical analyses of the specific dispositions, manoeuvres, tactics, techniques, functioning through which power operates [...]” can give us an insight into how these have “multiple, relational and pervasive effects” (Lövbrand and Stripple 2015, 95). The analysis allows us to see that contemporary forms of arrangements of youth field at EU level have not always emerged through deliberate, strategic and predetermined shifts and the adoption of measures and policies within a given framework. These youth policy frameworks are at once coherent and permeable, and the actions taken within them are at once deliberate and contingent. If anything, even at present we can observe (ter Haar and Copeland 2011, 2) a series of interactions between heterogeneous actors, the introduction of a range of instruments ranging from regulations and directives to new forms of governance, responding to specific problems related to young people identified by actors at local, national and European levels. This, according to Rose and Miller (1992, 182), is exactly how modern government at different levels, including European, functions. Government is a problematising activity through which objects or subjects of intervention are not pre-existing but are imagined, performed, articulated and constructed. In this way, youth as a strategic policy objective and object of intervention is not only addressed as an end point but articulated in a specific way. As we have shown, the Youth Campaign as well as the narratives of the Assembly and the proposed lines of intervention in this field already addressed youth in the 1950s as bearers of the European future, but at the same time not yet ready-made persons whose attitudes, compartments, values and norms can and must be shaped and formed.

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ZGODNJE POVOJNO EVROPSKO POVEZOVANJE IN MLADINSKE POLITIKE: ŠTUDIJA EVROPSKE MLADINSKE KAMPANJE IN POBUD NA PODROČJU MLADINE V ENOTNI SKUPŠČINI EVROPSKE SKUPNOSTI ZA PREMOG IN JEKLO

Članek se osredotoča na dva pomembna okvira zgodnjih povojnih evropskih integracijskih procesov na področju mladine: Evropsko mladinsko kampanjo, ki jo je v petdesetih letih prejšnjega stoletja zagnalo Evropsko gibanje, in Enotno skupščino Evropske skupnosti za premog in jeklo ter njene diskurze in pobude, povezane z mladimi. Prek pristopa analize politik, ki temelji na Foucaultovem konceptu dispozitiva, prispevek kritično interpretira in primerja kompleksnosti in dinamiko teh specifičnih okvirov na evropski ravni ter tako omogoča vpogled v zgodnje faze mladinskih politik v povojni Evropi. Z analizo zgodnjih konfiguracij v določenem zgodovinskem kontekstu, v katerem so se pojavile različne problematizacije mladih, ter v medsebojnem vplivu in dinamiki moči med različnimi akterji, vključno z nastajajočimi evropskimi gibanji in institucionaliziranimi oblikami medvladnega sodelovanja na evropski ravni, je kritično naslovljeno oblikovanje strateških in konceptualnih okvirov, prek katerih so bili mladi v Evropi obravnavani.

Ključne besede: mladi; politika; povojna Evropa; Evropska mladinska kampanja; evropsko povezovanje.

THE POLITICAL POTENTIAL OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES: THE ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SITUATIONAL FACTORS

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There is no easy explanation for why some people believe in conspiracy theories. Susceptibility to conspiracy theories can be associated with a range of various factors in which both psychological and situational components play a significant role. In this article, I aim to provide a review of potential psychological and situational factors that fuel conspiracy theorising, focusing primarily on examples relating to politics. Moreover, I aim to analyse the effects of conspiracy theories on society and politics. At the beginning, I will define the key terms used in psychology research. Then, I will discuss psychological factors. I will review current research on predispositions that drive people to believe conspiracy theories. These may comprise psychological motives (epistemic, existential, and social), cognitive factors (e.g. intuitive thinking style), personality traits (e.g. maladaptive traits), or worldviews (e.g. authoritarian worldviews). In the next section, I aim to illuminate situational factors. Large-scale and threatening events may drive people to seek explanations in the wrong places, specifically, in conspiracies. A notable example is the COVID-19 pandemic when the popularity of conspiracy theories greatly increased. Overall, a combination of specific predispositions and situations may significantly contribute to higher levels of conspiracy beliefs, which, consequently, severely impact society.

Key words: conspiracy theories; conspiracy beliefs; politics; predictors; consequences.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Conspiracy theories are widespread in society. Many surveyed respondents worldwide believe in at least one conspiracy theory (Bowes, Costello and Tasimi 2023). In 2020, 25% of US adults agreed that ‘the coronavirus is being used to force a dangerous and unnecessary vaccine on Americans’ (Uscinski et al. 2022, 6). In turn, in Germany, the endorsement of pro-Russian conspiracy narratives increased between the spring and fall of 2022 (Lamberty and Frühwirth 2023, 4). For instance, in April, 12% of respondents agreed that ‘Putin is acting against a global elite that is pulling the strings behind the scenes’; in October, it increased to 18%. Moreover, 20–26% of respondents partly agreed and partly disagreed with this statement. As another example, the GLOBSEC study conducted in Central and Eastern European countries in 2022 demonstrated that around 30–50% of respondents believe in conspiracy theories related to democracy, for example, that democracy does not exist, and the world is ruled by hidden elites (Hajdu et al. 2022). These percentages were particularly high in Bulgaria and Slovakia, reaching 54% in both countries.

First, to properly characterise the phenomenon of conspiracy theories, it is crucial to present key terms and definitions. In psychology, conspiracy theories are often defined as beliefs about a group of people collaborating secretly to illegitimately achieve malevolent goals related to harming others (Zonis and Joseph 1994). Another definition describes conspiracy theories as unverified belief in a conspiracy in a situation for which this does not seem to be a particularly convincing and plausible explanation of the event (Brotherton 2013). Another definition of conspiracy theories was proposed by Nera and Schöpfer (2023), who characterised conspiracy theories as claims that the public is ubiquitously lied to about certain aspects of reality to allow certain groups to achieve a harmful goal that serves their own benefit. Furthermore, some definitions of conspiracy theories are epistemologically agnostic, whereas others are epistemologically normative (ibid.). The first group do not stake claims about the truth of conspiracy theories. They assume that any suspected conspiracy can be treated as a conspiracy theory, even if some of these claims turn out to be true (e.g. the Watergate scandal), like the definition by Zonis and Joseph (1994). In contrast, epistemologically normative definitions assess the truth value of conspiracy theories, that is, whether suspicions of conspiracy are justified (e.g. Brotherton 2013). However, it is difficult to judge with certainty whether a given conspiracy claim is true or false. In this article, I rely on the epistemologically agnostic approach to conspiracy theories, which researchers often use.

1.1 Conspiracy Mentality and Specific Conspiracy Theories

Beliefs in conspiracy theories can be studied in reference to the endorsement of specific conspiracy theories on a particular topic or in reference to more general worldviews, specifically, conspiracy mentality (Imhoff, Bertlich and Frenken 2022).

Specific conspiracy theories are focused on specific issues or events (ibid.). They concern beliefs about the existence of a conspiracy related to a particular phenomenon. Most often, these are topics related to important social and political events, like the war in Ukraine (Lamberty and Frühwirth 2023) or the COVID-19 pandemic (Uscinski et al. 2022). Thus, specific conspiracy theories are an application of the idea that there are conspiracies behind important events that are hatched in a specific context by specific people for particular purposes

(Imhoff, Bertlich and Frenken 2022). Specific conspiracy theories refer to particular content; hence, they may be related to other variables in various ways. For instance, belief in conspiracy theories about 'gender ideology' was correlated with social distance towards gay men and lesbians (Marchlewska et al. 2019). Moreover, specific conspiracy theories may change over time and, compared to conspiracy mentality, are more susceptible to experimental manipulation (Imhoff, Bertlich and Frenken 2022).

In turn, conspiracy mentality can be described as the general proneness of seeing the world in conspiracist terms, creating a monological belief system (ibid.). It is a relatively stable predisposition that varies from individual to individual. Conspiracy mentality takes the form of a continuum, in which one extreme represents paranoid suspicion and a strong tendency to endorse conspiracy theories, while the other extreme represents the unreflective acceptance of all official versions of events. The essence of the conspiracy mentality is that people who believe in one conspiracy theory are likelier to endorse others, even if they are unrelated or contradictory (Galliford and Furnham 2017). Therefore, conspiracy mentality remains a strong predictor of belief in specific conspiracy theories (Imhoff, Bertlich and Frenken 2022). It should be noted that conspiracy mentality is also referred to as 'conspiracist ideation' or 'conspiracy thinking' (Douglas et al. 2019).

2 PREDICTORS OF BELIEF IN CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Explaining why people believe in conspiracy theories is not easy. Various psychological, political, and social factors may underlie conspiracy beliefs (ibid.). In the sections below, I describe some of the most important psychological and situational factors that can make a person more inclined to believe in conspiracy theories.

2.1 Psychological Factors

Motivations

Douglas, Sutton and Cichocka (2017) proposed a classification of motives behind conspiracy beliefs focusing on epistemic, existential, and social needs essential to healthy psychological and social functioning. Deprivation of those needs can worsen well-being and result in maladaptive, harmful psychological responses as well as deterioration of mental health (Biddlestone et al. 2022). As a result, it can increase the tendency to accept simplified explanations offered by conspiracy theories since they seem to satisfy frustrated needs, point out the enemy responsible for all misfortunes, and help to make sense of the situation.

Epistemic motives of conspiracy beliefs refer to the psychological need for certainty and knowledge (Douglas, Sutton and Cichocka 2017). Feelings of uncertainty inhibit people's capacity to predict and anticipate potentially threatening events (Biddlestone et al. 2022). Conspiracy theories offer consistent explanations for complex phenomena; therefore, they especially appeal to people who experience unpleasant feelings of uncertainty. They help deal with the unpredictability of events, and, at the same time, they can protect one's beliefs in the face of threatening information and alternative views (Douglas et al. 2019). For instance, in previous research, conspiracy beliefs related to intolerance of uncertainty (e.g. Larsen et al. 2021) and a higher need for cognitive closure (e.g. Marchlewska, Cichocka and Kossowska 2018), which is a desire to have certain

and unambiguous knowledge about a given topic and an ambiguity aversion. People prone to believe in conspiracy theories also tend to look for patterns, meanings, and agency in the environment, which may help to deal with uncertainty. For instance, participants with a higher tendency to conspiracy beliefs perceived non-existing, illusory patterns in chaotic paintings (van Prooijen, Douglas and De Inocencio 2018) and deeper meaning in statements that were grammatically correct and seemed profound, but they were nonsense (i.e., pseudo-profound bullshit) (Pennycook et al. 2015). Moreover, people who endorse conspiracy theories look for agency and intentionality in events (e.g. Douglas et al. 2016) and are more prone to believe in paranormal phenomena (e.g. van Prooijen, Douglas and De Inocencio 2018). Furthermore, conspiracy beliefs are related to a lower ability to analytic thinking, overreliance on intuitive thinking, and susceptibility to cognitive biases (e.g. Lantian, Wood and Gjonneska 2020), which I will discuss in more detail in the section on cognitive factors.

Existential motives of conspiracy beliefs refer to the need for security and control (Douglas, Sutton and Cichocka 2017). Feelings of lack of control, powerlessness, or fear can increase the tendency to believe in conspiracy theories since they can be used to cope with existential threats and insecurities (Biddlestone et al. 2022). Alternative explanations of conspiracy theories can provide a sense of illusion of control and power (Douglas et al. 2019). Previous studies found positive associations of conspiracy beliefs with the need for control (e.g. Gligorić et al. 2021), perceived lack of socio-political control (e.g. Bruder et al. 2013), and anomie (e.g. Enders et al. 2023), which is a belief that social conditions and institutions are irreversibly crumbling. Also, endorsement of conspiracy theories was connected with depression and anxiety (e.g. Bowes et al. 2021). Additionally, some studies suggest that chronic lack of control and dispositional anxiety can be associated with conspiracy beliefs more than situational anxiety and acute lack of control (Krüppel, Yoon and Mokros, 2023; Stojanov, Bering and Halberstadt 2020). However, it should be noted that threats in real life, like disasters, may arouse a higher threat to perceived control than experimental manipulations (ibid.).

Social motives of conspiracy beliefs concern the need to maintain a positive image of self and the groups that one belongs to (Douglas, Sutton and Cichocka 2017). Conspiracy theories offer the opportunity to attribute one's failures to others, which protects one's image and releases one from responsibility for an unfavourable position. Conspiracy theories may support people in enhancing self-esteem and defending this positive image through the conviction that they possess accurate, important information that others do not have. Previous research demonstrated that higher levels of conspiracy beliefs were associated with the need for uniqueness (e.g. Imhoff and Lamberty 2017), individual narcissism (e.g. Cichocka, Marchlewska and Biddlestone 2022), and collective narcissism (e.g. Golec de Zavala, Bierwiazzonek and Ciesielski 2022). Collective narcissism is the belief that one's group (e.g. nation or religious group) is great and unique but not appreciated enough by others (Golec de Zavala et al. 2009). In particular, groups that perceive themselves as threatened or undervalued tend to believe that others conspire against them (Uscinski and Parent 2014).

Overall, previous meta-analyses confirmed that epistemic, existential, and social motives are associated with conspiracy beliefs (Biddlestone et al. 2022; Bowes, Costello and Tasimi 2023). Moreover, in a meta-analysis by Biddlestone and colleagues (2022), the variables included in the motives were often more strongly related to specific conspiracy theories than to conspiracy mentality. For

example, anomie, which is an existential motive, was not significantly associated with conspiracy mentality. Instead, anomie may lead to the adoption of specific conspiracy theories that relate to current socio-political conditions.

Cognitive factors

Conspiracy beliefs are also rooted in cognitive processes, such as thinking patterns or cognitive styles (Lantian, Wood and Gjoneska 2020). People who believe in conspiracy theories are characterised by a lack of reflection and excessive reliance on intuition (e.g. Binnendyk and Pennycook 2022). They rely on simple explanations offered by conspiracy theories and avoid looking for information from reliable sources, especially since official narratives are often complex and ambiguous (Douglas et al. 2019). At the same time, they overestimate their capacity to understand complex causal relationships. In previous research, endorsement of conspiracy theories was related to higher intuitive thinking (e.g. Swami et al. 2014) and lower analytic thinking (e.g. Čavojová, Šrol and Ballová Mikušková 2022; Swami et al. 2014), as well as a lack of critical thinking ability (e.g. Lantian et al. 2021) and scientific reasoning (e.g. Čavojová, Šrol and Ballová Mikušková 2022). Negative relationships between reflective thinking and conspiracy beliefs were confirmed in a recent meta-analysis (Yelbuz, Madan and Alper 2022). Another study worth mentioning is the one by Caroti and others (2023), which demonstrated that critical thinking education interventions in school students decreased the level of conspiracy beliefs. Thus, cognitive style is a significant factor underlying conspiracy beliefs, which may be susceptible to intervention.

Furthermore, cognitive biases and heuristics are also prevalent among conspiracy believers. Heuristics are part of intuitive thinking that can be characterised as mental shortcuts that enable quick and efficient evaluation of complex information (van Prooijen, Klein and Milošević Đorđević 2020). Heuristics are useful and allow people to function with minimal mental effort, but can lead to false judgments and cognitive biases. For instance, conspiracy beliefs were associated with conjunction fallacy (e.g. Brotherton and French 2014), jump-to-conclusions bias (e.g. Pytlik, Soll and Mehl 2020), and 'major event-major cause' bias (e.g. Leman and Cinnirella 2007). The conjunction fallacy is a tendency to perceive implausible casual connections between coinciding events that are probably not directly related (Lantian, Wood and Gjoneska 2020). Jumping to conclusions is a tendency to make rash decisions that are not based on enough evidence (Pytlik, Soll and Mehl 2020). The 'major event-major cause' bias refers to inferring that big-scale and significant events (e.g. the death of a famous person) are more likely to have a major cause (Leman and Cinnirella 2007). An attractive explanation for such an event may be a conspiracy theory that clearly indicates the perpetrator and the cause of the event. Conspiracy beliefs were also connected with stereotyping, which arises from heuristics (Lantian, Wood and Gjoneska 2020).

Additionally, the endorsement of conspiracy theories can be related to reflexive open-mindedness, an inflated openness to possibilities, and the tendency to naively accept new information as valid (Binnendyk and Pennycook 2022; Pennycook and Rand 2020). In this case, people high in reflexive open-mindedness may unreflectively accept alternative conspiracist claims and, at the same time, be sceptical toward all official non-conspiracist narratives. People who avoid assessing their beliefs based on various evidence are more open to conspiracy theories. Overall, cognitive factors, including thinking skills, usage of heuristics, and cognitive biases, may drive conspiracy beliefs.

Personality Traits

Furthermore, research to date suggests that some personality traits may contribute to the endorsement of conspiracy theories. For instance, in previous studies, conspiracy beliefs were associated with maladaptive traits, like Dark Triad or Dark Tetrad personality traits (e.g. Kay 2021; Teličák, Halama and Kohút 2023). The Dark Triad is composed of Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism. In turn, the Dark Tetrad consists of these three traits plus sadism. What they have in common is their undesirable, socially problematic, and maladaptive nature, which results in difficult relationships with others. They are maladaptive, but they are distinct from clinical psychopathology. In general, all those traits were associated with conspiracy beliefs in previous research, although the results were not always consistent, especially in the case of sadism (e.g. Teličák, Halama and Kohút 2023). Moreover, some approaches suggested that the potential explanation for the connection with conspiracy theories may differ for each of the Dark Tetrad traits, and some indicated that they have a similar background. For instance, Kay (2021) suggested that conspiracist ideation may result from the common core of Dark Tetrad traits rather than features unique to each trait. In his study, most of the relationships between facets of Dark Tetrad traits and conspiracist ideation were explained by the propensity to entertain odd beliefs, be fatalistic, and distrust others.

Another common area of research regarding the relationship between personality and conspiracy beliefs was personality factor models, such as the Big Five model, which consists of five traits: neuroticism, agreeableness, extraversion, openness to experience, and conscientiousness. Nejat, Heirani-Tabas and Nazarpour (2023) hypothesised that the Big Five traits could refer to motives of conspiracy beliefs in specific ways. Neuroticism could be related to existential motives of conspiracy beliefs due to increased anxiety and stress vulnerability. High levels of agreeableness could be negatively associated with conspiracy beliefs since increased optimism and trust toward others may suppress the impact of existential motives. In the case of extroversion, social motives could be crucial, as this trait is related to the significant role of social relationships. In turn, openness and conscientiousness could refer to epistemic motives. People open to experience could be less prone to conspiracy beliefs since openness is the opposite of the need for closure, which is a part of epistemic motives. Conscientiousness, as a striving for order and accuracy, may be negatively related to conspiracy beliefs and their epistemic motives. However, in the study, only extraversion positively predicted conspiracy beliefs. Furthermore, meta-analyses conducted in recent years have provided inconsistent results (Bowes, Costello and Tasimi 2023; Goreis and Voracek 2019; Stasielowicz 2022). Goreis and Voracek (2019) indicated that none of the Big Five traits were correlated with conspiracy beliefs. In another meta-analysis, low agreeableness and high neuroticism were related to conspiracy beliefs, but those relations were weak (Stasielowicz 2022). In a meta-analysis by Bowes, Costello and Tasimi (2023), agreeableness and conscientiousness were negative correlates, while neuroticism and extraversion were positive correlates of conspiracy beliefs. However, these relationships were weak. Overall, results indicate that relationships between the Big Five traits and conspiracy beliefs are weak or negligible.

In addition, belief in conspiracy theories was associated with psychopathology factors such as schizotypy, paranoia, psychoticism, and the disposition to have unusual experiences (ibid.). Taken together, the research findings on personality

factors and conspiracy beliefs are somewhat inconsistent, but some traits, like the Dark Tetrad traits, may drive conspiracy beliefs.

Worldviews and Ideology

Other factors that may play an essential role in the endorsement of conspiracy theories are worldviews and ideology. Ideology is a set of beliefs through which people perceive and understand the world (Thórisdóttir, Mari and Krouwel 2020). It affects cognitive processes, affective reactions, and behaviour, including conspiracy beliefs. Thus, ideology, such as political beliefs, can drive a person's tendency to believe in conspiracy theories. Moreover, increased sensitivity to information that conflicts with one's worldview may lead to attempts to defend one's beliefs using conspiracy theories (Douglas et al. 2019).

It is worth noting that political beliefs can be studied as unidimensional or dimensional constructs (Czarnek, Szwed and Kossowska 2019). The unidimensional approach covers the left-right continuum, whereas the dimensional approach includes two dimensions encompassing economic and cultural views. In the cultural dimension, right-wing views are related to a preference for traditional values, whereas left-wing views refer to a preference for social change and personal freedom. In turn, the economic dimension includes a right-wing preference for a free-market economy versus a left-wing preference for the welfare state. The two-dimensional approach is especially common in post-communist countries such as Hungary and Poland (Bilewicz et al. 2015). In addition, those dimensions are often negatively correlated, which means that people with right-wing views on cultural issues may have left-wing views on economic issues.

Much of the research to date has examined links between conspiracy beliefs and political ideology. For instance, some studies indicated that conspiracy beliefs were connected with right-wing views (e.g. Galliford and Furnham 2017). People on the right are usually more close-minded, have a higher need for cognitive closure, and perceive threats in the environment more often than people on the left (Thórisdóttir, Mari and Krouwel 2020). For this reason, right-wing views may be associated with epistemic motives of conspiracy beliefs and the need for threat reduction. Regarding the dimensional approach to political views, people with right-wing cultural views may be particularly prone to conspiracy beliefs. For instance, right-wing cultural views were linked to negative attitudes toward vaccinations (Kossowska, Szwed and Czarnek 2021). Moreover, religious fundamentalism, as a part of cultural right-wing views, was also related to the endorsement of conspiracy theories, like coronavirus conspiracy theories (Łowicki et al. 2022). However, it should be noted that the relationship between religiosity and conspiracy beliefs is not clear. It occurs that probably only religious fundamentalism is related to conspiracy beliefs, not general religiosity.

However, it turns out that left-wing people may also endorse conspiracy theories (e.g. Imhoff et al. 2022; van Prooijen, Krouwel and Pollet 2015). In general, especially people in the extremes of the political spectrum are more prone to conspiracy thinking, and it can be either right or left extreme. A meta-analysis by Imhoff and colleagues (2022) confirms this conclusion; the results suggest that the relationship between political ideology and conspiracy endorsement may be quadratic. Moreover, in a study by van Prooijen, Krouwel and Pollet (2015), belief in simple political solutions was a mediator in the quadratic relationship between political orientation and conspiracy beliefs. The authors concluded that the relationship between political extremism and conspiracy beliefs results from

a thinking style focused on seeking sense in societal events. Thus, conspiracy beliefs are not limited to right-wing views and may depend more on the level of extremity, regardless of the political side. Both extremes may be predisposed to conspiracy mentality and share similar features, such as distrust and negative attitudes toward outgroups with alternative views (Imhoff et al. 2022). In addition, both right and left extremes may strive to maintain their beliefs rigid because of crippled epistemology (van Prooijen, Krouwel and Pollet 2015). However, they may endorse different types of conspiracy theories. For instance, people on the left may believe more in conspiracies about capitalism, whereas people on the right may endorse conspiracy theories about science or immigrants. Overall, political ideology is related to conspiracy beliefs, but it should be noted that this relationship is still stronger for the right side of the political spectrum (Imhoff et al. 2022).

Furthermore, conspiracy beliefs were linked to right-wing authoritarianism (e.g. Bowes, Costello and Tasimi 2023). Right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) is characterised by submission toward established authorities, authoritarian aggression, and conventionalism (Altemeyer 2004). It is also connected with ethnocentrism, prejudice, and hostility toward minorities and homosexuals. Conspiracy beliefs were also related to belief in a dangerous world, which can be perceived as a precursor to RWA (Lantian, Wood and Gjonneska 2020). This belief concerns perceiving the social world as threatening, where bad people menace good people. Moreover, people who believe in conspiracy theories tend to believe that the world is a competitive jungle, which is a conviction that weak people are always dominated by those stronger (ibid.). In turn, this worldview can form the basis for social dominance orientation (SDO), which can be defined as a support for hierarchy in society and beliefs that lower-status groups should be dominated since they pose a threat to higher-status groups (Pratto et al. 1994). Indeed, previous studies demonstrated that people high in SDO are likelier to believe in conspiracy theories (e.g. Bowes, Costello and Tasimi 2023). Overall, conspiracy beliefs, RWA, and SDO have a common feature: the desire to maintain the socio-political status quo (Thórisdóttir, Mari and Krouwel 2020).

Many studies also linked conspiracy beliefs to national collective narcissism (Golec de Zavala, Bierwiazzonek and Ciesielski 2022). I described this issue in this section since national collective narcissism is embedded around right-wing views and authoritarianism. National collective narcissism describes a need for recognition of its nation and concerns about its good image (Golec de Zavala and Keenan 2021). It is related to right-wing extremism, populism (ibid.), RWA, and SDO (Golec de Zavala et al. 2009). A recent meta-analysis confirmed that collective narcissism is associated with conspiracy mentality and belief in specific conspiracy theories, especially conspiracy theories about out-groups like immigrants (Golec de Zavala, Bierwiazzonek and Ciesielski 2022). People high in collective narcissism are sensitive to signals of insufficient in-group appreciation and often experience intergroup threats (Biddlestone et al. 2020). Consequently, they tend to believe that out-group members are conspiring against the in-group. Conspiracy theories can provide specific targets on which to blame the in-group's failures and negative experiences. At the same time, they allow for maintaining a positive image of the in-group. These aspects are related to the social motives of conspiracy beliefs (Douglas et al. 2019). Furthermore, national collective narcissism is also related to the endorsement of other conspiracy theories. For instance, national collective narcissism was related to belief in coronavirus conspiracy theories and their spreading during the COVID-19 pandemic (Sternisko et al. 2023). This may happen since conspiracy theories can protect

the professed beliefs and function as meaning-making activity, which is important for collective narcissists due to being constantly concerned about the in-group's greatness and its recognition (Golec de Zavala, Bierwaczzonek and Ciesielski 2022). Taken together, some worldviews, especially those characterised by extremity, may drive conspiracy beliefs.

2.2 Situational Factors

In addition to psychological predispositions, situational factors can be essential in predicting conspiracy beliefs. Some social and political situations are conducive to developing and spreading conspiracy theories. Moreover, psychological and situational factors may interact and, as a result, increase the endorsement of conspiracy theories. Thus, the combination of psychological and situational factors may be crucial in explaining succumbing to conspiracy theories. In the following section, I will discuss the role of situational factors and their connections with individual predispositions.

Large-Scale Events

Conspiracy theories emerge especially after large-scale and distressing events, such as social and economic crises, terrorist attacks, wars, natural disasters, pandemics, rapid societal changes, or even the death of a famous person (van Prooijen and Douglas 2017). Those circumstances may contribute to the increase in the popularity of some conspiracy theories in society, which most concern people susceptible to conspiracy claims. Belief in conspiracy theories during times of crisis can satisfy epistemic, existential, and social motives. Conspiracy theories arise when people experience feelings of existential threat, uncertainty, fear, or powerlessness, which are present during a societal crisis (van Prooijen 2020). A meta-analysis by Biddlestone and colleagues (2022) demonstrated that the association between conspiracy beliefs and perceived threats is particularly strong for external rather than internal threats, consistent with the conclusion that conspiracy theories emerge during societal crises. Moreover, in difficult situations, people try to cope with unpleasant feelings and look for a sense of the situation in conspiracies, which are usually simple and certain, in contrast to official narratives (van Prooijen and Douglas 2017). In this way, conspiracy explanations can appeal to people who do not tolerate ambiguity, think intuitively, and are prone to cognitive biases; the 'major event-major cause' bias may be of particular importance (Leman and Cinnirella 2007). Generally, an increase in conspiracy beliefs could be observed during various significant social and political events throughout human history (Douglas and Sutton 2023). Referring to specific examples, conspiracy theories emerged after the JFK assassination, the 9/11 attack, or, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic was a circumstance that affected the whole world and enabled the natural observation of the emergence of conspiracy theories in times of crisis. Conspiracy theories were focused, for instance, on the government, 5G radiation, public figures like Bill Gates, pharmaceutical companies, or vaccinations (Grimes 2021). They also often refer to the origins, spread, and treatment of the coronavirus (Douglas and Sutton 2023). Generally, COVID-19 conspiracy theories have started to appear on social media since the pandemic outbreak (Douglas 2021). These times were challenging for societies and affected all areas of life. Therefore, people were experiencing fear, worries about their relatives, and uncertainty about the future. Additionally, various preventive measures, including social isolation, were necessary, which also had a negative impact on well-being. Some people sought answers to difficult questions in conspiracy

theories, attempting to deal with thwarted psychological needs. Moreover, research demonstrated that certain individual factors, like national collective narcissism, predicted a tendency to believe in and spread conspiracy theories about COVID-19 (Sternisko et al. 2023). Crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic may reveal weaknesses in a nation's leadership and health care; hence, this threatens a national image important to collective narcissists. Thus, conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 pandemic could serve to manage this identity threat. COVID-19 conspiracy theories also had numerous adverse outcomes, which I will mention below.

Socio-Political Situation

Conspiracy theories are common in politics and may attract people for political reasons (Douglas and Sutton 2023). Populist leaders and authoritarian regimes favour the development of conspiracy theories since they may serve strategic functions (Giry and Gürpınar 2020). Conspiracy theories can be used to manipulate people and their attitudes, especially those with extreme views. Populism can be defined as a 'political mentality that construes society as a dichotomous struggle between "the people" versus "the establishment"' (van Prooijen 2018, 83). According to Thielmann and Hiblig (2023, 791), populism and conspiracy mentality have a common basis, which is generalised dispositional distrust, defined as 'a belief that others are untrustworthy, exploitative, and self-serving to one's own disadvantage'. Both populism and conspiracy theories deepen societal division and are based on 'us versus them' narratives. Furthermore, authoritarianism promotes political conspiracy theories, especially if they protect the status quo (Osborne et al. 2023). People high in right-wing authoritarianism try to protect the in-group and their beliefs, which are propagated and reinforced by in-group leaders. Thus, right-wing authoritarians especially believe in pro-establishment conspiracy theories (Wood and Gray 2019).

Moreover, in populist and authoritarian regimes, conspiracy theories may take the form of propaganda aimed at finding and combating alleged ubiquitous enemies, which reinforces and legitimises their power (Giry and Gürpınar 2020). The relationship between conspiracy beliefs and discrimination of certain groups may be conditional on various situational factors, like political elections, during which the motivation to defend in-group power may be higher (Biddlestone et al. 2020). Scapegoats may be various groups depending on the socio-political situation, for instance, immigrants, Jews, or the LGBT community (Giry and Gürpınar 2020; Soral et al. 2018). Thus, depending on their goals, politicians can spread specific conspiracy theories and contribute to their prevalence in society. For instance, if the LGBT community in Poland were not pointed out as a threat to the nation by some far-right populist political leaders and their constituencies, conspiracy theories about 'LGBT ideology' might not be so widespread. Belief in this conspiracy theory in Polish public discourse was initially visible mainly in the Catholic and far-right-wing political environments (Soral et al. 2018). Later, it gained more attention, for instance, from concerned parents who feared the 'LGBT ideology', which allegedly threatens traditional family values and encourages immorality among children (Korolczuk and Graff 2021).

Additionally, a characteristic significantly related to susceptibility to populist slogans and conspiracy theories, especially these accusing out-groups, is national collective narcissism. People high in national collective narcissism more often support right-wing populist parties (Golec de Zavala and Keenan 2021) and may believe in conspiracy theories, which they spread. Collective narcissism and

conspiracy theories share the same political functions: they create threatening environments that undemocratic leaders exploit for their own benefits. Therefore, the use of undemocratic practices, coercion, and violence can be justified (Golec de Zavala, Bierwiazzonek and Ciesielski 2022).

Socio-Political Exclusion

Moreover, factors related to socio-political exclusion and lack of political power play an essential role in proneness to conspiracy beliefs. People more often endorse conspiracy theories targeted at their political rivals, and this tendency is especially salient when people perceive that their political group is threatened (Douglas and Sutton 2023). For instance, some political conspiracy theories may emerge during elections, which can be related to increased feelings of uncertainty (Douglas et al. 2019). However, they can also be prevalent after elections, when rivals win, since people who are political losers more often believe in conspiracy theories (Uscinski and Parent 2014). Furthermore, people who experience political distrust (e.g. Walter and Drochon 2022), powerlessness (e.g. Bruder et al. 2013; Uscinski and Parent 2014), lack of socio-political control (e.g. Bruder et al. 2013), feelings of not being represented within the political system (e.g. Uscinski and Parent 2014), and who reject the political system (e.g. Walter and Drochon 2022) are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories. In line with these findings, a meta-analysis by Imhoff and colleagues (2022) indicated that deprivation of political control strengthens the relationship between ideology and belief in conspiracy theories. Such theories may help regain a sense of control, so they are appealing to political losers and those who feel powerless.

Furthermore, the experience of ostracism, belonging to minority groups (e.g. ethnic or religious minorities), and low social status also predispose to conspiracy beliefs (e.g. Graeupner and Coman 2017; Uscinski and Parent 2014). Conspiracy beliefs may be higher in low-status groups due to attempts to explain their position and status (Douglas et al. 2019). A meta-analysis by Biddlestone and colleagues (2022) confirmed that a sense of deprivation and societal marginalisation were significant risk factors for conspiracy beliefs. Thus, conspiracy theories help excuse disadvantaged positions of self and in-group. They protect the socio-political status quo and help people cope with difficult life situations (Jolley, Douglas and Sutton 2018).

New Media

The Internet and social media are further situational factors facilitating the transmission of conspiracy theories (Bangerter, Wagner-Egger and Delouvé 2020). In these times, conspiracy explanations can be widely transmitted, making gaining new supporters easier. The availability of conspiracy claims increases the risk of potential exposure to them and their endorsement by individuals. However, according to Enders, Uscinski and colleagues (2023), the Internet may be less affected by conspiracy theories than is often assumed, and the relationship between social media use and conspiracy beliefs may depend on individual-level predispositions, such as conspiracy thinking. Other studies demonstrated that conspiracy thinking is related to using non-mainstream media (e.g. Walter and Drochon 2022) and the tendency to share false information online (Enders et al. 2023). Overall, the transmission process of conspiracy theories may depend on individual differences, situational factors, and the specific content of conspiracy theories. These factors may affect belief in conspiracy theories and the intention to spread them (Bangerter, Wagner-Egger and Delouvé 2020).

3 CONSEQUENCES OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Conspiracy theories have serious adverse consequences and are associated with various maladaptive behaviours. Some scholars suggest that potential benefits of conspiracy theories may exist, yet numerous studies confirm their negative impact on individuals and societies, especially democratic societies (Jolley, Mari and Douglas 2020).

Although conspiracy theories attempt to meet psychological needs, they do not do this effectively and may worsen individuals' well-being (*ibid.*). Belief in conspiracy theories may lead to greater deprivation of those needs rather than satisfying them. For instance, conspiracy theories can increase feelings of powerlessness, uncertainty (Jolley and Douglas 2014), and existential threat (van Prooijen 2020). Instead of satisfying the existential need, conspiracy theories can be a source of existential threat. In addition, conspiracy beliefs are related to increased feelings of intergroup threat, and they may strengthen feelings of alienation, which frustrate social motives of conspiracy beliefs (Jolley, Mari and Douglas 2020).

Conspiracy theories also lead to various societal harms (Biddlestone et al. 2022). They are related to the deterioration of public health, which could be observed during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, a meta-analysis by Bierwiazzonek, Gundersen and Kunst (2022) confirmed associations between conspiracy beliefs and unwillingness to follow public health guidelines, rejection of COVID-19 vaccines, and support for alternative treatments like chloroquine. Furthermore, conspiracy beliefs were generally associated with science denialism, for example, in the domains of global warming and vaccinations (Jolley, Mari and Douglas 2020). Conspiracy theories can also pose a threat to social cohesion since they are related to the support of political violence (e.g. Enders et al. 2023), civic disengagement, such as disengaging from voting (e.g. Jolley and Douglas 2014), extremist ideology (e.g. Imhoff et al. 2022), and populism (e.g. Thielmann and Hilbig 2023). Populism and conspiracy beliefs are integral parts of societies, and they both are based on us vs. them narratives, so they deepen societal division and have harmful consequences for societies (*ibid.*).

Additionally, conspiracy beliefs have intergroup consequences and may lead to problematic intergroup relations in the form of prejudice, intergroup discrimination, and the legitimisation of injustice (Biddlestone et al. 2020). They offer an opportunity to justify immoral acts toward out-groups accused of conspiracies. The reason for this may be an attempt to reduce the alleged control assigned to the out-group, regardless of the actual status of the group: both powerful and powerless groups can be accused of conspiring. Relationships with negative intergroup attitudes are especially visible in the context of collective narcissism, which is strictly connected with out-group conspiracy theories and sensitivity to in-group threats (Golec de Zavala, Bierwiazzonek and Ciesielski 2022). A meta-analysis by Golec de Zavala, Bierwiazzonek and Ciesielski (2022) indicated that out-group conspiracy theories often mediated the relation between collective narcissism and prejudice or discrimination of specific out-groups. For instance, Catholic collective narcissism predicted outgroup hostility, and this effect was mediated by gender conspiracy beliefs (Marchlewska et al. 2019). Conspiracy theories allow collective narcissists to blame others for in-group failures and justify the out-group hostility as a necessary defence against out-groups that undermine the in-group's greatness (Biddlestone et al. 2020;

Golec de Zavala, Bierwiazzonek and Ciesielski 2022). Thus, conspiracy beliefs can be a defensive reaction to protect the in-group image.

4 CONCLUSION

The main aim of this article was to provide an overview of psychological and situational factors that may increase the endorsement of conspiracy theories. First, I discussed the role of psychological factors, including motivational underpinnings, cognitive factors, personality traits, worldviews, and ideology. In the following section, I focused on situational factors, covering large-scale events, socio-political situation, socio-political exclusion, and ways of conspiracy theories transmission that may foster the development of conspiracy theories in society, particularly among susceptible individuals. Finally, I discussed the consequences of conspiracy beliefs, highlighting their harmful effects on individuals, public health, social cohesion, and intergroup relations. Taken together, the individual's susceptibility combined with the specific socio-political situation may particularly translate into greater acceptance of explanations offered by conspiracy theories, which, in consequence, may have a harmful impact on society. In summary, conspiracy beliefs are complex phenomena stemming from various psychological and situational factors. More research, especially experimental, is needed to understand the mechanisms of conspiracy beliefs and to develop potential ways to prevent them, thereby protecting society from their harmful consequences.

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POLITIČNI POTENCIAL TEORIJ ZAROTE: VLOGA PSIHOLŠKIH IN SITUACIJSKIH DEJAVNIKOV

Ni enostavne razlage, zakaj nekateri ljudje verjamejo v teorije zarote. Dovzetnost za teorije zarote je lahko povezana z vrsto različnih dejavnikov, pri katerih igrajo pomembno vlogo tako psihološke kot situacijske komponente. V tem članku želimo ponuditi pregled možnih psiholoških in situacijskih dejavnikov, ki spodbujajo teorije zarot, pri čemer se osredotočamo predvsem na primere v zvezi s politiko. Poleg tega želimo analizirati učinke teorij zarot na družbo in politiko. Na začetku opredelimo ključne pojme, ki se uporabljajo v psihološkem raziskovanju, nato razpravljamo o psiholoških dejavnikih. Pregledali bomo trenutne raziskave o predispozicijah, zaradi katerih ljudje verjamejo v teorije zarote. Ti lahko vključujejo psihološke motive (epistemične, eksistencialne in socialne), kognitivne dejavnike (npr. intuitivni stil razmišljanja), osebne lastnosti (npr. neprilagojenost) ali poglede na svet (npr. avtoritarnost). V naslednjem razdelku želimo osvetliti situacijske dejavnike. Obsežni in grozeči dogodki lahko ljudi spodbudijo k iskanju

pojasnil na napačnih mestih, torej v zarotah. Pomemben primer je pandemija COVID-19, ko so teorije zarote postale priljubljene, zato bomo izpostavili tudi vlogo omenjene pandemije. Na splošno lahko kombinacija posebnih predispozicij in situacij bistveno prispeva k višjim stopnjam prepričanj o zaroti, kar ima posledično močan vpliv na družbo.

Ključne besede: teorije zarot; zarotniška prepričanja; politika; napovedovalci; posledice.

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 19th 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 Eurabia² 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

² 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 struggles³ (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).

³ 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 (Birchall 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 Vranič 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 emphasising 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.

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 extra-terrestrials 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-lever 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 metaphysic, 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 (Alsubhani 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 #Slavians, 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.

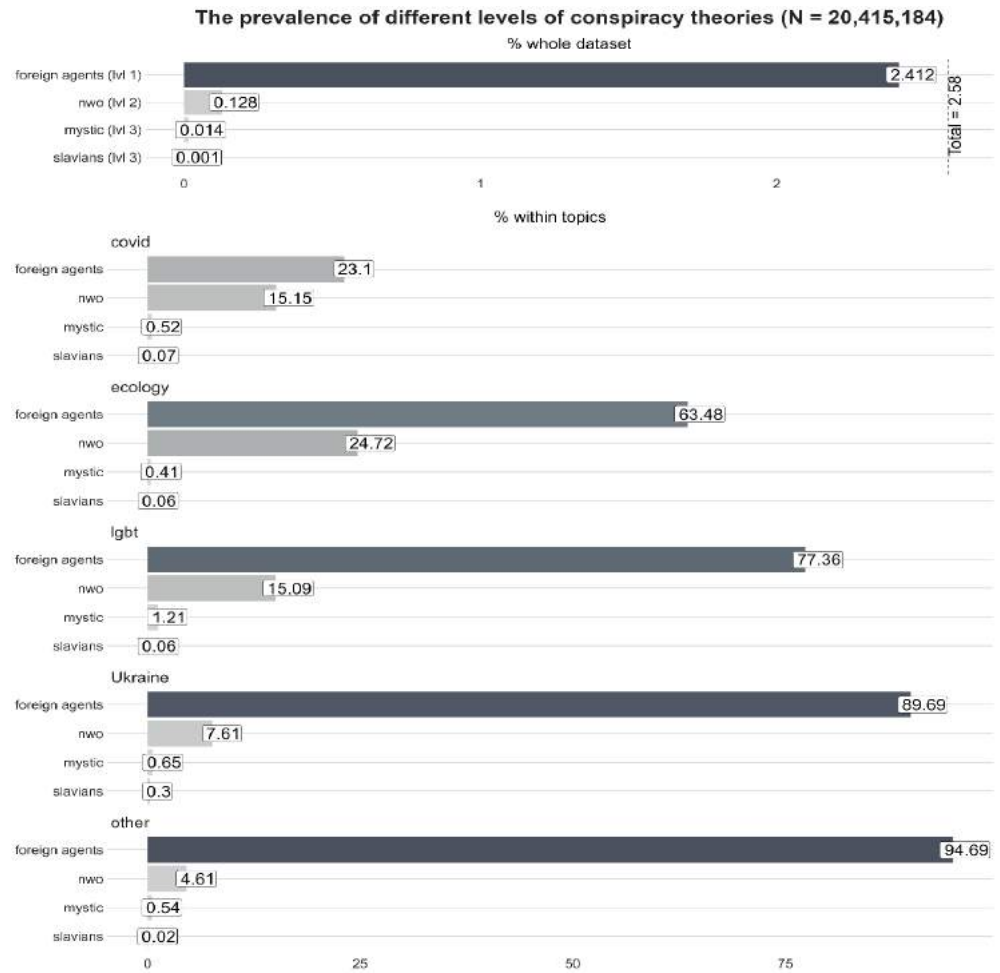
4.2 Findings from quantitative analysis

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.

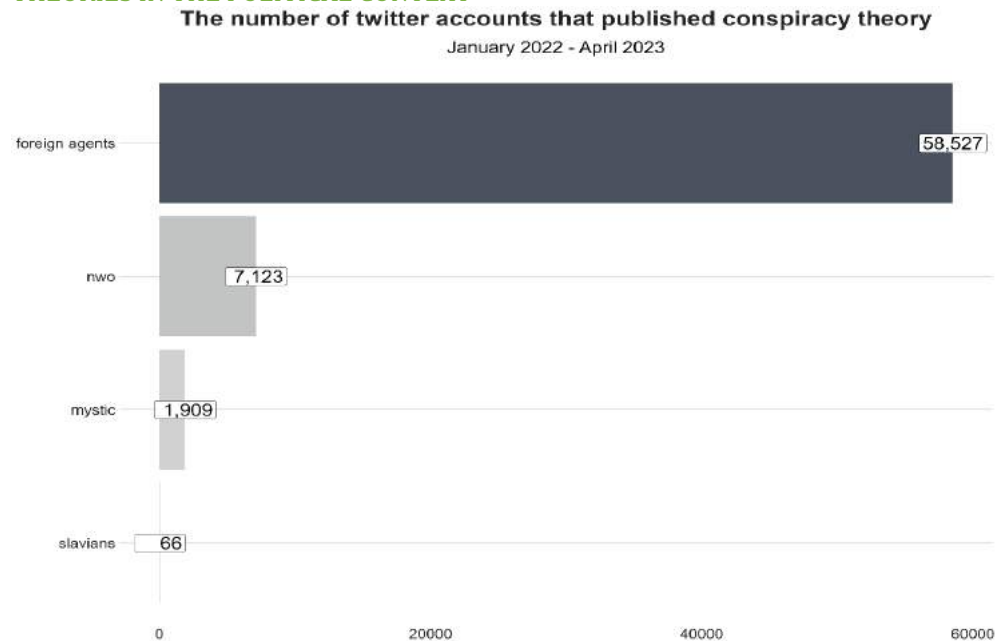
The prevalence of conspiracy theories in political discussions may be affected by hyperactive accounts that disproportionately publish their content (Matuszewski and Szabó 2023). Therefore, we verified the number of accounts that published conspiracy tweets. These results are congruent with those of 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.

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