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Conspiracy Theories and Politics in Slovakia:

How Conspiracy Thinking Relates to Political Opinions
and Preferences

Master's Thesis

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Declaration

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on January 1, 2022   Katarína Kondrótová

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Abstract

Conspiracy theories have become a fashionable buzzword, appearing across the internet, the media, and political speeches with great frequency. However, there are many misconceptions associated with them, making them more divisive and mysterious than they need to be. The present contribution seeks to remedy that by providing a deep dive into conspiracy theories. It examines the multitude of their possible definitions and conceptualizations, their existence across history, as well as past research findings about why they appeal to us. In the second half, conspiracy theories are presented through new research regarding their relation to political and ideological preferences of Slovaks. The findings are in line with past studies, showing a relationship between stronger conspiracy beliefs and extremist thinking, preference of authoritarian policies, and low faith in authorities. A regression analysis also uncovered a strong correlation between conspiracy beliefs and the political party the respondents had voted for, as well as their preference of the politics and ideologies of 'the West' (EU, USA) or 'the East' (Russian federation).

Abstrakt

Konspirační teorie se staly módním pojmem, který se často objevuje napříč internetem, v médiích i v politických projevech. Je s nimi však spojeno mnoho mylných představ, které je činí více rozdělujícími a záhadnými, než by musely být. Tato práce se snaží mylné představy uvést na pravou míru, poskytnutím hlubokého ponoru do tématu konspiračních teorií. Zkoumá jejich možné definice a konceptualizace, jejich existenci napříč dějinami, jakož i dosavadní výzkumná zjištění o tom, proč jim propadáme. V druhé polovině textu jsou konspirační teorie představeny prostřednictvím nového výzkumu, týkajícího se jejich vztahu k politickým a ideologickým preferencím slovenských občanů. Zjištění jsou v souladu s dřívějšími výzkumy a ukazují vztah mezi silnějším konspiračním přesvědčením a extremistickým smýšlením, preferencí autoritářské politiky a nízkou důvěrou v autority. Regresní analýza rovněž odhalila silnou korelaci mezi vírou v konspirační teorie a politickou stranou, kterou respondenti volili, stejně jako jejich preferencí politiky a ideologie 'Západu' (konkrétně EU a Spojených států amerických) nebo 'Východu' (konkrétně Ruské federace).

Keywords

Conspiracy theories, conspiracist ideation, conspiracy beliefs, disinformation, Slovak republic, elections, COVID-19

Klíčová slova

Konspirační teorie, konspirační myšlení, konspirační přesvědčení, dezinformace, Slovenská republika, volby, COVID-19

Title

Conspiracy Theories and Politics in Slovakia: How Conspiracy Thinking Relates to Political Opinions and Preferences

Název práce

Konspirační teorie a politika na Slovensku: Jak konspirační myšlení souvisí s politickými názory a preferencemi

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1. Introduction

Prior to writing this thesis, conspiracy theories seemed to me like a marginal phenomenon, albeit with an understandable degree of allure. I would hear them narrated as engaging fables at social gatherings, or see them used as plot points in adventure movies. Tales of 'the Illuminati' pulling the world's strings, or extraterrestrial visitations being hushed by the government, seemed harmless, even entertaining at times. However, when the COVID-19 pandemic began and the world plunged into chaos, less amusing conspiracy stories took the center stage. And rather than seeming marginal, they began overtaking mainstream narratives and shaping important decisions relating to people's health and lives. It was then that I realized how pervasive and powerful conspiracy theories can be and decided to study them more closely.

The time for conducting this study could not have been better, especially in the context of my home country[1]. Throughout 2020 and 2021, the people of Slovakia witnessed profuse revelations about the extent of corruption and clientelism in the republic, reaching to the highest levels of the executive and judiciary power. Long suspecting that 'something was rotten' in their homeland, people's theories about deep ominous links between judges, politicians and criminals were proven right, at least to some extent.

The police conducted mass detentions of numerous (former) police and government executives, prosecutors, judges, and influential lawyers and businessmen, on the grounds of corruption and other criminal activity. Simultaneously, and largely in response to the spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories about COVID-19, the government formed new organs and action plans aimed at countering hybrid threats, particularly in the information domain. The administration thus formally elevated conspiracy theories to a matter of national security, while on the other hand, many members of the public turned to them as providers of 'answers' in the chaos.

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[1] The initial project proposal for this thesis counted with researching conspiracy beliefs in two countries - Slovakia and the Czech Republic, culminating in a comparative analysis. However, it soon became evident that even with just one country, the thesis will be quite extensive. Hence, I decided to limit the research area to Slovakia only, and dedicate more space to explaining the political environment of Slovakia, as well as the theoretical and historical background of conspiracy theories.

Studying conspiracy theories thus seems more pertinent than ever before. This thesis examines them as social phenomena from a political and ideological perspective. It seeks to find out whether and how conspiracy thinking relates to people's political opinions and preferences, using a sample of the Slovak population. These chapters should answer questions such as: Are rightists or leftists more likely to be conspiracy believers? Which Slovak political party has supporters with the strongest conspiracy mentality? Is there any connection between a person's faith in institutions and their conspiracy beliefs? And many more...

This research journey starts by defining what conspiracy theories are. Though it might seem like an easy task, the entirety of Chapter 2 demonstrates that the contrary is true. The chapter traces the evolution of the words 'conspiracy theory' throughout time, as well as their use across various social sciences. It then specifies the definition that will be used throughout the rest of this thesis. Finally, it presents conspiracy theories as social constructs and embeds them into the wider context of constructivism in international relations.

While Chapter 2 deals with the etymology and usage of the term 'conspiracy theory', Chapter 3 examines it as a phenomenon throughout history. It presents records from Antiquity, Middle Ages and Modernity to demonstrate that tales of conspiracies have been abundant across time and space, and are not a product of the current era. The chapter broaches the subject of conspiracy theories as legitimate, (albeit often non-factual) interpretations of reality, which have been with us for much longer than many acknowledge. The chapter ends with an overview of the historically popular conspiracy theories in Slovakia, shedding light on the roots of the country's current ideational environment.

Chapter 4 provides an extensive review of past research about the factors that influence people's belief in conspiracy theories. It presents the known psychological, social, and ideological determinants of conspiracy beliefs, and forms a strong basis for this thesis' own empirical research. Chapter 4 also illuminates the conditions under which conspiracy beliefs tend to rise and why they become more popular in certain situations.

Chapters 5 and 6 are dedicated to the presentation of this thesis' new research. First, they explain the research design and the logic behind the construction of the questionnaire, which served as the data collection method. Second, they provide broader research context by explaining the current political climate of Slovakia. Finally, they present the research findings and show which variables relate to conspiracy thinking and how.

The thesis ends with a discussion of the findings and concluding remarks. Chapter 7 answers the main research question and ponders what other questions remained unresolved. Chapter 8 summarizes this thesis' key points and reiterates the main takeaways.

Despite its length, I hope this thesis remains engaging and illuminating in its theoretical introduction, as well as its empirical observations.

2. Defining conspiracy theories

This chapter provides an indispensable introduction into the topic of conspiracy theories. At its core lies the attempt to define what a conspiracy theory is, which, as will soon become evident, is more complicated than it might seem, due to the long history of conspiracy theories and a multitude of their social-scientific explanations. Furthermore, any chosen definition would be insufficient if presented on its own, without a closer look at the complex and fascinating evolution of mankind's understanding of 'conspiracy theories'.

Hence, this chapter starts by distinguishing between conspiracy theories, conspiracies, and other terms that frequently gets mistaken for one another. Afterwards a distinction between 'conspiracy theory' as a term, concept and phenomenon is made, followed by more detailed accounts of how conspiracy theories were studied across social sciences. Finally, having explained the evolutional background and nuances of the term and concept of 'conspiracy theory', the author completes the chapter by laying out the definition that will be used in the rest of this thesis.

2.1 Distinguishing conspiracy theories from related terms

2.1.1 Conspiracy theory vs. conspiracy

The words 'conspiracy' and 'conspiracy theory' are often, and incorrectly, used synonymously. Let us look at the root of these words and on how exactly they differ.

The etymological root of the word 'conspiracy' can be traced to the Latin verb *conspirare*, meaning "to agree, unite, plot", or, in literal terms "to breathe together". This term was adopted by Old French and later Anglo-French, which in the mid-14th century recognized the word *conspiracie* as "a plotting of evil, unlawful design; a combination of persons for an evil purpose" (Online Etymological Dictionary, n.d.). That definition is almost identical to how we understand 'conspiracy' nowadays. To be exact, the Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines it as "the act of conspiring together", with the word "conspiring" meaning "join[ing] in a secret agreement to do an unlawful or wrongful act or an act which becomes unlawful as a result of the secret agreement"[2].

Analogously, Merriam-Webster defines a 'conspiracy theory' as "a *theory* that explains an event or set of circumstances as the result of a secret plot by usually powerful conspirators" (with conspirators being "the ones who conspire") (n.d., emphasis added).

So, what is the main difference between 'conspiracy' and 'conspiracy theory'? A conspiracy is a secret and unlawful act that *actually* happened or is happening, while a conspiracy theory is a mere hypothesis or *belief* that such an act happened or is happening. Even though the difference between the two terms is quite self-explanatory, the word 'conspiracy' often gets used in the stead of 'conspiracy theory'. This happens frequently in the Slovak republic[3], not only in spoken language, but also in written texts, such as newspaper articles. Nevertheless, even in natively English-speaking countries, you can hear people interchange the terms and say things like 'The media are spreading conspiracies'. The factitiousness of this statement aside, it is linguistically incorrect. One

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[2] Alternatively, the verb "conspire" can also mean "to act in harmony toward a common end", and be used as a synonym of agree, concur or cooperate, without a negative connotation. Nonetheless, for the original definition that is being examined here – the definition of 'conspiracy' – only the first meaning of 'conspire' is relevant.

[3] To denote the terms 'conspiracy' and 'conspiracy theory', the Slovak language uses the terms 'konšpirácia' and 'konšpiračná teória', respectively.

cannot spread a conspiracy, i.e. an act. Rather, it is an idea, a belief or a *theory* that is being spread. Using the same word for real events and (baseless) conjectures can encourage the false notion that all conspiracy theories are, in fact, substantive. Mixing these terms contributes to the dangerous blurring of the line between fact and fiction.

2.1.2 Conspiracy theory vs. conspiracy myth / story / belief

Some academics object to the use of the term 'conspiracy theory', because technically, they are not *theories* in the scientific sense of the word.

By definition, "a theory refers to a scientifically testable assumption about the world. If it turns out false, it is rejected" (Nocun & Lambery, 2021, p. 18). However, that is not how most people work with conspiracy theories. The very essence of these 'theories' is that they cannot be sufficiently proven and regardless of how much evidence is presented against them, their believers rarely reject them. Hence, some authors began changing the traditional term 'conspiracy theory' to either 'conspiracy myth' – which refers to a broader, more abstract master narrative (such as the idea of a "worldwide Jewish conspiracy"); or 'conspiracy story' - meaning a concrete account of a particular event, often tied to a larger conspiracy myth (such as the idea that "Jews have created the [corona]virus to collapse the economy for financial gain" (Mahmood, 2020)) (Nocun & Lambery, 2021, p. 18-19).

While there are sound reasons behind the push to start calling 'conspiracy theories' more appropriately, the author chose to stick with the original term. The reason is that 'conspiracy theory' has become a household name for the phenomenon it describes, both in academia and in everyday life. Even though it is technically inaccurate, most people have the right idea about what it means. Using a new term like 'conspiracy story' brings unnecessary confusion into the already complex debate and needlessly erases the fascinating evolution of the term and concept of 'conspiracy theory'. Hence, keeping the deficiencies of the term 'conspiracy *theory*' in mind, it will continue to be used in this thesis, interchangeably with the term 'conspiracy belief'.

2.1.3 Conspiracy theory vs. other related terms

Other terms that often get pooled together with conspiracy theories are 'disinformation', 'misinformation' and 'fake news'. However, it is important to distinguish these terms from one another, not only to achieve better understanding of the subject at hand, but also to delimit this thesis, which studies only conspiracy theories and does not concern itself with the other terms / phenomena.

First, "*[d]isinformation* is information that is false, and the person who is disseminating it knows it is false. It is a deliberate, intentional lie" (Ireton & Posetti, 2018, p. 44). Thus, unlike a conspiracy theory, disinformation is not a belief in a secret elite or group of elites that control what happens. Rather, it is any information or 'fact' that has been made up or knowingly manipulated and then presented as truthful. Conspiracy theories can contain disinformation, and disinformation can point to larger conspiracy theories, but they are not one and the same.

Misinformation too signifies information that is false. However, contrary to disinformation, misinformation was *not* deliberately manipulated and is not being spread with malicious intent. Most of us have probably spread misinformation at some point in our lives, when we misremembered something and unwittingly passed that incorrect information to others. However, as soon as one learns that an information is false and continues to spread it, they become the spreaders of *dis*information. Hence, it is the *intent* of the spreader that constitutes the line between mis and disinformation (Ireton & Posetti, 2018, p. 44-46).

Fake news are false stories that pretend to be legitimate news. Put more eloquently, they are "purposefully crafted, sensational, emotionally charged, misleading or totally fabricated information that mimics [*sic*] the form of mainstream news" (Zimdars & McLeod, 2020). Fake news can include bits of disinformation and conspiracy theories; however, these are set in a broader context and presented as news, rather than 'secret truths' revealed by a rogue enlightened individual fighting against the system, (as is often the case with conspiracy theories).

Having these related terms out of the way is a necessary first step in the study of conspiracy theories. However, it is not enough. To understand the full extent of what can

and cannot be labeled a conspiracy theory, and what it even means if something is labeled so, dictionary definitions will not suffice. Academic literature provides a much larger variety of definitions of conspiracy theories, often quite dramatically different in their scopes and understanding of the phenomenon, which influences the nature and findings of each study. These differences are discussed in the following section, which traces the genealogy of the term and concept of 'conspiracy theories'. Afterwards, Section 2.4. establishes a final definition that will be used throughout the rest of this series.

2.3 Conspiracy theory as a term, concept and phenomenon

A conspiracy theory can be studied as a *term*, as a *concept* and as a *phenomenon* (McKenzie-McHarg, 2020). 'Term' is used here in the sense of a technical (or scientific) term. A 'concept' is more substantial than a term. It refers to something that already has a certain form in people's minds; something most people can understand, because they have already experienced it. Finally, a 'phenomenon' is something that happens and is widely seen and / or understood, even if it does not yet have a name (a 'term') associated with it[4].

'Conspiracy theory' as a phenomenon, term and concept each developed at a different time in history and had their own evolution and significance. The term and concept are relatively new, as the coming sections demonstrate, while many historians agree that as a phenomenon, conspiracy theories have existed for much longer (see Chapter 3 for details). That is why, in order to understand the breadth of conspiracy theories, it is necessary to distinguish between these three 'states' and provide a look at each one separately.

2.3.1 Conspiracy theory as a term *in police reports*

Andrew McKenzie-McHarg (2020) studies the term and concept of a 'conspiracy theory' by reconstructing its genealogy through conceptual history - i.e. finding the earliest

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[4] For better reference of this trichotomy, think of gravity. People recognized the existence of gravity – i.e. items falling to the ground when dropped – long before they were able to name it or study it. Hence, gravity was first observed as a phenomenon and only later coined as a term and studied as a concept. A similar thing can be said about conspiracy theories, which spread among people as 'rumors' long before they became a subject of academic study and got their own name and definition.

mentions of the term in literature, contextualizing its original meaning, and then tracing the meaning's evolution to how we understand it today.

The author found that the term 'conspiracy theory' was first used in written texts in the latter half of the 19th century. A search through digitized copies of old printed publications revealed that "from the 1870s onward, the term 'conspiracy theory' [began appearing] in reports on criminal and also civil cases in American newspapers" (McKenzie-McHarg, 2020, p. 23). However, the way it was used then was different to how it is used now. At the time, Anglo-American common law considered conspiracy a crime, and 'conspiracy theory' referred to a *police investigation of a potential conspiracy* (in the sense of "multiple perpetrators of a crime working together" (ibid, p. 24)). The term was being used alongside other forensic jargon like 'murder theory' or 'blackmail theory', all of which named the tentative explanations of crimes that were still under investigation (ibid, p. 23).

McKenzie-McHarg also argues that in the 19th century, 'conspiracy theory' did not yet exist as a concept, but only as a term - a purely denotative *terminus technicus*. It did not, therefore, carry the prejudice and the negative connotation we often associate it with today.

That changed almost a century later, when 'conspiracy theory' began to be applied to President Kennedy's assassination and the Watergate scandal (which, as was later discovered, was a true conspiracy that crossed the realm of theory and was proven right in reality). "The tumult of American politics in these years had given rise to an awareness of [conspiracy theories as] a generic phenomenon" and transformed them from a neutral *term* used in forensic sciences to a negatively-charged *concept* studied in social sciences[5] (McKenzie-McHarg, 2020, p. 24).

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[5] Even before the 1960s, there were sparse occurrences of the term 'conspiracy theory' being used in social scientific literature (see e.g. Dimock, 1937; or Popper, 1945). However, their use in this sense had not caught on until the later decades of the 20th century.

2.3.2 Conspiracy theory as a concept in the academia

Conspiracy theories are now studied by humanities, social and even some natural sciences[6] and therefore have multiple *conceptual* understandings. This section will provide their overview, focusing on the social-scientific ones, and further demonstrating the reason behind the difficulty of finding a single suitable definition of conspiracy theories.

Studies of culture and history

Historians were among the first to start conceptualizing conspiracy theories. And yet, even though conspiracy theories have a long historical tradition as a phenomenon, "the historiographic engagement with conspiracy theories only began in the twentieth century" (Butler & Knight, 2020, p. 29). The key publication in this field, which rippled across social sciences and influenced the study of conspiracy theories for years to come, was Richard Hofstader's 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics' (1964). In it, Hofstader called the belief in conspiracy theories a "paranoid style of thinking" and defined it as the conviction that "a 'vast' or 'gigantic' conspiracy [w]as *the motive force* in historical events" (p. 29). Hofstader also claimed this mode of thinking, though recurring throughout US history, was "the preferred style only of minority movements" (p. 7). In conceptualizing conspiracist thinking as an extreme and fringe phenomenon, Hofstader marginalized it and rendered it less attractive for further research. Conspiracy theories were dismissed as a form of paranoia, rather than viewed as a legitimate and mainstream phenomenon worthy of exploration. Only with the start of the new millennium had Hofstader's influence on the historical study of conspiracy theories began to fade and a number of new publications emerged. Some of these are presented in the following chapter, which covers conspiracy theories as a phenomenon existing throughout history.

Cultural studies, which developed as a separate field around the time when Hofstader published his influential book, was also strongly influenced by the publication, and produced no noteworthy studies regarding conspiracy theories during the 20th century. However, analogously to the fading of the 'paranoid stigma' in historical studies, scholars

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[6] Natural sciences have studied conspiracy theories mainly from the perspective of biochemistry, neuroscience and psychiatry, as part of a broader question of how the formation of beliefs affects the brain and vice versa. See e.g. Flannely et al., 2007; Sathyanarayana Rao et al., 2009.

of culture began challenging the condemnation of conspiracy theories and are now seeking "to understand their appeal and assess their cultural significance" (Butter & Knight, 2020, p. 31). Current cultural research is focused on conspiracy theories as elements of the "collective narratives that communities used to make sense of their worlds". They are being conceptualized as "logical responses to technological and social change" (Melley, 2000, p. 14), or as reactions to "a long history of abuse" and inequality of certain peoples (Butter & Knight, 2020, p. 32). Cultural studies have thus enriched our understanding of conspiracy theories as potential collective coping mechanisms, helping communities make sense of tumultuous times and unjust conditions. Nonetheless, "in [their] desire to tune into the playful, creative, insightful and potentially progressive forms of conspiracism, the cultural studies approach at times can end up downplaying or ignoring the nonsensical and harmful kind" (ibid, p. 35).

A related field, *social and cultural anthropology,* studied conspiracy theories mostly "in tandem with research on witchcraft, sorcery and evil forces" (Rabo, 2020, p. 83). Many observations of these phenomena have been made before conspiracy theories were established as a study subject in social sciences, so connections between them and the occult were largely made later, when both phenomena were sufficiently conceptualized. For example, Evans-Pritchard's study of the Azande people in South Sudan in the 1920s and 1930s, revealed the Azande did not believe in coincidences and explained all unfortunate events by witchcraft. Be it an unsuccessful hunt, a spoiled relationship, an injury, or death, almost all hardship was attributed to the work of witches (Evans-Pritchard, 1976 [1937], p. 18-22). The Azande's reasoning for why bad things happened consisted of "connecting the dots" and "denying the possibility of coincidence", which is "quite similar to belief in conspiracies", as other anthropologists later concluded (Rabo, 2020, p. 83). The Azande example is just one of many, but it shows that conspiracy theories can exist in many forms, across time and cultures. While in Europe we mostly connect them with powerful politicians or millionaires, societies elsewhere in the world might attribute conspiratorial behavior to occult forces or gods. Among cultures that attribute their misfortunes to some higher power, 'conspiracy theories' are common and legitimate explanations of life.

In more general terms, social anthropology has reached conclusions similar to those of cultural studies – that "sorcery, witchcraft and conspiracy theory is (…) one particular way to handle and explain misfortune on the part of people lacking power and influence" (ibid, p. 90). However, some researchers pointed out that the rich and powerful also frequently had a hand in spreading conspiracy theories for personal gains, pointing to the important relationship between truth and power, which is a connection oft studied by critical scholars of international relations (Pelkmans & Machold, 2011; Rabo 2020, p. 90).

Studies of literature and philosophy

Literary studies have produced the bulk of their work on conspiracy theories in the 2000s. Unlike historians or cultural anthropologists, scholars of literature focus mostly on the form and content rather than the roots or effects of conspiracy theories. They make an important distinction between the works of fiction, which use conspiracy theories as a story-building tool, and discursive texts, which present evidence to expose alleged conspiracies (Butter, 2014, p. 25–7). Literary scholars found that "[i]n American culture, prior to the twentieth century, most conspiracy narratives tended to be promoted in factual genres" rather than fictional (Butter & Knight, 2020, p. 35). This adds further strength to the argument that conspiracy theorizing existed as an activity / phenomenon long before it was coined as a term or developed by social scientists and writers of conspiracy thrillers. Nonetheless, conspiracy theories from a literary perspective remain greatly understudied, especially in the global perspective, as most researchers analyzed exclusively publications written in the English language (ibid, p. 39).

Moving on to *philosophy*. Even though it is not per se a social science, it needs to be mentioned, for its contribution to the conceptualization of conspiracy theories is significant. According to Räikkä & Ritola (2020), the field centers its study of conspiracy theories along these four questions: "(1) the *conceptual* question of what the appropriate definition of the term 'conspiracy theory' is; (2) the *epistemic* question about the rationality and justification of conspiratorial beliefs; (3) the *moral* question of the ethical status of conspiracy theorising; and (4) the *practical* question of how decision-makers should deal with conspiracy theories" (p. 56, emphasis added). Of these, the first question in particular is of great importance to this thesis, because it summarizes some of the main issues with defining conspiracy theories. Essentially, "[p]hilosophers disagree about

whether conspiracy theories should be distinguished from ordinary social explanations that refer to conspiracies" (ibid, p. 57). In other words, they cannot agree on whether to define conspiracy theories pejoratively or neutrally.

One group of philosophers believes the term 'conspiracy theory' carries a negative / speculative charge and should only refer to suspected conspiracies that "are *not supported* by the appropriate epistemic authorities, such as mainstream media, investigative journalists, various state authorities and agencies, the scientific community and professional historians" (Räikkä & Ritola, 2020, p. 57). Others (e.g. Coady, 2006; Pidgen, 2007; Dentith, 2016...) argue that 'conspiracy theory' ought to be a neutral term that signifies all explanations referring to conspiracies, both proven and potential. Their argument is that if we keep dismissing conspiracy theories by categorically defining them all as irrational – in the style of Hofstader – we might be missing out on things. For one, the value of accepting conspiracy theories and studying them might lead to bringing necessary attention to people's grievances, which tend to be reflected in these theories. For two, they might help uncover real conspiracies. After all, some conspiracy theories were proven right in the past and there is no indication it could not happen again. But we might never find out if we choose to "downplay their importance" by defining them pejoratively and not even giving them the benefit of an unbiased look (Dentith, 2020, p. 165).

This constitutes the key conundrum in studying and thereby defining conspiracy theories. For philosophy, it might be more fruitful to keep the definition more neutral and broad, as that keeps the door to the study of reality and knowledge more open. But what about other disciplines? Specifically, what about political science, which not only ponders theoretically about the epistemology or morality of conspiracy theories, but deals with their real-world implications? The following sections should get us closer to finding the answer to that question and, ultimately, to choose a definition that will be used throughout the rest of this thesis.

Studies of politics

Political science and theory are closest to the field studied by the author and should therefore provide the most pertinent insights. While politics and conspiracies have had a

long-lasting common history, political science began studying conspiracy theories only after the Second World War. It started in Europe in the 1940s with Karl Popper, who coined "the expression 'conspiracy theory of society' to designate a defective social phenomenon" (Giry & Tika, 2020, p. 108; Popper, 1945, p. 94). In the USA, it was mainly the work of historians that made conspiracy theories a noteworthy subject of political study – especially Hofstader's aforementioned publication 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics'. However, unlike in historical studies, Hofstader's account of conspiracy thinking as a marginal phenomenon that was reflected in US politics, made it *relevant* for political scientists.

Nowadays, political science investigates "the understanding of conspiracy beliefs in relation to politics" (Giry & Tika, 2020, p. 111) and its study areas often overlap with other disciplines, notably social psychology. More concretely, "[a]t the global level, scientific contributions commonly interrogate the relationship between (mis)information …, extremisms or ideologies in democratic regimes …, partisanship … and conspiracy theories. Furthermore, at the individual level, researchers investigate the social determinants that make people prone to believe in conspiracy theories" (ibid, p. 110).

Decades of study reveal that from a political point of view, "conspiracy theories are not a marginal phenomenon and their presence extends throughout the entire political spectrum and up and down the social ladder" (Giry & Tika, 2020, p. 111; Goertzel, 1994). Conspiracy theories are therefore worthy of more thorough exploration, especially in connection with politics, international relations and security.

Many authors and scholars of political science have managed to navigate the perilous waters of defining conspiracy theories too broadly or narrowly / too positively or neutrally, and have devised definitions that capture their nature, without dismissing or mocking them. That appears to be the most suitable way to study conspiracy theories, at least in the bounds of political science and international relations, and within the social constructivist lens the author chose as the theoretical basis for this thesis (more on that in Chapter 2.5).

2.4 Defining conspiracy theories for the purpose of this thesis

Drawing from the example of Giry & Tika (2020) and van Prooijen (2018, p. 5-7), this section outlines a number of components that constitute a conspiracy theory. For something to qualify as a conspiracy theory for the purpose of this thesis, *all* the ensuing components must be met.

A conspiracy theory:

1) "is an *explanation* of historical, ongoing or future events" (Uscinski & Parent, 2014, p. 32);
2) based on assertions that could be true but *have not been sufficiently proven* to be generally accepted as facts (Uscinski 2018; Olmsted 2009).
3) The events it explains are the alleged result of discreet or *secret* activities of *powerful* individuals / groups / minorities / elites / institutions / corporations (Uscinski & Parent, 2014, p. 32; Giry & Tika, 2020, p. 114-5; Campion-Vincent, 2005);
4) that aim to take *power*, strengthen their position and / or *harm* others for their own benefit (ibid), hence creating or enforcing an 'us versus them' narrative (Giry & Tika, 2020, p. 115).

Put more concisely, a conspiracy theory is an *unproven explanation* of events, said to be *caused* by *powerful* groups or individuals, who *secretly* act *against* the public to achieve their own *goals*.

Note that this definition does not say anything about the veracity of a given theory. As was already mentioned, conspiracy theories *can* be true and it is not the job of the researcher to judge them *a priori*. The author believes the provided definition strikes the right balance between neutrality and concreteness. It does not condemn conspiracy theories by framing them as inherently false or irrational, but also avoids too broad of a conceptualization. By specifying that the thesis will only be dealing with theories that have *not* been sufficiently proven (yet), the author excludes those theories that were officially validated. An example of an officially validated conspiracy theory is the Watergate scandal (Knight, 2003, p. 725), whose evidence was so indisputable that it caused the resignation of President Nixon. The words 'sufficiently proven' might seem too ambiguous or

subjective, but in this definition of conspiracy theories, the line is quite clear-cut. There are either theories (which may or may not be true), and real conspiracies (which were proven to be true and are accepted as such by the 'mainstream').

2.4.1 Conspiracy beliefs vs. paranormal and religious beliefs

Let us now apply this four-part definition to practice and see what types of beliefs it does and does not encompass.

First, it is important to clarify that not all unfounded or poorly documented claims qualify as conspiracy theories. For example, beliefs in the existence of extraterrestrial life, mythical beings, magic, paranormal activity, supernatural abilities and similar phenomena are not automatically conspiracy beliefs. Even though these tend to meet the first two criteria of the provided definition, they do not generally (or automatically) meet the remaining two.

Supernatural beliefs *can* take on the form of a conspiracy theory *if* they are framed as a secret, being kept quiet by someone powerful for 'their' benefit or 'our' harm. For example, multiple conspiracy theories surround the so-called 'Roswell UFO incident' or 'Area 51'[7]. These claim that the US government is "covering up alien visitations" or outright experimenting on extraterrestrial beings, while keeping it away from the public for some sinister reason (Kluger, 2019; Knight, 2003, p. 91-92). Some theories even go as far as to say that the aliens being held at Area 51 have helped "humans decipher and decode [alien] technology, from which, it is alleged, we have reverse-engineered microwave ovens, cellular phones, and computers" (Knight, 2003, p. 91). Other related conspiracy theories have looked at the issue from the opposing end, claiming that the CIA have been using the Roswell incident to manufacture "UFO hysteria" and fueled it as a tool of "psychological warfare" against the Soviets (ibid, p. 158; Haines, 1999).

In sum, believing in aliens, paranormal activity and similar phenomena does not make one a conspiracy theorist. Only once these beliefs start containing elements of a secret

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[7] The 'Roswell (UFO) Incident' refers to a 1974 crash of a flying object in a ranch near the town of Roswell in New Mexico. Official accounts say the crashed object was a weather balloon, but many believe it was an alien vessel. 'Area 51' is a classified US Air Force facility in Nevada. The high degree of secrecy surrounding it has made it another popular subject of conspiracy theorists.

cover-up, plot or conspiracy, orchestrated by a powerful group or individual, do they cross the separating line and become conspiracy theories. It is also important to note that researchers found a correlation between paranormal and conspiracy beliefs, meaning that if one believes in the existence of paranormal or supernatural phenomena, they are more likely to sympathize with conspiracy theories (Dagnall et al., 2007; Darwin et al., 2011; Oliver & Wood, 2014). That happens because adherents of either of these beliefs process information and see the world quite similarly, which makes them more likely to accept additional explanations that follow the same 'logic'. "[B]oth conspiracist ideation and paranormal beliefs require a rejection of official mechanisms of information generation and expert opinion", adds Barron et al. (2014, p. 158).

The second group of beliefs that can get mistaken for conspiracy theories are certain religious and spiritual beliefs. Putting these in one basket would, once again, be incorrect; however, they do share some similarities. Asbjørn Dyrendal specifies that the relationship "between conspiracy beliefs and religion" has "three different components: Conspiracy theory *as* religion, conspiracy theories *about* religion and conspiracy theories *in* religion" (2020, p. 371).

Ad 1, conspiracy theories can be seen and studied "as a continuation of religious modes of thinking" – ergo as convictions substituting or overlapping religious beliefs. Why? Because religious and conspiracy beliefs tend to share certain characteristics. Both provide their own explanations of evil and promote "narratives about hidden, intentional agency that control large-scale events". In the case of religion, this "agency" is most often the will of God or gods, while in conspiracy theories it is the will of powerful and influential (wo)men. Both also like to paint a 'black and white world' with an evil side and a good side, clearly distinguishing an 'us' and a 'them'. Both are likely to convey secret knowledge that offers salvation from the grim consequences that await us. And both "present a worldview that is largely teleological," with "parallel epistemologies that make claims 'unfalsifiable'" (Dyrendal, 2020, p. 372, 374).

And yet, despite their similarities, religion and conspiracy theories cannot be reduced to one and the same. Religious and spiritual beliefs tend to be much broader and rooted in movements and ideologies that have existed for much longer that the ideas behind

concrete conspiracy theories have. It is also impossible to talk about religions as one uniform entity – there are likely thousands of them[8], with a great degree of variance and fragmentation.

Nonetheless, some studies show that certain religious / spiritual and conspiracy beliefs tend to correlate (Lahrach & Furnham, 2017; Robertson & Dyrendal, 2018); or rather that the stronger people's religious worldviews are, the more likely they are to endorse conspiracy theories (Jasinskaja-Lahti & Jetten, 2019). Just like beliefs in paranormal or supernatural phenomena, religious beliefs can make a person more susceptible to conspiracist ideation, because they tend to follow the same logic in explaining the surrounding world. They all "attribute the source of unexplained or extraordinary events to unseen, intentional forces" (Oliver & Wood, 2014, p. 954) and use similar narratives and methods to interpret the world.

Ad 2, there are a great many conspiracy theories *about* religion. Historical accounts show a particularly large number of these surrounding Judaism, but also Christianity (particularly Catholicism) and Islam. "Conspiracy theories about religious groups have been employed in larger social conflicts, mostly in attempts to deflect responsibility for problems on scapegoats, thus attempting to unify and mobilise a conflicted ingroup", writes Dyrendal (2020, p. 374). Accusing certain religions or their adherents of conspiratorial behavior (i.e. secret pacts designed to grab power, privilege their followers and/or hurt heretics) has thus been a popular method used by rulers, politicians and other powerful people, to shift blame or get rid of opponents. These days, conspiracy theories about religion appear mainly in pop culture. Conspiracy thriller has become a trendy genre of both books and movies, whose plots are often centered around religious conspiracies[9].

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[8] The word 'religion' does not encompass only the most popular, 'conventional' religions, like Christianity or Islam. Estimates say there are over four thousand different religions across the world (Juan, 2006). The core tenets and beliefs of some religions are closer to conspiracy theories than others.

[9] See for example bestselling books like 'The Da Vinci Code' or 'Angels & Demons' by Dan Brown, which were also turned into movies.

Ad 3, there can be conspiracy theories (*with*)*in* religions, embedded in their argumentation and vision of the world. This is especially true among fundamentalists and followers of religions built on paranormal and apocalyptic beliefs (ibid, p. 375; Robertson & Dyrendal, 2018). The subjects of these intra-religious conspiracy theories are usually the established authorities or followers of other religions. On the other hand, conspiracy theories *in* religion can also be created for the same reasons as conspiracy theories *about* religion – i.e. as tools to vilify one's enemies – and spread by influential people *within* the church[10]. This is common even for the world's most popular religions. For example, the Russian Orthodox Church began spreading a conspiracy theory about the band 'Pussy Riot', after they protested the Church for supporting President Putin. The band's actions were framed as "part of the West's … conspiracy against Russia", aiming to undermine the power and importance of the Church in Russian society and world history. "Official, political narratives tied the band and its supporters to a conspiracy consisting of the internal opposition, the intelligence operations of the West, atheism, a 'Neo-Bolshevism' that might instigate new pogroms against the Church and sexual deviance" (Dyrendal, 2020, p. 376; Yablokov, 2018, p. 107). This theory thus gained momentum because it was picked up and promoted by two powerful authorities – the Church and the government – as well as tied to other issues important for the country.

Another case of a conspiracy theory within a popular world religion could be seen in Nigeria, where local Islamic authorities boycotted the polio vaccine, describing it as "a Western plot to sterilise girls, spread H.I.V. and cancer". These rumors were also connected with profoundly anti-American sentiments, spurred by the USA's war on terror. As a result of this antivax conspiracy theory, "[f]ive states of the mostly Muslim north discontinued the vaccine", leading to a polio outbreak in the region (Dyrendal, 2020, p. 377-8).

The relationship between conspiracy theories and religion is complicated. The two have often been intertwined, used the same language and attracted similar people. However, they cannot be equated; and neither can beliefs in the supernatural or paranormal. The

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[10] The mechanism of creating conspiracy theories *about* and *in* religion can be very similar. The main difference lies in who fabricates them. For theories *about* religion, it is mostly the people outside of it, targeting those within. Theories *in* religion are made by people from within, targeting those outside.

definition provided at the start of this chapter offers a relatively clear dividing line between conspiracy theories and other types of beliefs. For something to be understood as a conspiracy theory within the scope of this thesis, it must be 'an unproven explanation of events, said to be caused by powerful groups or individuals, who secretly act against the public to achieve their own goals'. If even just one of these characteristics is missing, the thing at hand is *not* a conspiracy theory.

2.5 Conspiracy theories as a social construct

Conspiracy theories are objectively a relevant topic of study in politics and international relations (IR), regardless of the approach one adopts. Nonetheless, a good choice of theory backing the study can make it all the more pertinent, as it influences the way the study subject is conceptualized and places it into broader ideational context. In the author's mind, the best theoretical underpinning for the study of conspiracy beliefs and political preferences is the theory of (social) constructivism [11].

Constructivism is one of the newer theories of IR, having developed as a result of the Third (also known as Fourth) Great Debate, between positivist and post-positivist approaches (Fierke, 2013, p. 188). However, its roots go further back, as the idea of social construction of reality had been developed in philosophy and sociology long before it was picked up by IR scholars.

At the core of constructivism lies the notion that international relations are a *social construct*: a thing not objectively existing on its own but created and re-created by human ideation. Hence, the (political) world is "a world of our making" (ibid, p. 189; Onuf, 1989).

The theory of social constructivism focuses on "social facts" (Searle, 1995) - things "which have no material reality but exist only because people collectively believe they exist and act accordingly" (Finnermore & Sikkink, 2001). Hence, this theoretical approach is

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[11] Some would argue that (social) constructivism is not a regular *theory* of IR, but rather a "meta-theoretical approach to the study of social phenomena" (Risse, 2004, p. 3; Finnermore & Sikkink, 2001). Indeed, it was formed as a "critique of the static material assumptions" of traditional theories of IR, so it is not entirely correct to put them all under the same label (Fierke, 2013, p. 188). However, with that in mind, constructivism will herein be referred to as a theory, for the sake of simplicity and better legibility.

perfectly suited for the study of conspiracy theories, which only come into being and survive if people *believe* in them.

Conspiracy theories are always born in reaction to something – usually an event or occurrence that is unexpected and disconcerting. Since humans do not like to live in uncertainty, they look for explanations to these occurrences. Some of them are plausible, well-research and fact-based, while others rely on 'easier' and more fantastic interpretations, involving intentional plots and malicious actors (see e.g. van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017; Bruckmüller et al., 2017; or more details in Chapter 4).

These fabricated explanations are mental *constructs* – creations of the mind designed to help us cope with confusing situations. If these constructs gain traction, they start living their own *social* life; as more people subscribe to them, they are being expanded, altered and branched off, and start serving as suitable explanations for other events or phenomena. These beliefs can then become links in the chains leading to important decisions. We know that conspiracy theories and similar unfounded claims have served as fuel for wars and armed conflicts, for the marginalization or decimation of minorities, or the discreditation of important public figures. All of these are important matters that shape the face of politics and international relations across the globe.

Studying conspiracy theories can be overwhelming. However, the author believes that with the help of constructivism, understanding the mechanics of their creation and their impactful potential becomes easier. Constructivism explains that the social and political world is not made up of objective realities, but rather of structures and beliefs that we, the people, subjectively create and choose to maintain. The strength of these beliefs – be it beliefs about morality, religion, or the functioning of the world – comes from the amount of time and attention *we choose* to give to them. By subscribing to them, we let them enter our lives and influence our decisions, individually and collectively. That is why all beliefs, including conspiracy beliefs, are important elements of our existence, impacting even intra- and inter-national relations and politics.

2.6 Conclusion and summary

This chapter provided an indispensable introduction into the study of conspiracy theories. Though it may seem lengthy, the author believes it helped illustrate just how complex conspiracy theories are and how important it is to suitably define them.

The beginning of this chapter cleared up some common misconceptions about the use of the term 'conspiracy theory' and explained how it differs from related terms like conspiracy, disinformation, misinformation, and fake news. The following sections delved into the complexity and great variety of conspiracy theories, explaining that there is a difference between the original use of 'conspiracy theory' as a *term* in forensic reports, and the multiple *concepts* of conspiracy theory used across social sciences.

In section 2.4, I presented my definition of a conspiracy theory as an 'unproven explanation of events, said to be caused by powerful groups or individuals, who secretly act against the public to achieve their own goals'. This definition will inform the rest of this thesis and its empirical research. The chosen formulation is relatively neutral, non-judgmental, and does not address the (ir)rationality or (un)truthfulness of conspiracy theories. This enables a more objective and a priori unbiased study of conspiracy theories as a relevant phenomenon in human societies and politics.

Finally, the chapter ended with a presentation of an IR perspective of conspiracy theories through the lens of constructivism. It showed an outlook in which conspiracy theories are a relevant element of politics and international relations. It helps us see conspiracy theories as intentional ideational constructs, which exist because people are consciously keeping them alive and letting them influence their judgment in other fields of life, even in politics.

With this important introduction into conspiracy theories out of the way, it is time to move to an overview of conspiracy theories as a historical phenomenon.

3. Conspiracy theory as a phenomenon: A brief history of conspiracy theories

The previous chapter covered 'conspiracy theory' as a term and as a concept. This chapter completes the triad and delves into the existence of conspiracy theories as a *phenomenon* throughout human history.

Even though many people associate the existence and popularity of conspiracy theories with the current millennium and credit the invention of the Internet and social media with the proliferation of conspiracy beliefs, "there is no evidence that people are more prone to conspiracy thinking now than they were prior to the invention of the Internet" (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 15). To demonstrate the veracity of this statement, this chapter examines the role conspiracy theories played in some of the earliest human civilizations.

The chapter begins with a brief introduction into the problems and challenges of studying the conspiracy theories of the past. It then reviews the available scholarship on conspiracy theories during the Roman Empire, the Middle Ages, and Modernity. Finally, it features a separate section covering the known history of conspiracy theories in today's Slovakia. The primary goal of this chapter is to demonstrate that conspiracies and conspiracy theories are not a novel invention, but rather a persistent part of human societies and, one might even say, of human nature (Groh, 1987; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017).

3.1 Conspiracy theories in history: Problems and challenges

As was mentioned in the previous chapter, the historical study of conspiracy theories had been mostly frozen throughout the 20th century, in part due to Hofstader's dismissal of them as a marginal and unhealthy phenomenon. This changed in the early 2000s, when the popularity of conspiracy theories was seemingly on the rise because of tumultuous events such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks. These reignited the interest of historians and other scholars, who wanted to better understand the phenomenon of conspiracy theories in both current and historical contexts.

However, just as with any study of history, the available materials are scarce and not always reliable. Also, researchers have mostly focused on Europe and North America and overlooked other parts of the world in their studies of the history of conspiracy theories.

This even led to proclamations that conspiracy theories might be a 'Western invention' which was merely exported to other regions, much like European languages or religions. However, studies from 'non-Western' regions and societies exist and even though they are not as plentiful as their counterparts, their aggregate findings indicate that conspiracy theories have most likely existed across the globe and independently of one another. It appears more accurate to think about conspiracy theories as natural reactions to unrest and societal shocks, rather than a product of one particular region or culture (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017; Knudsen, 2020).

Some of the most notable studies discussing the history of conspiracy theories outside of Western Europe and the USA, were written about Central and Eastern Europe (Golec de Zavala & Cichocka, 2012; Panczová & Janeček, 2020); Western Asia / the 'Middle East' (Zonis and Joseph, 1994; Gray 2010, p. 49-87; Gray, 2020); or Latin America (Senkman & Roniger, 2019). Moreover, as the section discussing the anthropological study of conspiracy theories has brought up, beliefs and behaviors similar to those of 'modern' conspiracy theorists had been observed in many native societies in ethnological research. However, since most of these studies were conducted before conspiracy theories became an object of interest for social scientists, they are regarded as research of witchcraft, religion, or occultism, not of the history (or cultural variation) of conspiracy theories.

Aside from the relative lack of geographical breadth in the study of the history of conspiracy theories, there is also no consensus on when they first emerged.

Conspiracies – i.e. actual secret plots aimed at gaining power, wealth or influence - have indubitably been present in human history since the beginnings of civilizations. But what about conspiracy *theories* – 'the unproven explanations of events, said to be caused by powerful groups or individuals, who secretly act against the public to achieve their own goals'? It appears that they did not have to begin at the same time as actual conspiracies. Some authors (e.g. Raab et al., 2017) claim conspiracy theories had already existed during the late Stone Age, coming out as a result of the Neolithic revolution, in which the "settlements that humans began to inhabit engendered a more acute spatial awareness of boundaries drawn between those on the inside and those on the outside", which must have "fostered the earliest forms of conspiracy theorising" (McKenzie-McHarg, 2020, p.

17). However, this is only a speculation, as no written records survive from that era. Other authors, already drawing from available historical documents, subscribe to the idea that conspiracy theories first emerged during Antiquity (Pagán, 2005, 2020; Roisman, 2006); Renaissance (see Zwierlien, 2020, p. 542); the Middle Ages or early modernity (Coward & Swann, 2004; Zwierlein, 2013, 2014); the Enlightenment Age (Butter, 2014); or even later. These different timeframes stem from the authors' choice of definition of conspiracy theories – which proves just how impactful definitions are and how they affect the way we study certain phenomena.

Despite the many issues that the historical study of conspiracy theories has, it is worth looking at the existing research to see just how prevalent and perseverant conspiracy theories have been in the past. Whether we choose to pinpoint their emergence to Antiquity, the Middle Ages, or Modernity, we always find an inextricable link between conspiracy theories and politics. To truly understand conspiracy beliefs, it is important to acknowledge that they are not a new fad born in the digital age, but an old and somewhat natural phenomenon connected with power, influence and human perceptions of the surrounding world.

3.2 Conspiracy theories during Antiquity

According to American historian Veronica Pagán (2005), Ancient Rome was no stranger to conspiracies. Conspiracy *theories* were presumably less plentiful, but historical sources reveal they likely existed and were not too different from the theories we recognize today.

Pagán writes that rumors akin to conspiracy theories were "a mechanism by which the common people could interpret or comment on political events" in Rome, regardless of the realities that were truly happening (2020, p. 532). As one example, Pagán cites the death of Germanicus - the nephew / adopted son of emperor Tiberius, who died under suspicious circumstances while visiting the Roman province of Syria. Records written by the famous historian Tacitus show that the public believed the emperor was behind his nephew's death. Allegedly, Tiberius felt that the young man's skills and popularity threatened his position of power, so he had his nephew killed. Then he held a sham trial and punished a scapegoat for Germanicus' death, in order to "control public perception" (ibid, p. 534).

There are no surviving records of any evidence supporting these claims. Nonetheless, the theory about a nepoticidal emperor was apparently so popular and widespread that it entered official historical documents. As a result, we still learn about this theory as the most probable course of events, regardless of its veracity.

Another event that remains shrouded by stories of a conspiracy was the Great Fire of Rome in 64 C.E. The fire's true origins are unknown, but the most popular belief to this day is that it was started by Emperor Nero to help him "acquire lands for his 'Golden House', a vast megalomaniacal complex in the centre of the city" (Pagán, 2020, p. 536). However, Tacitus writes that the emperor blamed Christians for starting the fire, likely to dispel rumors about his own involvement. In other words, Nero created a conspiracy theory which painted Christians as spiritless evildoers and "haters of mankind", who had cowardly attacked the citizens of Rome (Pagán, 2012, p. 4).

Once again, whether Nero's account of a Christian conspiracy was true or not, does not really matter. What matters is that it was being advertised as the truth so intensely that it was included in the official historical records of the era. Furthermore, this accusation, as recorded by Tacitus, constitutes "the earliest mention of Christians in classical [secular] literature" (Pagán, 2020, p. 536). The fact that Christians were first mentioned as part of a conspiracy theory is especially interesting in light of their long-lasting historical persecution, linked with other stories about their involvement in power-grabbing schemes. Hence, Ancient Roman accounts of history may have been the start of "an effortless slip into a timeless and believable, if unproven or unprovable, indictment of Christians as conspirators" (ibid, p. 538).

The works of Tacitus and other ancient historians are proof that conspiracy theories not only existed, but also influenced the mainstream discourse on political and social events in Ancient Rome. And they continue to influence what we learn about history to this day.

There are also records of conspiracy theorizing in ancient Athens, studied by Joseph Roisman (2006). He found that a "rhetoric of conspiracy" was used as evidence "in cases of homicide and inheritance, and in cases in which litigants attempted to entrap their opponents" (Pagán, 2020, p. 532). Accusing one's opponent of engaging in a conspiracy

to deny one justice was a "frequent rhetorical technique" in judicial speeches, utilized by both defendants and prosecutors (Kennedy, 2008, p. 90).

Besides conspiracy theories being spread during ancient court hearings, Roisman shows they were also used in matters of internal Athenian politics and international policy (Pagán, 2020, p. 532). Hence, theories about people who secretly engaged in illicit activities against society were usually crafted by men in positions of power or influence, and quickly picked up by the Athenian public, which was "unusually contentious, quick to believe the worst and detect insult" (Kennedy, 2008, p. 93).

3.3 Conspiracy theories in the Middle Ages and Early Modernity

Unlike Pagán and Roisman, who saw the accounts of ancient historians as evidence of the existence of conspiracy theories during Antiquity, German historian Cornel Zwierlein places their birth into Renaissance (for religious conspiracy theories) and early modernity (for secular conspiracy theories) (Zwierlein, 2014; 2020). In his definition, a conspiracy theory is a "consciously and purposefully crafted text that was *circulating independently* within a given communication context" (Zwierlein, 2020, p. 543, emphasis added). Hence, per this definition, the accounts of Tacitus and his contemporaries do not qualify as evidence for the existence of conspiracy theories in Antiquity, because they do not sufficiently prove that the described theories were independently spreading among the population.

Zwierlein acknowledges the existence of a phenomenon *similar* to conspiracy theories prior to the Middle Ages, which he calls 'conjurations' and distinguishes them from 'modern' conspiracy theories (Zwierlein, 2014). According to him, real conspiracy theories "only emerged in tandem with the new print culture and modes of communication around 1500", when they began to be used "as a means of explaining the larger plot[s]" rather than just marginal rumors (Zwierlein, 2020, p. 544).

Concretely, Zwierlein identified three historical conditions that enabled the emergence of 'real' conspiracy theories. These were: 1) "the establishment of a stable information public sphere of political news"; 2) an epistemic change in "how politics was perceived and made"; and 3) the stabilization of the post-Reformation Christian schism, which formed

"consistent boundaries between we-groups and 'enemies'" (2020, p. 545). Under these conditions, conspiracy theories formed as "parasite[s] of other narratives", with their own "autonomy of agency and influence". "In other words, they emerged from real plot situations, they influenced these situations and eventually they produced the fear of plots", writes Zwierlein (2020, p. 546).

In the 16th and 17th century, the most popular conspiracy theories had a strong religious dimension. For example, Protestant Northern Europe was awash with pamphlets detailing fictitious plots of Catholic alliances seeking to subjugate Protestants. Elsewhere in Europe, conspiracy narratives involving anti-Jesuitism, anti-Jacobitism, anti-Puritanism or anti-popery were plentiful (ibid, p. 547-549; Donovan, 1987).

Once again, we can see how the definition of conspiracy theories influences the way we understand and study them. If one includes the mechanism of their spread in the definition, it might rule out some of the earliest mentions of potential conspiracy theories in history, because their spread was not sufficiently documented.

Be as it may, even if we chose to disregard Ancient conspiracy theories, their existence in the Middle Ages is hardly disputable. That gives conspiracy theories centuries of existence and influence in human societies, making them a significant phenomenon with inextricable links to matters of social hierarchy, power, and politics.

3.4 Conspiracy theories in Late Modern and Postmodern history

Accounts of conspiracy theories shaping the events of the (late) modern and contemporary era are plentiful. With the world interconnected like never before, political and social realities changing dynamically, power struggles raging on unprecedented scales, the freedom of expression becoming more common, and information spreading faster than ever, the late modern era provided the perfect fertile ground for the creation and spread of conspiracy theories. Hence, it is no surprise that some of the most notorious conspiracy narratives - many of which are still being used today - originated in this period.

Zwierlein recounts that the era of predominantly religious conspiracy theories had subsided towards the end of the 17th century, only to be replaced with an even stronger, more persistent wave of secular conspiracy theorizing in the second half of the 18th

century. These social and political changes of those years (particularly in Europe) enabled more 'independence' and variety in the interpretation of events, which included explanations involving the conspiracies of powerful elites (Zwierlein, 2020, p. 548-550).

As a result, conspiracy thinking became completely commonplace during late modernity. "It was widely accepted that some men had the (secret) power to be the driving force behind any kind of observable change – a belief that was shared across all social classes", writes Oberhauser (2020, p. 556). Michael Butter adds that between the Enlightenment era and the 1960s, conspiracy theories were a "legitimate form of producing and representing knowledge" and were "believed and voiced not only by 'normal' people, but frequently by the country's elites" (2014, p. 9).

If one looks at the events happening at the start of late modernity (circa from the 1750s onwards), it is easy to see why people could interpret them as the secret plots of some grey eminences. For instance, the Industrial revolution began in the 1760s and launched the world into a spiral of unprecedented socio-economic changes. It was soon followed by the Declaration of Independence by the United States of America in 1776, the French revolution in 1789, the spread of the ideas of Enlightenment, and other significant and dynamic developments. In a matter of mere years, the world changed drastically.

People tend to process such unexpected changes by attempting to explain how and why they happened, which, in some cases, results in conspiratorial explanations. The conspiratorial explanations of the 1700s were further bolstered by the coincidental creation of many secret societies at exactly the same time as these large-scale events took place. Naturally, people began putting the two together, often despite the absence of evidence.

Most notably, the Illuminati were founded in 1776 in modern-day Germany, with the goal of spreading ideas of the Enlightenment and replacing "Christianity with a religion of reason" (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2017). Nonetheless, their existence was short-lived. In less than 10 years since their creation, the Illuminati were banned by the Bavarian government and its top-ranking members imprisoned or exiled. From 1786 onwards, there have been no real historical records of their existence or interference in

politics (ibid). However, that has not stopped people from conjuring wild tales of their involvement in everything from the French Revolution to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The full breadth and pervasiveness of conspiracy theorizing in the late modern and postmodern period is beyond anything that could fit into this subchapter. The key point to remember is that during this period, conspiracy theories became unprecedentedly widespread and generally accepted. This only changed after the Second World War, which was a brutal demonstration of the destructive potential conspiracy theories can have, when coupled with the 'right' social and political climate.

Hence, in the second half of the 20th century, conspiracy theories organically moved from the mainstream to the periphery of the information sphere – with the exception of the Soviet Union, which "sponsored conspiracism from its inception until its expiration" in 1991 (Pipes, 1999, p. 127). Then, in the final decades of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st, conspiracy theories lost some more of their mystical gilt as they became a subject of study in the academia.

However, some say conspiracy theories are now going through a resurgence and gaining traction in the mainstream, due to new methods of their production and spread via the Internet, as well as the tumultuous events of late. Should this period of social, economic and political unrest continue, we can expect conspiracy theories to grow stronger. If history has taught us anything, it is that "societal crisis situations almost invariably elicit conspiracy theories" (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017, p. 326).

3.5 Conspiracy theories in Slovak history

To fully appreciate the empirical research included in this thesis, it is vital to know not only the history of conspiracy theories globally, but also, and particularly, in Slovakia. Understanding the role they had played in shaping the nation is crucial for studying their current popularity and influence.

Slovak republic has formally existed only since January 1, 1993. However, its history – or rather the history of the lands that it covers and the people it governs - goes much further than that. Nonetheless, to study the legacy of conspiracy theories in Slovakia, we do not

have to go all the way back; it suffices to start in the 18th century when, as was previously mentioned, conspiracy theories began thriving like never before.

In the 1700s, the Slovak lands were part of the Habsburg Monarchy (known as the Austro-Hungarian Empire since 1867). The empire spanned most of Central Europe, ruling peoples of various backgrounds and ethnicities, while allowing them little national and cultural self-realization. The late 18th and 19th century were characterized by attempts to strengthen Slovaks' cultural identity by formally codifying the Slovak language (which was successful), and attempts to gain a higher sociopolitical status, autonomy, or independence (which were unsuccessful).

Naturally, this push for greater self-expression and autonomy did not sit well with the ruling authorities. Hungarian politicians saw it as a "pan-Slavic conspiracy orchestrated by Russia", aimed at weakening their Empire. On the other hand, Slovaks also suspected foul play by their oppressors and believed Hungarians conspired with "Jewish forces" to wipe out traditional Slavic values (Panczová & Janeček, 2020, p. 2-3). Interestingly enough, Jews were also the target of conspiracy theories on the Hungarian side, where certain deputies voiced threats of a looming Jewish population explosion and a malevolent international Jewish network controlling local events (Panczová, 2017a, p. 37).

Aside from conspiracy theories induced by political and social events, medical conspiracy beliefs were also plentiful. Just as we are seeing nowadays with COVID-19, epidemics were a major trigger. When the Slovak lands were hit by cholera in the 1830s, the attempts to curb mass gatherings and limit free movement across regions were interpreted as "a pretext for the government to prevent the spread of revolutionary thoughts" (Panczová, 2017a, p. 43). Others believed the epidemic was entirely made up by the elites and used as a tool of oppression. And naturally, people also found a way to make Jews the culprit, accusing them of poisoning food or water in public wells, which supposedly led to people falling ill with cholera-like symptoms (ibid, p. 44; Rapant, 1953).

Apparently, the ever-popular theories about the secret evil influence of Jews resonated even in 18th century Slovakia. Anti-Semitism has been one of the most frequent and

powerful narratives in the history of conspiracy theories, popping up across a multitude of events and countries ever since Antiquity, and Central Europe was no exception.

At the start of the 20th century, Austria-Hungary entered the First World War. However, it found itself on the losing side and was forced to dissolve into smaller states – one of them being Czechoslovakia, which mostly covered the area of today's Czech and Slovak republics. Slovakia remained part of Czechoslovakia between 1918 and 1993, with a brief albeit significant interruption during WW2 (when Slovakia formed a separate state and Czechia was annexed by Nazi Germany).

The Czechoslovak era brought plentiful opportunities for the formation of conspiracy theories, especially during the communist period between 1948 and 1989. The communist regime, firmly controlled and overseen by the USSR, "brought a certain change in the attributes of the image of the enemy". The concept of the evil "Jew, 'Jew Bolshevik', or Freemason faded into the background, giving way to images of the class enemy, either external ('Western imperialists') or internal (saboteurs, anti-state groups and many other categories)" (Panczová & Janeček, 2020, p. 6).

Anything 'capitalist' or 'western' was vilified as part of communist propaganda. The USA was portrayed as the root of all evil, accused of planning a third world war with the aid of former Nazi officials and of infiltrating Eastern European states to spy on them and subvert them. "The first half of the 1950s was characterized (…) by a hysterical search for enemy infiltration into the country" (ibid, p. 7), accompanied by a series of faked 'show trials' during which 'uncooperative' individuals were singled out and sentenced to death, under the false pretense of conspiring with American imperialists or Zionists.

The totalitarian regime had fully institutionalized and adopted disinformation and conspiracy theories as political tools. The Czechoslovak secret service, following instructions from the KGB, "created a union of 'Active Measures', i.e. political, military and economic disinformation and secret operations, with the goal of influencing public opinion and powerful institutions and personas" (Panczová, 2017a, p. 40; Bittman, 2000). Conspiracy theories about malevolent outsiders became official narratives spread by the ruling communist party, often contrasted with propagandist claims about Soviet progress and welfare.

The very logic of repressive communist ideology and the pillars on which totalitarian regimes are built, are extremely conducive to conspiracy theories. The secrecy, the paranoia, the censorship, the lack of freedoms and the obsessive control of the ruling party over *every* aspect of civilian life, breed a mentality that teaches people to always look for hidden meanings, to read between the lines, and to be more trusting of 'alternative' sources or rumors than of official government accounts (Zavacká, 2005; Panczová, 2017a, p. 39). This was the type of environment that the people of (Czecho)Slovakia lived in, for over 50 years. It certainly left its mark.

After the fall of Czechoslovakia's communist regime, the floodgates of ideational pluralism were suddenly open wide. With free borders and no more censorship, there was nothing stopping Slovaks from engaging with all sorts of information, not all of which were qualitative or reliable. "The public, euphoric about discovering the formerly forbidden alternative discourses, but not experienced with foreign religious, medical, or political subcultures, was particularly easy to influence" (Panczová, 2017a, p. 41). New sensational opinions and interpretations were quickly adopted, especially if they came from 'the West' – the forbidden land that suddenly became accessible. Unfortunately, many mistook the freedom of expression for automatic truth and honesty.

In present-day Slovakia, "conspiracy theories have become smoothly established in every type of cultural phenomena, including science and lifestyle, philosophy or medicine" (Panczová & Janeček, 2020, p. 8). As is common, any turbulent political or social event prompts a slurry of new or renewed conspiracy theories, which are usually not exclusive to the Slovak context, but resonate across Europe or the world as such. Events such as "the civil war in Ukraine, the war in Syria, the refugee crisis, terrorist attacks in Western Europe", American or any European elections, and most recently the COVID-19 pandemic create space for 'alternative' explanations, involving conspiracies of powerful elites. Many of the most salient theories still follow the 'good east vs evil west' rhetoric, which was at the forefront during the communist regime. However, their target has largely shifted from the USA to the EU and NATO.

"An important role in the construction" of these conspiracy stories is played by the 'extended hands' of the external conspirator – i.e. "internal traitors, accomplices, and

collaborators". "In anti-Western rhetoric, this refers to the 'henchmen of the West' or the 'cronies of Brussels', whose networks are spread mainly by pro-liberal non-profit organisations, 'homolobby', or – in the slang of internet debates – manipulated and naïve 'sunpeople' (*slniečkári* in Slovak)" (Panczová, 2017b, p. 51-52). The spread of these theories relies heavily on social media (or rather people freely and often unscrupulously communicating through them), and on the self-proclaimed 'alternative news sources' that claim to "balance out the allegedly unilateral pro-Western orientation of the mainstream media" (ibid, p. 51). Finally, conspiracy theories have become a prominent tool of certain populist and extremist politicians in Slovakia and abroad. However, political authorities spreading speculations and falsehoods is no novelty; after all, they have been an important driver of conspiracy theories for most of human history, before it became commonplace to have independent media or freedom of expression.

3.6 Conclusion and summary

To summarize the key takeaway from this chapter, let me borrow a few words from professors van Prooijen and Douglas (2017, p. 329):

> "Conspiracy theories may spread over time and become part of people's mental representations of important historical events, long after the feelings of uncertainty and fear that the events initially caused have dissipated. (…) Conspiracy theories can become coherent historical narratives that are transmitted to future generations as if they were facts, even if the actual facts do not provide compelling evidence for the conspiracy theory. What starts as a psychological response to cope with distressing feelings can become part of people's representations of history".

In other words, the primary goal of Chapter 3 was to demonstrate that conspiracy theories are no novelty. Despite their relatively recent emergence as a study subject in the academia, stories about conspiracies, both truthful and false, have been a part of society for centuries. They have served as coping mechanisms, as explanations for the unexplainable, as well as tools of psychological warfare in a variety of power struggles. They are inevitably intertwined with our past and, shockingly, are part of the official accounts of our history, even though they might not always be true.

It will serve us right to remember that conspiracy theorizing is natural and human, though not necessarily right, nor healthy. Instead of condemning it, we should strive to better understand it and react to it appropriately. More often than not, conspiracy theories are signals of deeper societal problems that should be resolved, not ridiculed.

4. Understanding conspiracy theories: The who, the why and the when

Now that the evolution of the term, concept and phenomenon of conspiracy theories has been covered, we can take a more profound look at what they are and how they affect us.

The bulk of research on conspiracy theories has been done through the eyes of psychology and sociology. Numerous studies have examined the personality traits and surrounding factors that make people believe in conspiracy theories, as well as their appeal in specific situations. Hence, we already know a lot about the *who*, the *why* and the *when* of conspiracy beliefs.

This chapter provides a literature review of some of these findings and helps paint a fuller, more 'tangible' image of conspiracy theories as a real and current phenomenon. Overviewing the 'whos' and 'whys' / 'whens' of conspiracist thinking is a crucial step towards the practical part of this thesis, where the collective knowledge gained from previous research will be used to create a questionnaire, inquiring about Slovaks' views on conspiracy theories, politics, and way of life.

4.1 Who believes in conspiracy theories

The breadth of existing research has shown that "no ideology, no party, no social class, no gender, in short, no one, is immune to beliefs in conspiracy theories by virtue of inherent nature or acquired education" (Giry & Tika, 2020, p. 111). Hence, beliefs in conspiracy theories are more common and widespread than most people think. Oliver & Wood (2017) found that "half of the American public consistently endorses at least one conspiracy theory" (p. 952). Similarly, a recent poll in Slovakia revealed that 56% of Slovaks believed in "5 out of 6 conspiracy theories and misinformation narratives" (Hajdu & Klingová, 2020, p. 46-47).

Studies show that conspiracy theory believers can be found among the young and old, the poor and the wealthy, the powerful and the powerless. However, there are certain characteristics that consistently come out as more common in research. These are presented in the coming subchapters, which group the predictors of conspiracy beliefs into psychological and personality traits, social and demographic traits, and political and ideological traits. (For a similar approach to categorization, see e.g. Douglas et al., 2019; Goreis & Voracek, 2019.)

4.1.1 Psychological and personality traits

Most of the existing research focuses on the relationship between people's psychological factors / personal traits and their degree of belief in conspiracy theories. These studies revealed that conspiracy beliefs are more frequent among individuals who:

- experience *fear*, anxiety (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2013), uncertainty and / or neuroticism (Hollander, 2017);
- have increased levels or perceptions of *stress* (Swami et al., 2016);
- have *low self-esteem* (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Swami et al., 2011);
- feel a lack of *control* and / or a great need to exert control over their surroundings (Sullivan et al., 2010; van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2012; Lobato et al., 2014);
- are *narcissistic*, i.e. have an "exaggerated feeling of self-love" (Goreis & Voracek, 2019; Cichocka et al., 2016); or exhibit collective (in-group) narcissism (Cicochka et al., 2015);
- believe in the *paranormal* (i.e. believe in things and phenomena that were scientifically not proven possible, as discussed in Chapter 2.4.1);
- suffer from *mental health disorders* like paranoia, paranoid ideation or schizotipy (a term encompassing the full spectrum of milder schizophrenic conditions) (Freeman et al., 2005; Darwin et al., 2011; Bruder et al., 2013; van der Tempel & Alcock, 2015).

Note that these are just some of the predictors of conspiracy beliefs; they do not *all* have to be met for a person to be more likely to believe in conspiracy theories, and not all believers of conspiracy theories exhibit them. However, among existing believers, these traits came out as the most common, individually or in unison.

We can see they range from very common traits, like the feeling of fear or stress, all the way to (milder) psychiatric disorders. In the past, before the psychological study of conspiracy theories became more widespread, conspiracy beliefs were mostly "attributed to those suffering from delusions and pathological paranoia, either at an individual level or collectively" (Rose, 2017, p. 30). However, with the turn of the millennium, as new findings began to come to light, this view was abandoned. Most researchers now acknowledge that "conspiracy belief is sufficiently widespread that one cannot claim that it is simply a result of psychopathology" (ibid). Scientists have thus kept looking for other reliable predictors and connections between people's personalities and beliefs.

Among these, researchers also examined the correlation between the *'Big Five' personality traits* (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, neuroticism) and conspiracy beliefs. Some individual studies found small relations – e.g. that a higher degree of agreeableness meant slightly lower levels of association with conspiracy theories, and vice versa for openness. However, once these studies were taken in sum, with their effect sizes combined, they showed that neither of the Big Five personality traits had a statistically significant effect on conspiracy beliefs (Goreis & Voracek, 2019).

Scientists also identified certain "epistemic" characteristics – i.e. characteristics relating to "the desire for understanding, accuracy, and subjective certainty" – that were linked to a higher degree of belief in conspiracy theories (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 7). For example, people who see *patterns in randomness*, or actively seek them in their surroundings, are more likely to sympathize with conspiracy narratives (see Whitson & Galinsky, 2008; van der Wal et al., 2018; van Prooijen et al., 2018a). 'Connecting the dots' is a common mechanism used in conspiracy theorizing. That is why it might appeal more to people who already engage in "illusory pattern perception" (van Prooijen et al., 2018a). Put differently, "conspiracy belief is driven by readiness to draw implausible causal connections even when events are not random" (van der Wal et al., 2018, p. 970).

A higher degree of conspiracy beliefs was also found among people with lower levels of analytical / *critical thinking* (Swami et al., 2014; Ballová Mikušková, 2017); people who do not value "epistemic rationality" (i.e. who do not form their beliefs on evidence-based

grounds) (Ståhl & van Prooijen, 2018, p. 155); and individuals with a general "tendency to accept epistemically unwarranted beliefs (Lobato et al., 2014)" (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 8). "Overall, there is evidence that conspiracy theories appear to appeal to individuals who seek accuracy and/or meaning, but perhaps lack the cognitive tools or experience problems that prevent them from being able to find accuracy and meaning via other more rational means", write Douglas et al. (ibid).

Finally, many studies have found that people who already *believe in some conspiracy theory*, are more likely to endorse others (Goertzel, 1994; Swami et al., 2010; Wood et al., 2012). That is true even for mutually contradicting conspiracy theories (Wood et al., 2012) and fictitious theories made up by researchers (Swami et al., 2011; Bensley et al., 2019). This apparent tendency to adopt conspiratorial explanations that fit a person's pre-established worldview, has been named 'conspiracist ideation' or 'conspiracy mentality' (Swami et al., 2011 and Moscovici, 1987, respectively). Brotherton et al. (2013) even devised a way to measure this ideation in individuals through a set of 15 questions with Likert scale responses, called the Generic Conspiracist Belief (GCB) scale. This well-established scale is utilized in the practical portion of this thesis, as part of the study of conspiracy beliefs and political preferences in Slovakia (see Chapter 5 for more details).

4.1.2 Social and demographic traits

Social and demographic traits are perhaps the hardest to correlate with belief in conspiracy theories, because there is no single social group, age group or gender that would be more susceptible. However, some findings indicate a somewhat higher propensity of certain groups to sympathize with conspiracy narratives.

Freeman & Bentall (2017) surveyed 5645 people in the USA and asked them whether they believed one generic, all-encompassing conspiracy claim: "I am convinced there is a conspiracy behind many things in the world". A weighted 26.7% of their respondents endorsed this claim. Of these, most were "male; currently unmarried; less educated; in a lower income household; outside the labour force; from an ethnic minority group; not attending religious services; taking a weapon outside; and perceiving themselves as of lower social standing compared to others". They also had "weaker social networks, less secure attachment style, [and] difficult childhood family experiences". "Lower levels of

physical and psychological well-being" and a higher likeliness to "meet criteria for a psychiatric disorder" were also reported among the endorsers, which falls in line with the previously presented findings on psychological traits. Freeman and Bentall found no significant relations between the belief in the conspiracy claim and the respondents' age or "importance of religious beliefs in daily life" (ibid).

Higher endorsement of conspiracy theories by members of *marginalized* groups and people with *low social status*, was also found by other researchers (see e.g. van Prooijen et al., 2018b; Stempel et al., 2007). For many members of the lower social strata, or individuals feeling alienated from society, conspiracy theories are the easiest / most appealing way to explain their position - a way to take the blame off themselves and attribute their lack of social well-being to some higher, untouchable power (Goertzel, 1994; Swami, 2012; Douglas et al., 2019, p. 9). For example, Van Prooijen et al. (2018b) surveyed members of the Muslim minority living in the Netherlands about their belief in conspiracy theories, both relevant and irrelevant to their Muslim identity. The study found that Muslim participants "believed both identity-relevant and irrelevant conspiracy theories more strongly than non-Muslims". However, it was their feeling of collective marginalization, not their religion, that made them more attracted to conspiracy narratives. The researchers thus concluded that "feelings of both personal and group-based deprivation independently contribute to belief in conspiracy theories" (ibid, p. 1).

Race does not seem to play a role in one's degree of belief in conspiracy theories in general, but members of a certain race are more likely to believe those theories that 'expose' a conspiracy against their own race. For example, Crocker et al. (1991) found that "Black Americans [were] far more likely than White Americans to endorse theories about conspiracies by the U.S. government against Blacks" (p. 941). In another study, Russel et al. (2011) examined people's belief in the theory that AIDS was "the result of a government plan to intentionally kill a certain group of people by genocide". They found black and Hispanic respondents to be about 3-times more likely to endorse this conspiracy theory than white respondents, largely because people of color perceived their ethnic groups as a potential target of this alleged conspiracy (p. 37-38). Other studies (e.g. Parsons et al., 1999; Simmons & Parsons, 2005) also found "that people are more likely to believe in conspiracies directed at their own group if they personally have experienced

discrimination, such as being the victim of police harassment (…) or racial discrimination" (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 9). Van Prooijen concluded that "[t]he more strongly people connect their own identity with a particular group, the more likely they are to believe conspiracy theories when members of that group are victimized" (2018, p. 54). This applies not only to one's race, but to any (social) group, faction, or organization that one is part of.

The topic of *religion* and conspiracy theories was already covered in Section 2.4.1. The author summarized that 'certain religious / spiritual and conspiracy beliefs tend to correlate (Lahrach & Furnham, 2017; Robertson & Dyrendal, 2018); or rather that the stronger people's religious worldviews are, the more likely they are to endorse conspiracy theories (Jasinskaja-Lahti & Jetten, 2019).

Researchers also found lower levels of *intelligence* to be associated with conspiracy beliefs (Stieger et al., 2013; Ballová Mikušková, 2017). On the other hand, "[t]he link between education level and conspiracy theories is widely disputed" (Giry & Tika, 2020, p. 112). Some researchers have found that lower levels of formal *education* (i.e. having "fewer academic qualifications" (ibid)) make a person more susceptible to conspiracy theories (see Stempel et al., 2007; van Prooijen, 2017; IFOP, 2018; Syrovátka & Pinkas, 2020, p. 5). However, other studies have found high(er) rates of conspiracy theory supporters even among university graduates, hinting that having more formal education is not a reliable remedy against conspiracist thinking (see Davis 1969; Waters, 1997, p. 117-118). This also appears to be the case in Slovakia, where a 2019 study revealed that "Slovaks with a university degree tend to agree with conspiracy statements more than those who received a basic education. For example, while 55% of university educated respondents think that secret societies are aiming to establish a totalitarian world order, only 48% with basic education think along the same lines" (Klingová, 2019). A suitable explanation for the higher degree of belief in conspiracy theories among more educated individuals, is that they are more aware of the scope of existing issues and more confident about their knowledge and abilities. If universities fail to teach proper analytical and critical thinking and insufficiently foster the formation of opinions based on data and epistemic rationality (which, as previously mentioned, are factors that lower one's susceptibility to conspiracy

beliefs), all the while broadening only people's superficial knowledge and boosting their confidence, one can see how higher education might foster conspiracy thinking.

Somewhere in the middle between these two conflicting findings about the level of education and conspiracy thinking is Renard (2015), who "assumes that beliefs in conspiracy theories follow an inverted 'U-shaped' curve, with those with high-school degrees or little higher education more supportive of conspiracy theories than others" (Giry & Tika, 2020, p. 112). This area of research would benefit from further examination to uncover which concrete elements of higher education might lead to a lower or higher propensity for conspiracy beliefs.

4.1.3 Political and ideological traits

The relationship between people's political and ideological preferences and conspiracy theories remains relatively understudied. Some of the existing research even provides contradicting results. A number of researchers (e.g. Oliver & Wood, 2014; Uscinski & Parent, 2014; Berinsky, 2012) did not find a reliable link between people's political affiliations / behaviors and a heightened degree of belief in conspiracy theories. Among these, Oliver & Wood summarized that "[f]ar from being an aberrant expression of some political extreme or a product of gross misinformation, a conspiratorial view of politics is a widespread tendency across the entire ideological spectrum" (2014, p. 964). However, some researchers found noteworthy correlations and identified political and ideological attitudes, behaviors and preferences that appear to be linked with beliefs in conspiracy theories or conspiracy mentality / ideation:

Relationship to authorities

Multiple researchers found that believers in conspiracy theories tend to have *lower faith in authorities,* such as government agencies, police, or courts (see Waters, 1997, p. 119-120, Goertzel, 1994; Swami et al., 2011; Einstein & Glick, 2015). However, it remains unclear whether the believers' trust in authorities decreases as a result of their exposure to conspiracy theories, or whether they *a priori* do not trust authorities and that makes them more likely to believe conspiracy theories (both related and unrelated to the authorities and their potential misconduct). It appears both variants are probable and

coexisting[12]. However, as will be discussed in more detail in the coming section about *why* people believe conspiracy theories, these beliefs grow in times of uncertainty. That might suggest that for most people, it is the drop of faith in authorities and institutions, caused by a turbulent or uncertain situation, which forces them to turn to conspiracy theories.

Political activity

A number of studies have shown that conspiracy beliefs do *not* appear to be a symptom of *political ignorance,* nor of a lack of interest in political life (see e.g. Waters, 1997; Nyhan, 2012; Oliver & Wood, 2014). "[R]espondents who endorse conspiracy theories are not less informed about basic political facts than average citizens", found Oliver & Wood (2014, p. 964).

However, findings are less clear when it comes to the concrete *political engagement and behavior* of conspiracy theorists. Some studies found that belief in, or exposure to conspiracy theories reduced people's willingness to engage in politics (see Jolley & Douglas, 2013; Uscinski & Parent, 2014); while others found conspiracy beliefs stimulated political engagement, at least in some forms and for some respondents (see Kim, 2019; Imhoff et al., 2020).

Concretely, Jolley & Douglas (2013) exposed participants "to a range of conspiracy theories concerning government involvement in significant events", and conspiracy theories about climate change. They found that exposure to both types of conspiracy theories "reduced participants' intentions to engage in politics [esp. to vote], relative to participants who were given information refuting conspiracy theories" or an "anti-conspiracy account of events" (p.35; 48). The authors concluded that this decreased political engagement was caused by "feelings of powerlessness towards the government", which were fueled by conspiracy theories (p. 42). In another study, Uscinski & Parent (2014) "divided respondents into three categories depending on their conspiracy predispositions" and asked them whether they had voted in the 2012 US presidential election. People in the category with the *highest* conspiracy predispositions were "almost three times *less* likely to be registered voters compared to those in the low category" (Thórisdóttir et al., 2020, p. 310-311, emphasis added). The study also showed that

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[12] For papers that discuss this topic, see Einstein & Glick (2013), or Moore (2018).

"people in the low conspiracy predisposition category were more likely than people in the other two groups to put up political signs, attend local meetings, work for a candidate, donate money or run for office" (ibid, p. 311).

However, empirically, we see that conspiracy theorizing is often connected with political and ideological mobilization. "[V]irtually any radical political organization—from Al Quaeda to Aum Shinrikyo or anti-abortion groups like "Lambs of Christ"" utilizes conspiracy rhetoric to fan the flames and 'activate' followers to fight for their cause (Imhoff et al., 2020). Furthermore, conspiracy theories can also be found outside of the radical realm, in the reasoning of mainstream politicians, parties and movements. These use them to explain defeat, justify crackdowns or discredit opponents. As Önnerfors (2021) put it, "[t]he way conspiracy theories create meaning goes hand in hand with the populist style in politics, which is nurtured by pitting 'the people' against 'malevolent elites', dismissing established procedures of decision-making and undermining the societal discourse with false claims".

To see the connection between conspiracy beliefs and political mobilization in practice, we need look no further than to the storming of the US Capitol in January 2021. Many of the identified rioters were followers of the QAnon[13] conspiracy theory / cult (Tavernise & Rosenberg, 2021; Carrol 2021). Their belief in a world governed by perverted pedophilic elites who 'stole' Trump's presidency, led them to engage in extreme, nonnormative political action, on a scale unseen before in US history. Therefore, claiming that conspiracy beliefs make a person less politically active by making them feel helpless, is a gross and apparently incorrect oversimplification. There is certainly more to the 'mystery' of conspiracy theorists' political activity.

A 2020 study by Imhoff et al. sheds new and important light on this topic. The authors drew from two theoretical assumptions that most previous researchers had overlooked. The first one presupposed that "the connection between conspiracy beliefs and the degree

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[13] Put concisely, "QAnon is a decentralized, ideologically motivated and violent extremist movement rooted in an unfounded conspiracy theory that a global "Deep State" cabal of satanic pedophile elites is responsible for all the evil in the world. Adherents of QAnon also believe that this same cabal is seeking to bring down Trump, whom they see as the world's only hope in defeating it" (Argentino, 2021).

of political engagement per se may not be linear", but rather curvilinear – similarly to what was proposed about education and conspiracy beliefs (Imhoff et al., 2020, p. 2). The idea behind this assumption is that "people who do not see any conspiracies at play (…) and who trust the democratic process" have "little reason to protest or alter the status quo" – i.e. they are not likely to be very politically active. Then there is a 'middle ground' of people who are inclined to believe *some* conspiracy theories and accept "the scandalous possibility that some elected politicians do not represent their voters", but follow their own interests instead. For this group, political engagement is expected to be higher, because they have incentive to change what they feel is not right, while still having sufficient faith in the system. Finally, there are people with a high degree of conspiracy mentality. In their world, "virtually everything is controlled by conspiracies and there is little reason to trust anyone", let alone the system. Engaging in normative political activity likely seems pointless to these people, seeing as they believe everything is rigged and their voice does not matter (ibid).

Dividing people into these three groups illustrates the reasoning behind the idea of a curvilinear relationship between people's conspiracy beliefs and political attitudes. Political activity is expected to be lower at the ends of the spectrum and higher for the middle group, which has both incentive and sufficient faith to be socially and politically active.

The second assumption Imhoff et al. work with, is that political activity comes in a spectrum and has many different forms. On the one hand, "[p]olitical opinions and interest can be expressed by means that are in accordance with social and legal norms, often referred to as *normative* political action"; or via "extreme, illegal, and *nonnormative*" action (2020, p. 3, emphasis added). An example of normative political action would be casting one's vote in elections, reaching out to members of one's government administration, organizing official rallies against the government, or posting one's political opinions online. Examples of nonnormative political action include committing violent attacks on the people in power, refusing to pay taxes, intentionally spreading "wrong information to change the political situation", or influencing "election outcomes by hacking" (ibid, p. 4). The researchers expected people's willingness to engage

in normative political action to decrease as their conspiracy beliefs increased, and, conversely, expected non-normative action to increase as conspiracy beliefs increased.

Imhoff et al. (2020) tested these assumptions in two studies with participants from Germany and the USA. Both assumptions turned out correct and found support in the gathered data. The authors found "a curvilinear relation between (…) conspiracy worldview and the general tendency to become politically active". They also proved that "with an increase in conspiracy worldview, intentions to engage in normative, legal means decreased, whereas the willingness to commit illegal, nonnormative political acts was higher for any condition that involved any conspiracy worldview" (p. 7). Hence, this study, despite its limitations, provides an important piece of the puzzle in understanding how conspiracy beliefs influence people's political activity, and helps explain why previous research on this topic was inconclusive.

Political and ideological leanings

As was already mentioned multiple times in this thesis, beliefs in conspiracy theories span across a wide variety of people with different economic, social and political profiles. Therefore, one will find conspiracy theorists among both conservatives and liberals; Republicans and Democrats; leftists, rightists, and centrists; and so on. Nonetheless, research has revealed that some political and ideological leanings appear to correlate more with conspiracy beliefs than others.

Specifically, past studies indicate that "conspiracy beliefs are most prevalent at the *political extremes*" (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 11, emphasis added). In other words, the most support for conspiracy theories appears to exist among the far right and far left - though the relationship is somewhat stronger on the far right (Inglegart, 1987; van Prooijen et al. 2015; Krouwel et al., 2017; Alper et al., 2020). The relationship between political ideology and conspiracy theories can thus be described by a U-shaped curve, which we have already seen with education levels. "Although it is unknown whether conspiracy theorizing may be a result of political ideology, or vice versa, or both, this research suggests that extremist attitudes may be a consequence of conspiracy belief" (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 11).

A number of studies also found "a link between conspiracy beliefs and right-wing *authoritarianism* - a dimension of political attitudes characterized by preference for conventionalism, authoritarian aggression, and authoritarian submission to authorities" (ibid) (see Bruder et al., 2012; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Grzesiak-Feldman, 2015). However, there were also researchers who did not find right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) to be a reliable predictor of conspiracy beliefs (Douglas et al., p. 11). In an attempt to explain these opposing findings, Wood & Gray (2019) presented people with a series of statements measuring their levels of RWA and two sets of conspiracy theories. These were divided into anti-establishment theories (ones that "challenge the existing social order") and pro-establishment theories ("which seek to justify and reinforce [social order] against external threats"). The researchers found that "RWA correlated strongly with pro-establishment CTs but weakly with anti-establishment CTs". They concluded that "this gap in the predictive power of RWA can be explained by differences in attitudes toward [the] alleged perpetrators [of conspiracy theories], highlighting the importance of intergroup attitudes as an important driver of CT endorsement" (p. 163).

In more general terms regarding political affiliation, "scientists have found that people are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories when they feel *involved*, when they tend to exonerate them or the group they belong to (...) and when they implicate their political opponents. Hence, conservative or right-wing social actors are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories that implicate liberal actors or the left, and vice-versa" (Giry & Tika, 2020, p. 112, emphasis added). A similar conclusion was made by Uscinski et al. (2016), who wrote that "partisanship strongly affects the propensity to see a conspiracy theory when the conspiracy theory has a partisan element", and that "[p]artisans are less willing to adopt conspiracy theories that accuse their own coalition" (p. 11-12). Uscinski & Parent (2014) also argued that "conspiracy theories are for losers" (p. 130), since "the political camp that loses the election is more likely to endorse conspiratorial views than the winning side" (Giry & Tika, 2020, p. 112).

These last findings tell us little about particular political ideologies being more or less receptive to conspiracy theories; rather, they reveal what *contents* of conspiracy theories are popular among different politically ideological groups. They also fall in line with the findings presented in Section 4.1.2 about conspiracy believers' social and demographic

traits, which mentioned that "[t]he more strongly people connect their own identity with a particular group, the more likely they are to believe conspiracy theories when members of that group are victimized" (Van Prooijen, 2018, p. 54).

4.2 Why / when people believe in conspiracy theories

The previous sections covered the psychological, social, and ideological traits that correlate with conspiracy beliefs. Some of them have already provided the answer for 'why people believe conspiracy theories' - e.g. because they offer acceptable explanations for those who feel socially or economically marginalized, lack analytical skills, mistrust institutions, etc. However, there are also certain *situations* when people become more inclined to believe conspiracy theories, unrelated to their psychological, social or ideological profiles. The reason they are presented in this separate chapter is that they paint another important dimension of conspiracy theories and their role in people's lives. It is important to understand conspiracy theories not only as explanations of events that some people, due to their specific traits, are more prone to believing; but also as explanations that become more generally appealing under certain conditions.

Douglas et al. (2017) divided the motives for people's conspiracy beliefs into three categories – "epistemic (understanding one's environment), existential (being safe and in control of one's environment), and social (maintaining a positive image of the self and the social group)" (p. 538).

A primary epistemic motive for people's belief in conspiracy theories, which was corroborated by numerous studies, seems to be the *reduction of uncertainty*. When people feel uncertain or confused, they try to correct those feelings by seeking explanations. However, 'official' or fact-based explanations are generally not as readily available, nor as easily understandable, as explanations involving secret conspiracies of powerful elites. That is why, in times of crises, chaos or distress, conspiracy theories rise in popularity (see e.g. Jolley & Douglas, 2013; van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013; Douglas et al., 2017; Marchlewska & Cichocka, 2017). Other epistemic 'whys' of conspiracy beliefs include the occurrence of *events* that "are especially large in scale or significant and leave people dissatisfied with mundane, small-scale explanations", or "events that lack clear official explanations" (Douglas et al., 2017. p. 539). A final prominent epistemic motive

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for conspiracy beliefs is the *protection of one's pre-existing beliefs*, if they are being threatened by official accounts or scientific evidence (Lewandowsky et al., 2013).

When it comes to existential motives, conspiracy theories, "serve the need for people to feel safe and secure in their environment and to exert control over the environment" (Douglas et al., 2017. p. 539). Just as with epistemic motives, the desire to deal with uncertainty and chaos is a big existential driver of conspiracy beliefs, because these imbue people with a newfound sense of *control* over their world. Conspiracy theories can return a semblance of power to those who had lost their grasp on an unmanageable, unclear situation, because they tend to provide seemingly smart explanations of complex events and connect the dots of a foggy reality. As the saying goes, 'knowledge is power', and it seems not to matter whether that knowledge comes from unfounded conspiracy claims or fact-based explanations (ibid; Goertzel, 1994; Abalakina-Paap et al., 2002). However, existing research indicates that believing in conspiracy theories does not satisfy this existential motive of resuming control of one's life and eliminating powerlessness. "On the contrary, experimental exposure to conspiracy theories appears to immediately suppress people's sense of autonomy and control" (Douglas et al., 2017. p. 539).

Finally, the key social motive for why people may subscribe to conspiracy theories, is a "desire to belong and to maintain a positive image of the self and the in-group" (ibid, p. 40). Beliefs in conspiracy theories seem to rise particularly in situations when a person's positive *image* is jeopardized (Cichocka et al., 2016), when a person is being ostracized or victimized, either individually or as a member of a group (Bilewitz et al., 2013; Graeupner & Coman, 2017), or when someone's preferred political party or candidate loses in elections (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). In these sorts of situations, people are more likely to turn to conspiracy theories to help "make sense of their experience" and find someone to blame for their worsened situation (Douglas et al., 2017, p. 540).

4.3 Conclusion and summary

The previous sections discussed the existing findings regarding the psychological, social and political predispositions that were linked to an increased endorsement of conspiracy theories, as well as concrete conditions and situations under which people gravitate towards conspiracy theories more intensely. This chapter demonstrated that the

unfounded beliefs in the existence of conspiracies are influenced and driven by a wide variety of factors, making them a complex and widely appealing set of beliefs.

The previous sections have shown that anyone can be a conspiracy theorist. However, the odds are greater if a person feels particularly uncertain, anxious and/or stressed; has low self-esteem and lacks control over his/her surroundings; believes in other unfounded claims or conspiracy theories; or lacks critical thinking. Greater endorsement of conspiracy theories was also found among marginalized or socially weaker groups / individuals; those with lower intelligence; those who do not trust authorities; or those with extremist political ideologies. On the other hand, age, race or gender do not have a significant impact on conspiracy beliefs on their own, though they may come to play when one's group (which can include age, race or gender groups) is the perceived victim or cause of a conspiracy theory. Finally, there are factors whose relationship to conspiracy beliefs remains unclear or appears to be non-linear, such as education levels, political activity, and most other political / ideological leanings. However, we know that extremist ideologies on both sides of the left-right spectrum correlate more strongly with conspiracy beliefs.

Aside from these predispositions, people turn to conspiracy theories more frequently and intensely in uncertain situations, after large unexplained events or changes, in order to protect their beliefs or image when they are being challenged, or to regain a sense of control over their lives.

Now that the definition, history, theory, and literature review have been covered and a good understanding of conspiracy theories has been reached, it is time to move on to the 'practical' portion of this thesis, starting with an explanation of the design, methodology and general context of this research.

5. Research design, methodology, and context

This chapter uncovers the 'technical' aspects of this study – namely what it consisted of, how it was conducted, and what the logic behind its design was. It also briefly discusses the current situation and political environment in the Slovak republic, as it provides vital context for this research and for the subsequent interpretation of the gathered data.

Finally, an overview of the main Slovak political parties is presented, elucidating the country's recent political landscape.

5.1 What was researched and how?

The goal of this study was to examine the connection between beliefs in conspiracy theories and political / ideological affiliations and opinions of Slovaks. Data were gathered via a questionnaire and analyzed using quantitative statistical methods.

The questionnaire was distributed across Slovakia between April 25 and May 30, 2021, in digital form. Only citizens of the Slovak republic at least 18 years of age[14] were eligible to participate. The questionnaire was anonymous, and no financial reward was offered for its completion. The questionnaire was written in the Slovak language and later translated for the purpose of presenting its contents in this thesis.

The questions in the questionnaire were based on previous research findings, presented in Chapter 4. The following subchapter (5.2) presents them all in greater detail.

The key research question was: *How does the belief in conspiracy theories reflect in people's political opinions and preferences?* To help answer that question, a number of more concrete political dimensions was identified and tested. Concretely, the supporting research questions inquired about the relationship and significance of *these* variables on people's degree of agreement with conspiracy theories:

- Their left-right ideological leaning
- Their libertarian-authoritarian leaning
- Their perception of the internal efficacy of Slovakia's political system
- Degree of satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in Slovakia
- Interest in political events (locally and globally)
- Preference of Slovakia's political and ideological closeness to either the 'East' (the Russian federation), or the 'West' (the USA, EU), or to both equally
- The political party they had voted for in the latest parliamentary election

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[14] 18 years is the age in which Slovaks officially reach 'adulthood'. Following their 18th birthday, Slovaks can vote in elections, legally drink alcohol or drive motorized vehicles without supervision.

- Whether they would vote differently in the election with retrospect (i.e. whether their party affiliation had changed in ca. one year since the election)
- And to what degree they (dis)trust authorities and institutions in power.

Questions in the questionnaire were aimed at gaining insight into these independent variables. They were tested against the dependent variable (people's degree of agreement with conspiracy theories, expressed as a 'total conspiracy score'), both in a graphical data analysis, as well as a multiple regression analysis, which was used to identify the statistical significance of the linear relationships between the dependent and independent variables.

5.2 Questionnaire contents

The questionnaire was divided into four parts. The first one inquired about the basic demographic details of the respondent; the second consisted of a partially altered Generic conspiracy belief (GCB) scale, used to measure the general conspiracy mentality of the respondent; the third asked the respondent's opinion on concrete conspiracy theories; and the fourth inquired about the respondent's political-ideological preferences and opinions. The following paragraphs present the concrete questions from each part in greater detail.

Part 1: Demographic information

The first part of the questionnaire was used to identify the basic demographic profile of each respondent. Here is a list of the questions and the available responses (in brackets):

1. Are you a citizen of the Slovak republic at least 18 years of age? (*Yes - No*)
2. What is your gender? (*Male - Female - Other/I do not want to specify*)
3. What age group do you belong to? (*18-24 – 25-30 – 31-40 – 41-50 – 51-60 - 60+*)
4. What is your highest achieved education? (*Elementary – High school – University*)
5. What region of Slovakia do you live in? (*A list of all Slovakia's regions (8) – I live abroad*)

Since only adult citizens of Slovakia were allowed to participate in the study, given its political nature and questions about voting behavior, the first question served as a filter to stop ineligible respondents from participating.

Part 2: GCB Scale

The original GCB scale, created by researchers Brotherton, French and Pickering in 2013, consists of 15 "beliefs about the world". These are in the form of generic statements, all of which can be placed into one or more of these overarching conspiracy categories: *government malfeasance* (GM), which reflects "allegations of routine criminal conspiracy within governments"; *extraterrestrial coverup* (ET), "concerning the deception of the public about the existence of aliens"; *malevolent global conspiracies* (MG), "concerning allegations that small, secret groups exert total control over global events"; *personal well-being* (PW), "relating to conspiracist concerns over personal health and liberty such as the spread of diseases and the use of mind-control technology"; and control of information (CI), "relating to unethical control and suppression of information by organizations including the government, the media, scientists, and corporations" (Brotherton et al., 2013). In the GCB questionnaire, participants rate each statement on an adjusted 5-point Likert scale, "with a qualitative label associated with each point". These are: "1: definitely not true; 2: probably not true; 3: not sure/cannot decide; 4: probably true; 5: definitely true".

Given the length and nature of my questionnaire, I made a few changes to the GCB. First, I removed four statements, one from each overarching category. That helped make the questionnaire more compact, without compromising the original balance of the GCB Scale. The statements I chose to remove were ones that, according to my knowledge of Slovakia and locally popular conspiracy theories, did not resonate as much in the country, or had a problematic formulation. The removed items were:

- Statement n. 6: "*The government permits or perpetrates acts of terrorism on its own soil, disguising its involvement*", from the GM category. Slovakia has no recent history of terrorism, much less state-sponsored terrorism, and the terrorist threat in general is seen as relatively low (see e.g. Goda & Ušiak, 2016, p. 71-72).

- Statement n. 7: "*A small, secret group of people is responsible for making all major world decisions, such as going to war*", from the MG category. Even though MG conspiracy theories resonate quite strongly in Slovakia, this statement seemed the most concrete and far-removed from the country's collective worries and most pressing issues.

- Statement n. 13: "*Some UFO sightings and rumors are planned or staged in order to distract the public from real alien contact*" from the ET category. This is the most complex statement in the category, which even has the form of a 'meta conspiracy theory' - a theory that posits the existence of a conspiracy in order to hide another conspiracy - which seemed unnecessarily complex for my research.

- Statement n. 14: "*Experiments involving new drugs or technologies are routinely carried out on the public without their knowledge or consent*" from the PW category. The reason for its removal was that in the past years, with the advent of social media and their obscure algorithms, the statement has been getting somewhat more factual and less theoretically conspiratorial[15]. Even though the word "routinely" in the statement is the key indicator of conspiracy thinking – i.e. seeing conspiracies in almost everything and all the time - it walks a fine line between measuring conspiracy mentality and indicating a person's awareness of actual conspiracies in this field. Hence, to minimize the threat of 'false positives', the statement was removed.

With regard to the response scales, I debated adding an additional response outside of the 5-point Likert scale - namely an "I do not want to answer" response. It has been shown that adding this option to attitude-measuring scales decreases the misuse of the 'middle option' as a dumping ground for undecided or unengaged respondents (Chyung et al., 2017). However, I chose to stick with the original design of the GCB Scale responses, as it is a tried and tested design, and the generic nature of these statements removes some of the stigma and sensitivity often associated with discussing conspiracy theories. However,

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[15] For example, in 2014 it was revealed that "Facebook manipulated 689,003 users' emotions for science" by removing emotionally-charged posts from their News Feeds and monitoring the users' reactions, without their knowledge (Hill, 2014).

the 'I do not want to answer' response was available in Part 3, where concrete conspiracy theories were presented.

Part 3: Concrete conspiracy theories

I selected 13 concrete conspiracy theories based on: my knowledge of the information environment and salience of topics in Slovakia; existing studies that inquired about conspiracy beliefs in Slovakia and the neighboring countries (e.g. Hajdu & Klingová, 2020; Hajdu et al., 2020; Panczová & Janeček, 2020); and the database of the East Stratcom Task Force[16].

Below is a table showing the chosen conspiracy theories along with their general category (i.e one of the categories established by the GCB Scale), and a concrete category or topic it relates to. In some cases, one conspiracy theory can fall into multiple general categories; in that case, the secondary general category is written in brackets. The theories are ordered in the way they were presented in the online questionnaire, with theories about the same concrete topic always separated by other theories, so as not to blend into one another.

Statement	General conspiracy category	Concrete conspiracy category / topic
The new coronavirus was intentionally released by pharmaceutical companies for financial gain.	PW, (MG)	COVID-19, Big Pharma
Slovak NGOs are controlled by powerful foreign countries / individuals.	MG	NGOs
Airplanes are being used to discharge dangerous chemicals and viruses into the air, aiming to damage people's health and regulate population.	PW, (MG)	Chemtrails, Population control
Jews secretly control many world governments and institutions.	MG	Anti-Semitism

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[16] The ESTF is an EU initiative established to better understand and respond to disinformation campaigns threatening the Union and its neighbors. Its database can be found at https://euvsdisinfo.eu/ and filtered by country.

Bill Gates is the orchestrator of the COVID-19 pandemic.	PW, (MG)	COVID-19, Bill Gates
The 9/11 terrorist attacks were carried out by the US government.	GM	9/11, Anti-western[17]
The COVID-19 vaccination is a cover for microchipping and controlling the population.	PW	COVID-19, Antivax
The mainstream media in Slovakia are controlled by foreign powers.	CI	Media freedom
The EU was created to eliminate national cultures and sovereignty.	MG, (GM)	Anti-western
The new coronavirus was intentionally released by foreign elites, with the goal of establishing a new world order.	MG, (PW)	COVID-19, New World Order
Most global events are controlled and governed by the Illuminati.	MG	Illuminati
The Americans are building military bases in Slovakia with the goal of occupying us.	MG, (GM)	Anti-western

Table 1: Categorized overview of the concrete conspiracy statements used in the study.

As is apparent from this table, the general topic of the majority of the chosen conspiracy theories is 'MG' – 'malevolent global conspiracies. I believe that is the case for two reasons; first, Slovakia - as a small country with a long history of being ruled or dominated by other powers - suffers from a certain collective grievance. Having only gained independence in 1993, the nation has a lasting memory of subordination and lack of clout to influence large-scale events, which likely reflects in Slovaks' current understanding of the world. Second, Slovakia lies in a geopolitically sensitive region of central Europe and remains torn between the 'east' and the 'west'. The country is caught in the middle of a power struggle of ideologies and political, social and economic approaches, exemplified

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[17] The "Anti-western" category signifies that a given statement identifies a country or institution located to the west of Slovakia, and / or one propagating traditionally 'western' ideas, as the culprit of a conspiracy. Most often, that is the EU or the USA.

by the USA on one side and Russia on the other. Hence, given Slovakia's history, location and geopolitical situation, it is understandable why theories positing the influence of powerful countries or transnational actors over key events, might be the most salient.

Part 4: Political preferences and opinions

The final part of the questionnaire contained inquiries about the political / ideological preferences and opinions of the respondents. The concrete form of the questions drew from best practices of social survey-making, and from reviews of numerous social and political surveys performed by the European Social Survey (ESS). The following paragraphs cover the individual questions, explain the reasoning behind them and their relevance to the research question(s).

At the start of this final part of the questionnaire, I listed seven statements and asked the respondents to indicate their level of agreement with each one. The response scale was the same as the one used in Part 2 of the questionnaire, for the GCB Scale (*1: definitely not true; 2: probably not true; 3: not sure/cannot decide; 4: probably true; 5: definitely true*). Each duo of statements measured a distinct dimension of a respondent's political / ideological leaning. This was the wording of the first question (translated to English)[18]:

1. Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements:
   - S1: "It is not the government's role to redistribute income from the better off to the worse off";
   - S2: "Major public services and industries ought to be in state ownership";
   - S3: "The law should always be obeyed, even when a particular law is felt to be wrong";
   - S4: "There is nothing wrong in homosexuality";
   - S5: I believe that my vote matters in elections;
   - S6: Sometimes politics seem so complicated that a person like me cannot really understand what is going on;
   - S7: I am satisfied with the functioning of democracy in Slovakia.

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[18] The source material for the individual statements is listed in the subsequent paragraph.

The first two items help identify a respondent's placement on the *left-right political-ideological scale*. More precisely, they measure the scale's two dimensions: egalitarianism (S1) and interventionism (S2) (European Social Survey, n.d.(b), p. 250-255). Statements 3 and 4 measure one's placement on the *authoritarian-libertarian scale* (ibid, p. 243). S5 and S6 measure a person's *perceived internal political efficacy* (or subjective competence of the political system of their country) (European Social Survey, n.d.(a), p. 193-194). Finally, S7 measures one's *satisfaction with democracy*, which is part of the broader category of 'Political support', which also features in later questions (ibid, p. 202).

The two ensuing questions of this questionnaire part were worded as follows:

2. Where would you place yourself on the left-right political spectrum? (*Completely on the left – More on the left – In the center – More on the right – Completely on the right – I don't know / don't want to answer*)

3. How interested are you in the political events in a) Slovakia b) the world? (*Very much – Somewhat – Not much – Not at all - I don't know / don't want to answer. A separate response scale was provided for each sub-question.*)

Question 2 was used as a complement to S1 and S2 from the previous question, as it too measures one's placement on the left-right spectrum. However, this question asked respondents where they would place *themselves*, whereas the first two statements asked about their opinions on concrete policies, which had a distinctly leftist/rightist charge. It might be interesting to see whether the gathered data show any relationship between people's conspiracy beliefs and the potential discrepancies in their understanding of the left-right political ideology. (That is, whether the research will uncover a link between people's lack of understanding of this dimension of politics and a heightened propensity to conspiracy thinking.)

The following questions focused on people's concrete political preferences and voting behavior:

4. To whom should Slovakia be ideologically and politically closer? *(To the 'West' (EU, USA) – To the 'East' (Russian federation) – To both equally – I don't know / don't want to answer)*

5. Who did you vote for in the latest parliamentary elections (in February 2020)? *(A list of all the parties that made it into the parliament (7) – Another party – I did not vote – I don't want to say / don't remember)*

6. If parliamentary elections were happening <u>now</u>, would you vote differently than in February 2020? (*Yes – No – I did not vote – I don't know / don't want to answer*)

Question n. 4, though not one 'traditionally' asked in political questionnaires, is relevant in the Slovak context due to the country's unique historical and geopolitical situation, which was previously described. There is reason to believe that people who are more sympathetic to Russia may score higher on the conspiracy belief scales, as they are likely more receptive to Russia's (dis)information and propagandist campaigns, which tend to promote certain conspiracy narratives. (For more information about common Russian narratives and information activities in Slovakia, see e.g. Conley et al., 2016; ESTF, 2019; Krekó, 2020; ESTF, 2021).

Questions 5 and 6 inquired about participants' political participation and party choice (European Social Survey, n.d.(a), p. 194). Additionally, Question n. 6 captures a potential change of opinion or party affiliation in the past ca. 14 months since the last parliamentary election. Thanks to this question, the ensuing analysis can examine the existence of a potential correlation between stronger conspiracy beliefs and changes in party affiliation.

The final question asked the respondents about their degree of trust in various institutions in Slovak republic and international organizations Slovakia is part of. Same as in many previous questions, the available responses were presented as a scale (*Completely trust; Quite trust; Not sure; Do not trust much; Do not trust at all*). The question was worded as follows:

7. Please indicate how much you trust the following institutions:
   1. Government of Slovakia
   2. Courts
   3. Police
   4. European Union
   5. NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization)

As was described in Chapter 4, previous research suggests that lower faith in authorities correlates with stronger conspiracy thinking. This question will be used to corroborate or dispute the finding in this concrete context.

5.3 Research context: The situation in Slovakia

At the time of writing this thesis, both the global and local situations were turbulent. Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic was raging, sending economies into the worst recession since World War II (The World Bank, 2020) and profoundly impacting people's daily lives. Alongside the virus, disinformation and conspiracy theories relating to it had been spreading equally fast, forcing the relevant authorities to fight a battle on two fronts – in both the physical and information world[19].

Locally, Slovakia found itself under new political leadership just as the COVID-19 pandemic reached the country[20]. The new government had to deal with the virus while staying true to its pre-election promise of ridding the state apparatus of corrupt individuals. This was a difficult task which resulted in many missteps and failures. Hence, support for the ruling party dwindled among regular citizens as well as coalition partners. This culminated in a crisis in the spring of 2021, *almost* leading to governmental collapse and early elections.

Despite the government's mistakes, their anti-corruption battle bore some fruit. Slovakia was caught in a whirlwind of uncovering scandals of crime and clientelism, reaching to the highest levels of the executive and judiciary power. As a result, many enduring conspiracy theories about ominous links between judges, politicians and criminals were proven right. However, instead of being discarded, many people chose to cling to them, refusing to believe genuine change would come from the unstable new government. Hence, trust in authorities reached an all-time low (Lukovičová, 2021) and conspiracy theories kept growing in popularity as the pandemic chaos raged on.

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[19] The World Health Organization even coined the term "infodemic" to describe the overabundance of information, both factual and (deliberately) incorrect, which pollute the informational sphere and hinder the spread of correct, potentially life-saving information (WHO, 2020).

[20] Following dramatic parliamentary elections on February 29, 2020, a new government was named on March 21.

The previous chapter explained that conspiracy beliefs tend to rise in times of crises and uncertainty, which are words that could certainly be used to describe the period in which this research was conducted. These unprecedented situations have likely caused some ideational changes among Slovaks, possibly shifting the gathered responses a little out of 'norm'. While this can be interpreted as a drawback - as a factor that takes away from the general validity of the gathered data - it may also provide great added value to this study. Unexpected events that shake the society at its core, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the unraveling of a vast corruption network, provide unique conditions for researching social and political phenomena – especially those sensitive to turbulence and uncertainty, such as conspiracy theories.

When reading this study or interpreting the data, the situation in which they were gathered must be kept in mind. Due to the it's unique nature, the findings of this study might not be fully 'generalizable', but rather reflect the state of a sample of Slovak population during an especially stressful and chaotic period. Conditions like these are hard to pre-plan or artificially simulate, which is why studies from unique contexts are especially powerful and enriching for the academic debate. This thesis will hopefully contribute to it by providing a rare look at the state of conspiracy beliefs and political preferences in Slovakia at times of great instability and uncertainty.

5.4 Research context: Slovak political parties

This section provides a list of Slovakia's most popular political parties per the 2020 parliamentary election, along with their current position in the parliament and an overview of their political / ideological standing across four main dimensions.

A review of these parties is shown in Table 2. All of the included parties made it into the parliament, with the exception of the PS/SPOLU coalition, which closely missed the 7% mark set for coalitions. (For individual parties, the threshold for parliamentary representation is 5%.)

PARTY or COALITION (% of votes received)	NAME IN ENGLISH	POSITION IN THE PARLIAMENT
OĽaNO (25.02%) (formally a coalition of OĽaNO and 3 other parties, but referred to as OĽaNO for simplicity)	Ordinary People and Independent Personalities	Coalition (government)
SMER-SD (18.29%)	Direction–Social Democracy	Opposition
SME RODINA (8.24%)	We Are Family	Coalition (government)
ĽSNS (7.97%)	People's Party Our Slovakia	Opposition
PS/SPOLU (6.96%)	Progressive Slovakia / Together	---
SaS (6.22%)	Freedom and Solidarity	Coalition (government)
Za ľudí (5.77%)	For the People	Coalition (government)

**Table 2: Overview of the most popular political parties in Slovakia per the 2020 election.**

Graphs 1 and 2 show the placement of these parties on key ideological scales. Namely, Graph 1 shows the left-right scale on the X axis, with value 0 representing extreme left and value 10 representing extreme right. The Y axis show the libertarian-traditional scale, also going from 0 to 10 respectively. The size of the party bubbles reflects the relative percentage of votes they had received in the 2020 elections.

Graph 2 plots the parties based on their position on liberal policies on the Y axis, with 0 representing strong support for liberal policies and 10 representing strong opposition to them. The X axis shows each party's position on the issue of civil liberties vs. law and order, with 0 meaning a strong preference for civil liberties and 10 meaning strong preference for tough measures in crime-fighting. The Y axis was switched to provide better graphic representation of the given variable.
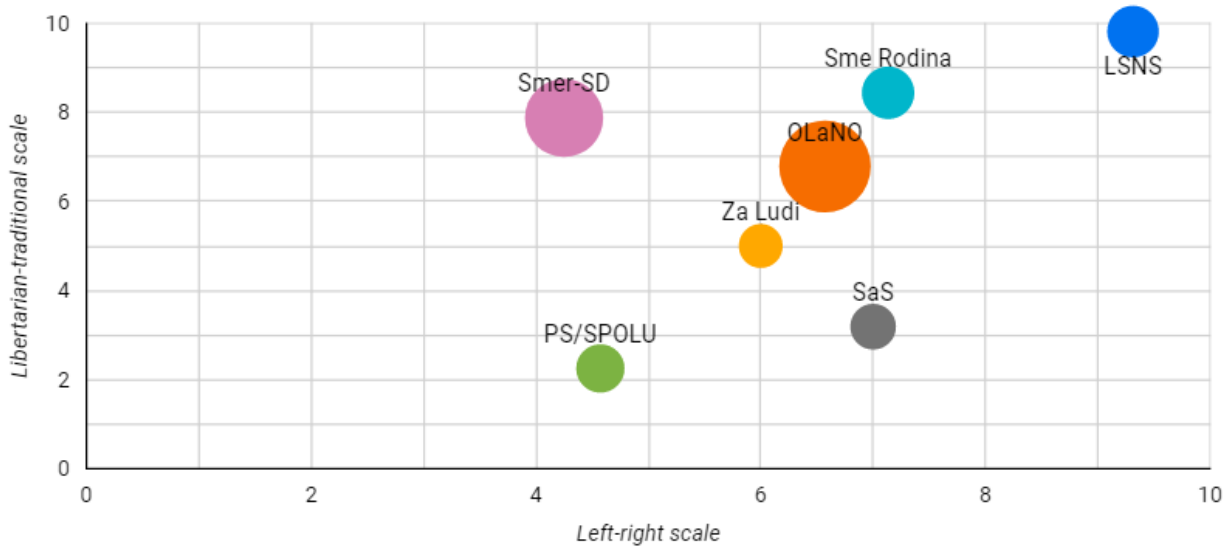
Graph 1: Slovak political parties placed on the left-right and libertarian-traditional scales.

(Author's visualization. Source of input data: Bakker et al., 2020)[21].
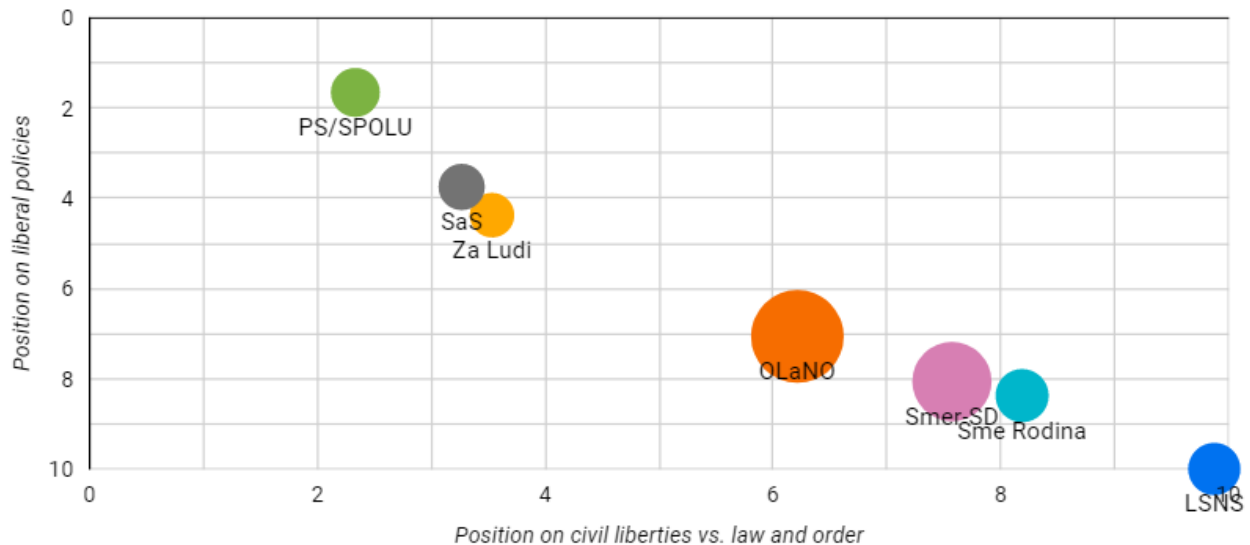
Graph 2: Position of Slovak political parties on civil liberties and liberal policies.

(Author's visualization. Source of input data: Bakker et al., 2020).

These graphs show that Slovakia's largest parties (at the time of the 2020 election) were primarily centrist, with a slight dominance of the center-right, and leaning towards traditional values. There is a notable divide in the parties' preference of liberal policies,

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[21] PS and SPOLU were listed as two separate parties in the original data set. To display them as a coalition, their corresponding values for each variable were averaged.

with a cluster of 3 predominantly liberal and 4 predominantly conservative parties. The same can be said about the parties' position on civil liberties vs. law and order.

Overall, the two most liberal / progressive parties are the PS/SPOLU coalition and SaS. The most conservative and overwhelmingly rightist party is ĽSNS, (often labeled extremist or fascist by local and foreign media and politicians).

It is important to note that this thesis was finished more than 1.5 years after the February 2020 elections. In the meantime, the political landscape had already changed – more parties were formed both in and out of the parliament, and voters' preferences had shifted. Nonetheless, for the most part, these visualizations of party ideologies still hold true and remain relevant for understanding Slovakia's political environment.

6. Data and analysis

This chapter presents the data gathered by the questionnaire introduced in Chapter 5 and performs analyses to help answer the research question relating to the political preferences and conspiracy beliefs of Slovaks.

The first part of this chapter discusses the sample size, variety, and selection bias. The second part presents graphs showing the relationships between the core research variables. Finally, part three contains a regression analysis, testing the significance of the selected independent variables for explaining the dependent variable. Afterwards, Chapters 7 and 8 close this thesis with a final discussion of the findings, recommendations for further research and an overall summary of this thesis.

6.1   Sample details and selection bias

Between April 25 and May 30, 2021, 168 respondents filled in the online questionnaire. Two of those responses were void, since the respondents indicated they were not Slovak citizens at least 18 years of age. Therefore, the final sample size consists of 166 individual responses.

The sample is not perfectly representative of the Slovak republic, due to certain limitations existing at the time of writing. The first was a series of restrictions relating to the COVID-19 pandemic, curbing free travel to / across Slovakia and meetings with

potential respondents. Second was a lack of funding for this research, which would enable the purchase of a more representative online panel of respondents. Hence, the author was left with less efficient methods of survey distribution, resulting in a less balanced / more biased sample. Nonetheless, the deficiencies of the sample are taken into account in the analysis and interpretation of the collected data. Nowhere in the analysis is it implied that the results are perfectly applicable to the Slovak republic as a whole. Still, the results provide a useful glimpse at least at some portions of the Slovak population (see Table 3 for details), and the data set is varied enough to enable the testing of the research question.

Three main distribution channels were utilized for gathering responses: 1) friends and family members, who distributed the questionnaire further among their networks; 2) various social media / online fora / groups made specifically for Slovaks; 3) Slovak political / conspiratorial Facebook groups. The first channel brought in 86 responses, the second 59 responses, and the third 21 responses. The third distribution channel was sought out specifically with the goal of balancing the sample, given that the first two channels reached mainly younger, more educated and more liberal citizens from the western regions of Slovakia. The Facebook groups in the third channel were chosen based on the nature of the content posted by their members, who appeared to fall mostly into opposite socio-political categories to the members of the first two distribution channels.

Table 3 shows the make-up of the sample compared with values from the Slovak republic as a whole, to help demonstrate the degree of representativeness of the sample. The characteristics with the largest discrepancy are highlighted in bold.

	SAMPLE	SLOVAK REPUBLIC
GENDER		
Male	50.6%	48.8%
Female	47.6%	51.2%
Other / not specified	1.8%	---
		(ŠÚSR, 2021a)
AGE		
18-24	**27.7%**	**7%**

25-30	22.9%	8%
31-40	19.3%	15.6%
41-50	12.7%	15.4%
51-60	6.6%	12.9%
61+	10.8%	22%
		(ŠÚSR, 2021a)
EDUCATION		
Elementary	3%	17%
Secondary	49.4%	48.8%
Tertiary	**47.6%**	**18.4%**
		(ŠÚSR, 2021c)
		*the percentage points remaining to the full 100% represent minors still at school, adults with no attained formal education and missing data.
REGION OF RESIDENCE (from west to east)		
Bratislavský region	**48.2%**	**12.3%**
Trnavský region	10.2%	10.4%
Trenčiansky region	4.8%	10.7%
Nitriansky region	4.2%	12.3%
Žilinský region	3%	12.7%
Banskobystrický region	6%	11.8%
Prešovský region	4.8%	15.1%
Košický region	6.6%	14.7%
N/A (living abroad)	8.4%	---
		(ŠÚSR, 2021b)
PARTY VOTE (in the 2020 Parliamentary elections)		
OĽANO	11.5%	16.3%
SMER-SD	11.5%	11.9%
SME RODINA	1.2%	5.4%
ĽSNS	3%	5.2%

PS/SPOLU	**24.1%**	**4.5%**
SAS	**21.7%**	**4%**
ZA ĽUDÍ	3.6%	3.8%
Other	4.2%	14.7%
Did not vote	**10.8%**	**34.2%**
N/A (not specified)	8.4%	---
		(ŠÚSR, 2020) *data adjusted to the sum of total eligible voters (i.e. not the percentages the parties received from participating voters); rounded to one decimal place

Table 3: Comparison of the basic demographic and political characteristics of the research sample and Slovak population.

It is apparent that the data sample collected for this research is biased towards:

- *younger* people (ages 18-30), which collectively make up 50.6% of the sample versus just 15% of the Slovak population;
- more *educated* people, especially those with completed tertiary education (47.6% vs 18.4%);
- people living in the *Bratislava region* – the westernmost and richest region of Slovakia (48.2% vs 12.3%);
- people with more *liberal / progressive* political and ideological leanings, exemplified here by Slovakia's most liberal parties: the PS/Spolu coalition, which did not make it into the Parliament; and the SaS party, a current member of the coalition government. (Their voters collectively represent 45.8% of the sample, but only 8.57% of all Slovakia's eligible voters);
- and finally, the sample is also tipped towards *people who participated in the latest parliamentary elections.* (Only 10.8% of the sample did not vote, compared to 34.2% of all eligible voters).

6.2 What the data show

To enable better graphic and quantitative analysis, I recoded all Likert-scale worded answers into corresponding numbers, thereby creating ordinal variables. Hence, all responses in Part 2 and Part 3 of the questionnaire, where respondents assessed their degree of belief in individual generic and concrete conspiracy theories, are expressed as numbers going from 1 (the smallest degree of belief) to 5 (the greatest degree of belief). Similarly, responses enquiring about the respondents' position on the left-right and the authoritarian-libertarian scale were encoded into numbers from 1 to 5, with 5 being the most leftist / most libertarian, and 5 being the most rightist / most authoritarian. Faith in authorities and interest in politics were recoded in the same way, with the value of 1 representing the lowest degree of faith or interest and 5 the greatest. Thanks to these adjustments, I could compute the averages for all ordinal political/ideological variables, as well as for the generic and concrete conspiracy beliefs, thereby getting 'average conspiracy scores'.

The following sections present the patterns revealed by the data, variable by variable, and compare these findings to those suggested by past research.

Demographic findings

First, let us look at the average level of conspiracy beliefs across four demographic dimensions – gender, age, education, and region of residence. When reading these findings, please keep in mind two things. First, demographic data are not good predictors of conspiracy belief, as had been explained in Chapter 4.1.2. Second, the research sample is not fully representative of the Slovak republic, as had been explained in Chapter 6.1. Therefore, kindly view this section as a small introduction into the gathered data, rather than a collection of noteworthy conclusions.

In the studied sample, women came out as slightly more conspiratorial than men. The age group with the highest conspiracy score were the 41 to 50-year-olds, while the two youngest groups – 18-24 and 25-30 – tied for last place. In terms of the highest attained education, the sample did not fulfil the expectations based on past research. The most conspiratorial group were the high-school-educated, not the ones with elementary or university education, as Renard (2015) suggests. Finally, the most conspiracy-believing

respondents came from the Košice Region, located in southeast Slovakia. Žilina Region came up as the least conspiratorial. Bratislava Region – the westernmost region of the country, containing the capital city – came in as the second least conspiratorial.

Generic and concrete conspiracy beliefs

Let us move on to more substantial findings. To begin with, this section examines which individual conspiracy theories were collectively the most believed. Among the generic theories (taken from Brotherton et al.'s GCB scale), the ones with the highest average 'conspiracy score' (listed in brackets) were:

- *"A lot of important information is deliberately concealed from the public out of [someone's] self-interest"* (3.43 / 5);
- *"New and advanced technology which would harm current industry is being suppressed"* (2.86 / 5);
- *"The power held by heads of state is second to that of small unknown groups who really control world politics"* (2.82 / 5).

Concrete conspiracy theories had notably lower support overall. The following three came up with the highest average conspiracy scores:

- *Slovak NGOs are controlled by powerful foreign countries / individuals* (2.82 / 5);
- *The mainstream media in Slovakia are controlled by foreign powers* (2.56 / 5);
- *The 9/11 terrorist attacks were carried out by the US government* (2.31 / 5).

As was expected and hinted in Chapter 5.2, conspiracy theories which talk about malevolent global actors constitute the majority of the most strongly believed theories in this sample of the Slovak population.

Moving on to combinations of metrics. As expected, the respondents' generic and concrete conspiracy beliefs went hand in hand. A linear trend can be observed in the data comparing the average scores of generic and concrete conspiracy beliefs at the level of individual respondents (Graph 3), as well as party affiliation in the 2020 elections (Graph 4).
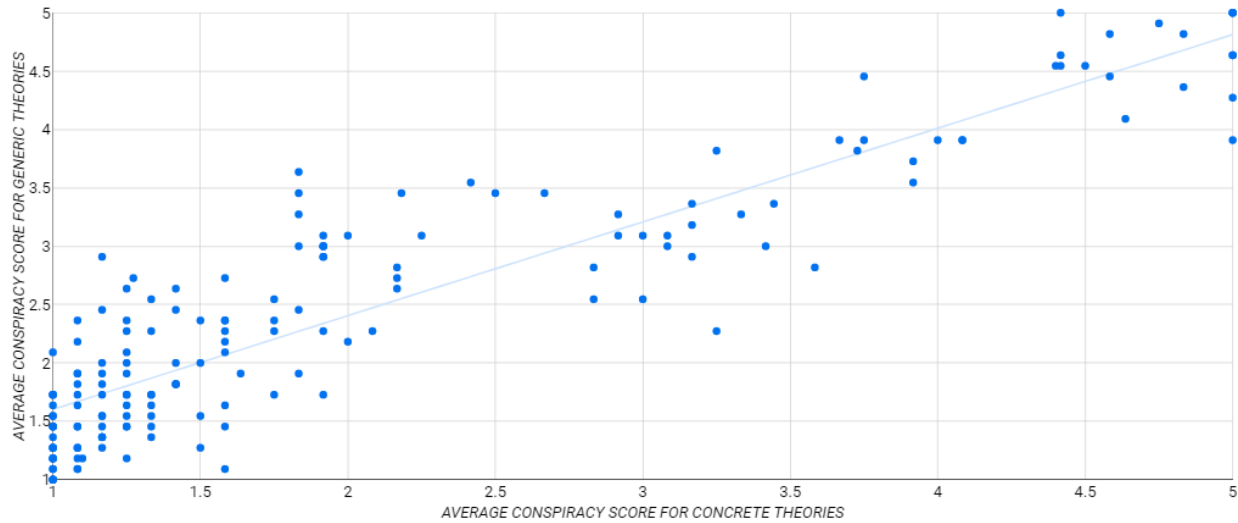
Graph 3: Respondents' average conspiracy scores[22].

Who did you vote for in the latest parliamentary elections (in February 2020)?
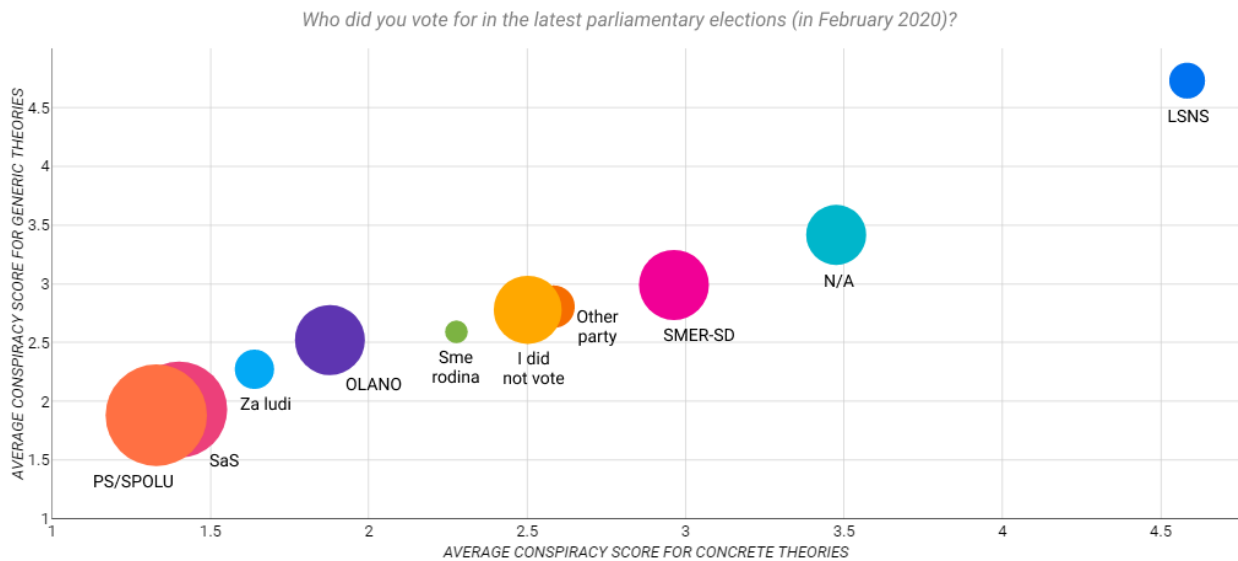
Graph 4: Respondents' average conspiracy scores clustered by party affiliation in the 2020 parliamentary elections[23].

Additionally, Graph 4 tells us how conspiratorial the voters of the individual parties in the sample were. The two least conspiratorial clusters represent the PS/Spolu coalition and

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[22] 'Conspiracy scores' are represented as collective averages for the generic conspiracy theories on the Y axis and concrete conspiracy theories on the X axis. This will be the case for all ensuing graphs in this section.

[23] The size of the clusters is determined by the number of respondents belonging to each cluster. The larger the bubble, the more people selected the given option in the questionnaire. This will be the case for all ensuing graphs in this section.

the SaS party – two of the most liberal and libertarian parties in Slovakia. The significantly highest conspiracy scores were reached by supporters of ĽSNS – Slovakia's most conservative, far-right party – who scored an average of over 4.5 in both conspiracy dimensions. This finding supports previous conclusions that people at the extremes of the left-right spectrum are more prone to conspiracy beliefs than others. Slovakia does not have a strong party equivalently positioned on the far-left side of the spectrum, so this claim could not be tested across the full left-right continuum. However, voters of Slovakia's most leftist party (from among the most popular parties), SMER-SD, were in the middle of the conspiracy belief scales, reaching a value close to 3 in both generic and concrete theories.

Graph 4 also shows that respondents who did not vote in the latest elections had the 6th highest average score in generic and concrete conspiracy beliefs, which narrowly places them in the more conspiratorial half of these party clusters. This suggests that those who chose *not* to participate in a normative political activity (elections) were *not* overwhelmingly more conspiratorial than those who did participate. The significance of the decision to not vote, or rather of the whole metric of voting behavior and party affiliation, will further be tested in the next subchapter, via regression analysis.

The other metrics portrayed against the average generic and concrete conspiracy scores were the preference of the 'East' or 'West' (shown in Graph 5) and a change in party affiliation during the ca. 14 months since parliamentary elections (shown in Graph 6).

Once again, as expected and hinted in Chapter 5, those respondents who wanted Slovakia to be closer to the Russian federation than to the EU or USA, exhibited the highest degree of conspiracy thinking in both concrete and generic terms, with average scores around 4.3/5. Respondents who wanted Slovakia to be ideologically and politically equally close to both the 'East' and the 'West' fall into the lower middle of both conspiracy scales. The same can be said for respondents who had no preference or did not want to specify it. Consequently, the significantly lowest conspiracy scores were reached by respondents who wanted Slovakia to be closer to the 'West'.
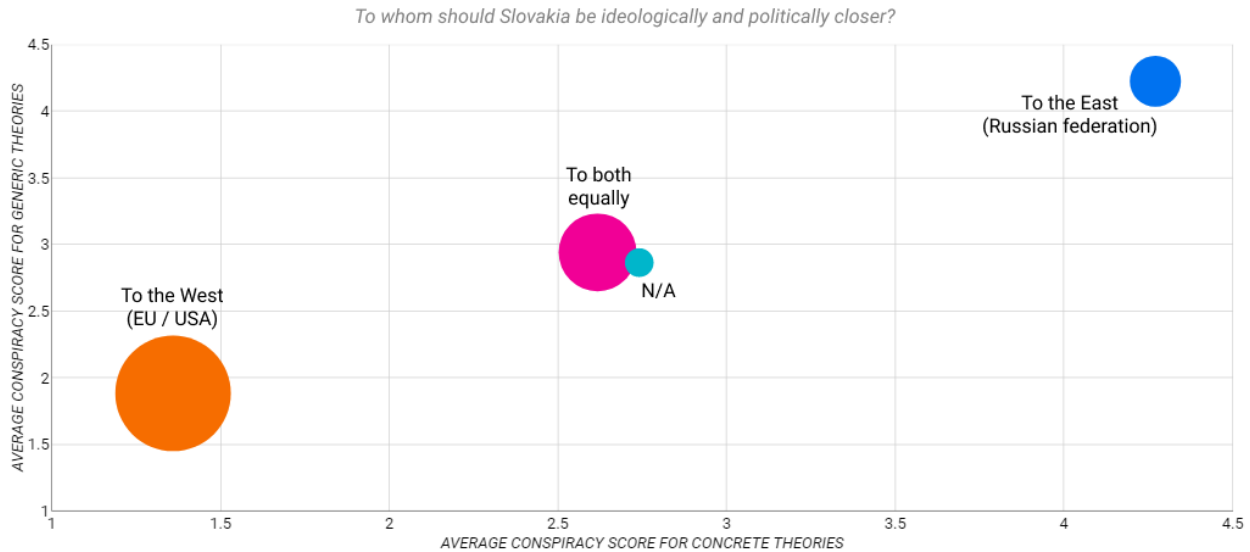
Graph 5: Respondents' average conspiracy scores clustered by preference of the 'East' or 'West' (In response to the question: "To whom should Slovakia be ideologically and politically closer?").

Finally, Graph 6 shows that if responses are clustered according to the metric of a change in party affiliation, the scales are relatively smaller than in most other cases. This graph only goes up to 2.6/5 on the concrete conspiracy scale and up to 3.25/5 on the generic conspiracy scale. That means that the differences in people's conspiracy scores were not particularly dependent on how they answered this question.

Those respondents who would vote for the same political party more than a year after elections, had the lowest conspiracy scores (around 2.25 in the generic scale and 1.9 in the concrete scale). That is just marginally lower than the average scores reached by respondents who *would* pick a different party. Respondents who *did not vote* were somewhat, but not overwhelmingly more conspiratorial than those who voted. Once again, the degree of significance of this metric will be tested in the regression analysis in Chapter 6.3.
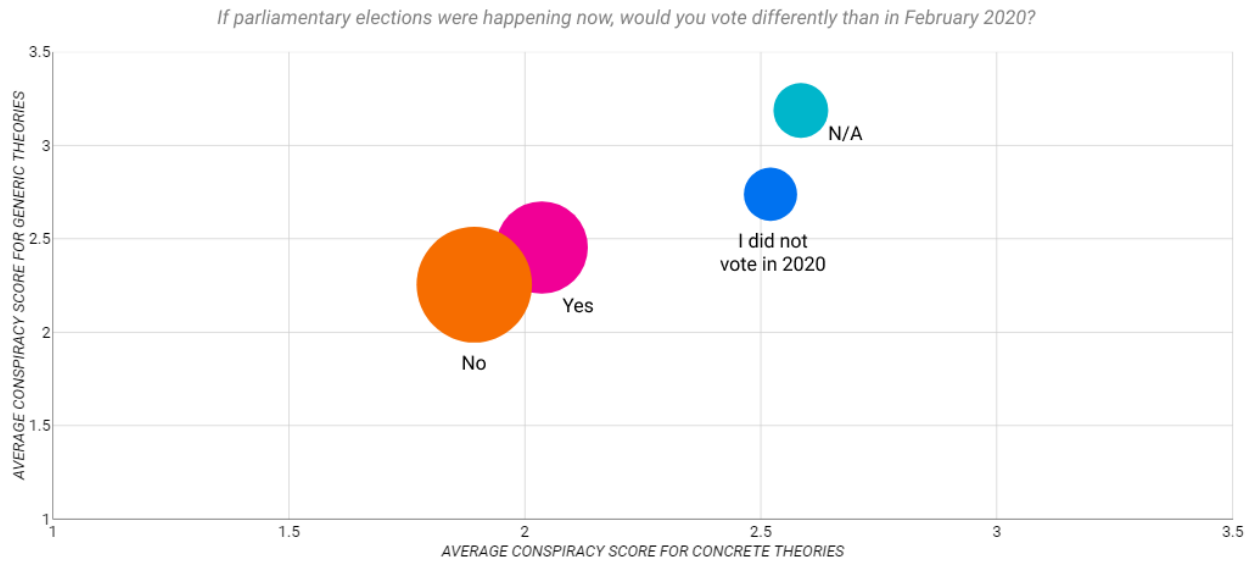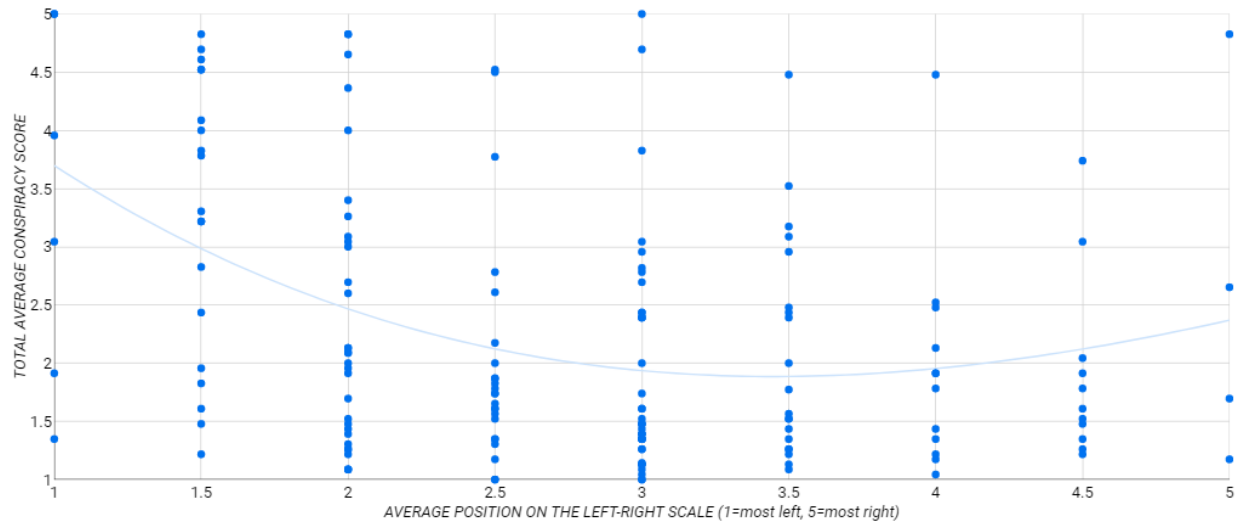
Graph 6: Respondents' average conspiracy scores clustered by change in party affiliation (In response to the question: "If parliamentary elections were happening now, would you vote differently than in February 2020?").

Political / ideological metrics and conspiracy beliefs

Let us now look at the combination of the average conspiracy scores (for all generic and concrete statements combined) and the remaining political / ideological metrics: position on the left-right scale, libertarian-authoritarian scale, perceived internal political efficacy, satisfaction with democracy, interest in politics, and trust in authorities.

Graph 7 shows the placement of individual respondents based on their average conspiracy score and assumed position on the left-right ideological scale. The scores on the X axis were computed from the respondents' answers to statements 1 and 2 in Part 4 of the questionnaire.

We can see that respondents with lower conspiracy scores (scores 1 – 2.25 on the Y axis) are spread relatively evenly across the left-right continuum, with most people focused around the central and near-central values between 2 ('more on the left') and 4 ('more on the right'). The trendline that cuts through the data has an imperfect convex curvilinear shape, showing higher conspiracy scores among people on either extreme of the left-right scale, which is consistent with previous research findings. However, this dataset shows a higher proclivity towards conspiracy thinking among the most leftist respondents.
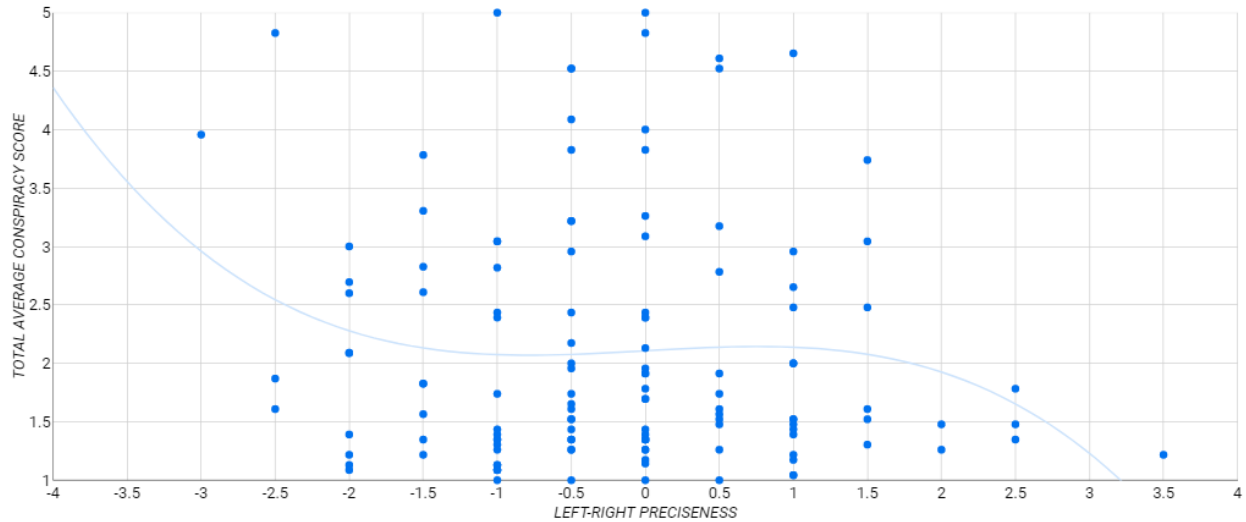
71

Graph 7: Respondents' average conspiracy scores and position on the left-right scale (based on their degree of agreement with leftist or rightist policy statements).

The questionnaire inquired about the respondents' left-right leanings in more questions than one. Aside from the two statements that were used to compute the scores in Graph 7, respondents were also asked to *place themselves* on the left-right continuum, thus providing their ideological self-assessment. In Graph 8, this self-assessment is contrasted with the respondents' ideological responses to the aforementioned leftist and rightist statements. As had previously been hinted, it might be interesting to see whether there was a higher proclivity to conspiracy thinking among people who misjudged their ideological leaning – i.e. whose responses to policy statements had placed them in one half of the left-right spectrum, while their self-assessment had placed them in the opposite half. This metric, called 'left-right preciseness' in Graph 8, was computed by subtracting the scores from the relevant questions. A result equal to zero signifies that there was no discrepancy between a respondent's reaction to leftist/rightist statements and their ideological self-assessment. Numbers further from zero, in either direction, indicate a greater discrepancy between the two.

Given how scattered the points on Graph 8 are, there does not seem to be a reliable relationship between higher conspiracy thinking and a person's ideological discrepancy; at least not in this population sample.

Graph 8: Respondents' average conspiracy scores and the preciseness of their ideological assessment on the left-right scale.

Moving on from the left-right scale, Graph 9 displays respondents' average conspiracy scores and positions on the libertarian-authoritarian scale. As the trendline shows, there appears to be a relationship between more authoritarian tendencies and stronger conspiracy beliefs. This supports the findings from past research, which observed a higher proclivity to conspiracy thinking among more authoritarian-leaning individuals.
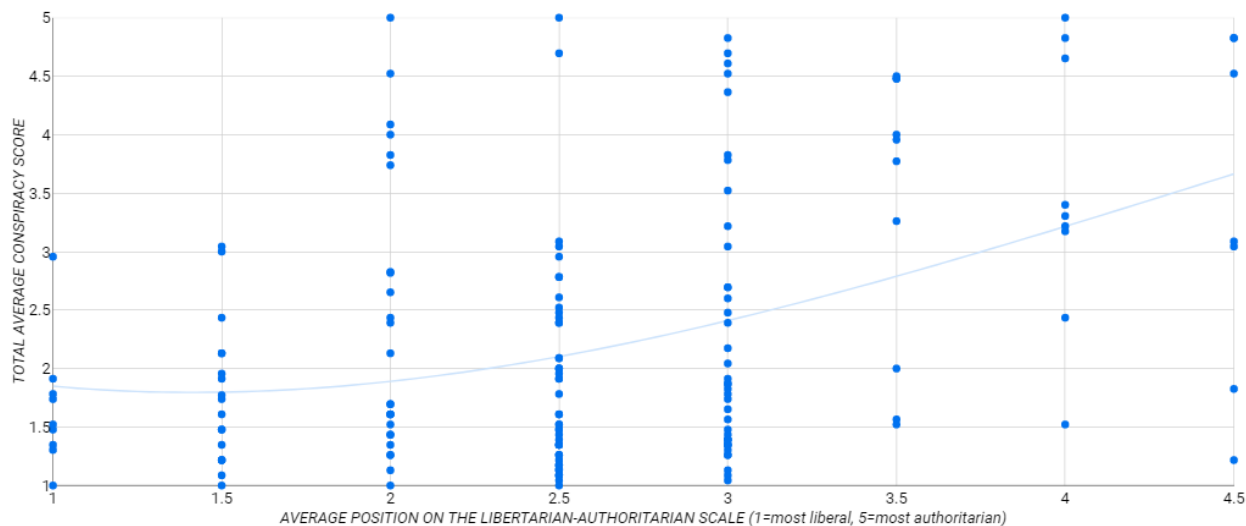
Graph 9: Respondents' average conspiracy scores and position on the libertarian-authoritarian scale (based on their degree of agreement with libertarian and authoritarian statements).

Next come the topics of perceived political efficiency, satisfaction with democracy and faith in authorities.

Graph 10 shows the respondents' average conspiracy scores and perceived political efficacy.
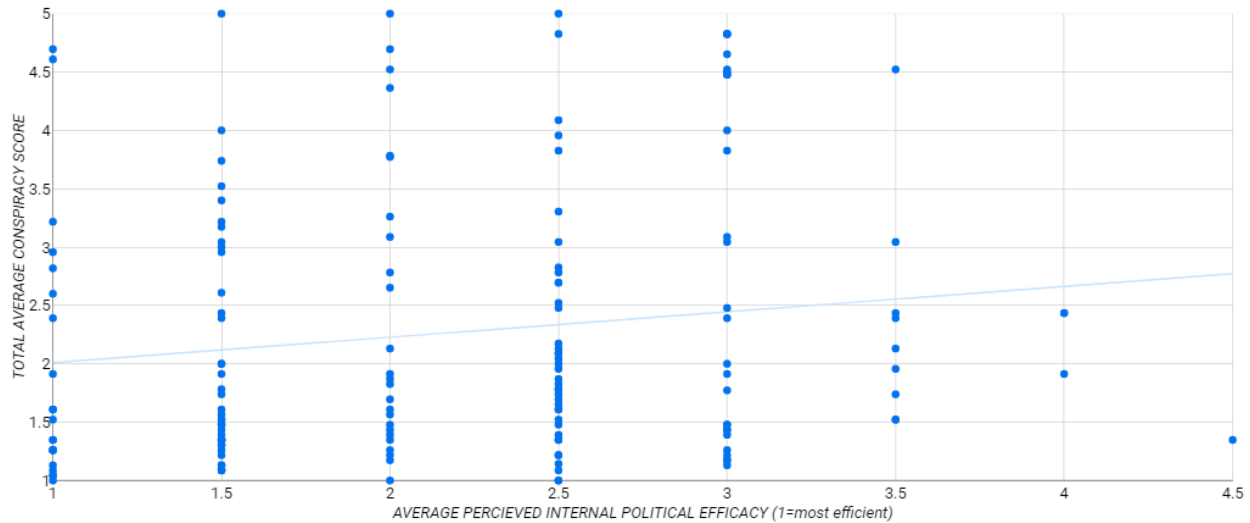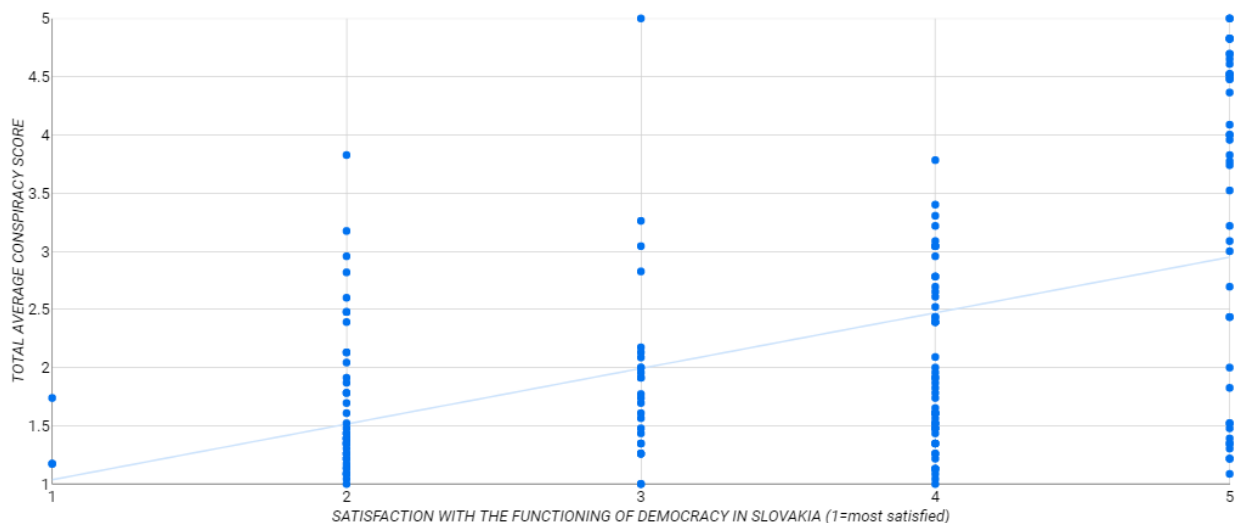

Graph 10: Respondents' average conspiracy scores and perceived level of internal political efficacy (based on their degree of agreement with statements regarding the subjective competence of their country's political system).

As explained in the previous chapters, past research suggests that those who perceive their country's political system as inefficient are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories. That also appears to be true in this population sample, albeit very slightly. The trendline in Graph 10 only goes from an average conspiracy score of ca. 2 to 2.5, meaning the variance in conspiracy thinking between those who did and did not perceive Slovakia's political system as efficient, was marginal.

Next, the metric of "satisfaction with democracy" is shown in two graphs. Graph 11 shows the traditional breakdown at an individual level, while Graph 12 clusters respondents based on their party affiliation in the latest parliamentary elections.

In Graph 11, the trendline paints a linear relationship between lower satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in Slovakia and higher conspiracy beliefs. (Value 5 on the X-axis represents complete disagreement with the statement "I am satisfied with the functioning of democracy in Slovakia".) Once again, this is consistent with previous

research findings, which showed that discontent with the workings of the regime can be a strong driver of conspiracy thinking.

Graph 11: Respondents' average conspiracy scores and satisfaction with Slovakia's democracy.

Clustering the same data based on the respondents' political party affiliation brings another interesting insight. As Graph 12 shows, all the party clusters are located between the values of 3 and 5 on the 'satisfaction with democracy' axis. This means that on average, the voters of *all* parties from the sample were in the *more discontent* half of the spectrum – leaning more towards dissatisfaction with Slovakia's democracy than towards satisfaction. The most dissatisfied (and also the most prone to conspiracy thinking) were the voters of ĽSNS – Slovakia's most rightist parliamentary party. This result was to be expected, seeing as a high dissatisfaction with democracy tends to correlate with the support of anti-establishment movements and "protest parties", especially from the extreme right (Lubbers et al., 2002. p. 348-349; Wike et al., 2019).
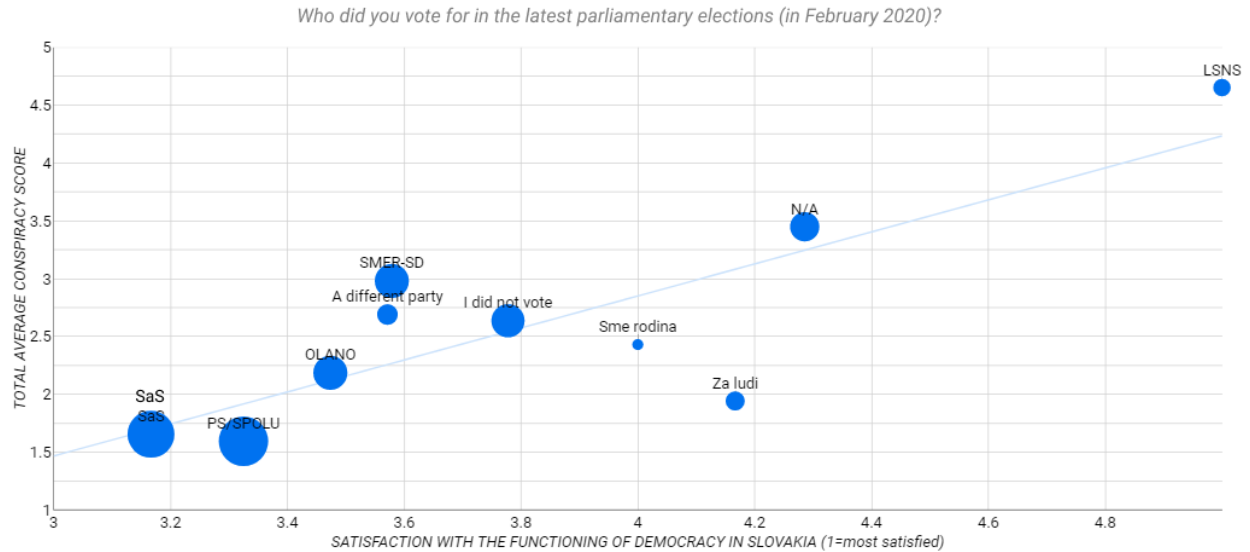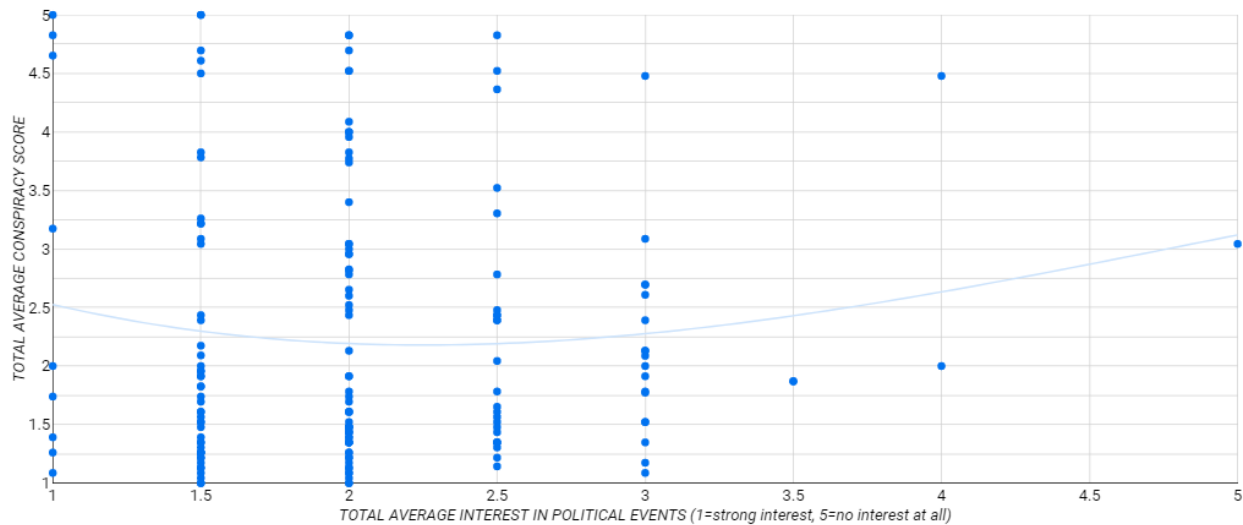
Graph 12: Respondents' average conspiracy scores and satisfaction with Slovakia's democracy, clustered by party affiliation.

Respondents were also asked about their degree of interest in politics, both in Slovakia and abroad. The assumption was that the relationship between this variable and conspiracy beliefs would, once again, be curvilinear – i.e. that the most and least interested people would be the most conspiratorial. This notion is derived from previous research regarding political activity and general civic engagement, described in Chapter 4.1.3. These claimed that many people who are politically inactive had lost faith in the system and tend to listen to 'alternative' and often conspiratorial explanations as to why the system does not work. On the other hand, many people who are very politically engaged – quite often non-normatively – do so to rebel against, weaken, or topple the system. Hence, the two ends of the 'political activity spectrum' are likely to be the most prone to conspiracy beliefs.

While questions about 'interest in politics' in my questionnaire did not measure political activity, a similar relationship to conspiracy beliefs was expected. The result is shown in Graph 13, where the X axis represents respondents' average interest in political events both home and abroad combined. A value of 1 means a very large interest, 5 means no interest at all. There does appear to be a slight curvilinear relationship, but the result cannot be seen as conclusive, given the small size of the sample and the fact that only one

respondent professed they had "no interest at all" in political events both home and abroad.

Graph 13: Respondents' average conspiracy scores and interest in political affairs.

Finally, Graph 14 plots the relationship between conspiracy belief and faith in institutions – both local (i.e the Slovak government, courts and police) and international (EU, NATO). A value of 1 on the X axis represents no faith in these institutions; conversely, 5 signifies absolute faith. The graph clearly shows that respondents were more likely to have high conspiracy scores when their faith in institutions was lower.
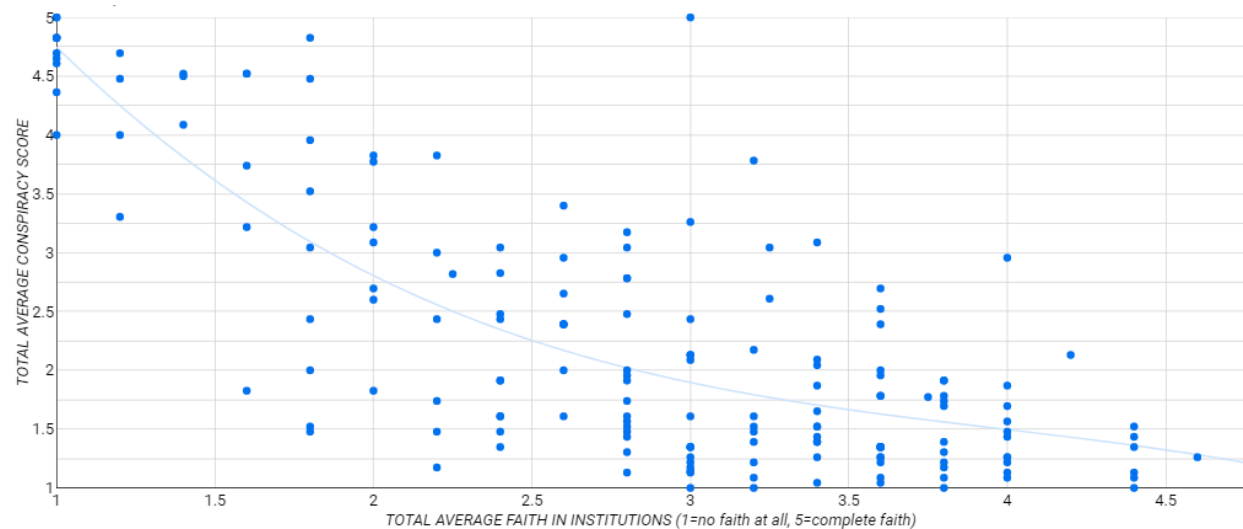
Graph 14: Respondents' average conspiracy scores and faith in local and international institutions.

Summary of findings

Ensuing is a quick summary of the findings from Chapter 6.2, starting with those that fulfilled expectations and were in line with the conclusions of past research.

This study found that respondents who had a higher degree of belief in generic conspiracy theories were also more likely to believe in concrete theories, and vice versa. This corroborates the notion that having an existing belief in any one conspiracy theory is a good predictor of belief in other such theories.

Respondents from the ideological extremes of the left-right scale were also found to be more prone to conspiracy beliefs than those in the ideological center. However, contrary to previous findings, this research identified stronger conspiracy beliefs among the most leftist respondents, not the most rightist ones. On the other hand, when it came to voting behavior, supporters of the far-right party ĽSNS came up as the significantly most conspiratorial. This finding was further confirmed by the relationship of conspiracy beliefs and respondents' libertarian vs. authoritarian leanings; the more authoritarian people were, the more they generally agreed with conspiracy theories.

The respondents were also clearly split into a more and a less conspiratorial half, according to their desired ideological and political closeness of Slovakia to either 'the West' or 'the East'. On average, respondents who favored 'the East' had significantly higher conspiracy scores. That could be explained by their higher receptiveness to Russian (dis)information campaigns, which do not shy away from promoting conspiratorial narratives aimed against 'the West'[24].

As expected, respondents with greater satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in Slovakia, were notably less conspiratorial than those dissatisfied with it. Finally, higher faith in institutions went hand-in-hand with lower conspiracy scores too.

Moving on to findings that diverged from past research conclusions. The respondents from this sample who chose *not* to vote in parliamentary elections were *not* overwhelmingly more conspiratorial than those who did vote. Similarly, a change in party

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[24] Albeit some might argue that 'the West' also engages in information warfare and the spread of conspiracy narratives in Slovakia, the activities of Russia appear to be much more widespread and potent (see e.g. Conley et al., 2016; Linvill & Warren, 2020; Lucas, 2016; Krekó, 2020).

affiliation did not appear to be a noteworthy factor in respondents' degree of conspiracy beliefs, since those who claimed they would have voted differently in parliamentary elections, had only marginally higher conspiracy scores.

Finally, there were three variables whose relationship to conspiracy beliefs came out much weaker than expected. First, this study found that people with a higher discrepancy in their self-placement and actual placement on the left-right ideological scale, were not more conspiratorial. Second, those respondents who saw Slovakia's political system as inefficient were only marginally more likely to achieve higher conspiracy scores. The same thing was found for 'interest in political affairs'. The expectation of a curvilinear relationship was fulfilled, but the numerical difference in conspiracy scores for those who were very interested, mildly interested, and not at all interested in political events, was miniscule.

6.3 Multiple regression analysis

All the relevant variables from Chapter 6.2 were tested against the dependent variable – the 'total conspiracy score' - in a multiple regression analysis. The main goal of the analysis was to assess the degree of significance of the independent variables and determine whether their relationship to the dependent variable was noteworthy. The complete results of the analysis can be seen in Table 4.

The independent variables included in the model were: left-right ideology, perceived internal political efficacy, satisfaction with democracy, libertarian-authoritarian ideology, interest in politics, faith in institutions, greater sympathies towards the 'East' vs the 'West', party affiliation in the 2020 election, and change in party affiliation[25].

Of the variables previously discussed, three were not included in the analysis. First was 'left-right preciseness' (i.e. respondents' accuracy in their self-placement on the left-right scale). As shown in Graph 8, there appeared to be no relevant (linear) relationship between this variable and the total conspiracy score. Plugging it into a linear regression model would thus not contribute to it meaningfully. The other two excluded variables –

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[25] As some of these variables were categorical, they were transformed into numeric dummy variables for the purposes of the regression analysis.

concrete conspiracy score and generic conspiracy score – had to be left out due to collinearity. As demonstrated in Graph 3, these variables have a strong linear relationship; hence, including them in the regression analysis would render it unreliable.

Let us now interpret the data and see how well the chosen independent variables (IVs) serve to explain the dependent variable (DVs), and which were the most statistically significant.

The value of Multiple R - the correlation coefficient of this model - is equal to 0.8387, which means that overall, the IVs and DV have a strong positive linear relationship. The goodness of fit of the model is determined by Adjusted R^2, which has the value of 0.6863[26]. This tells us that 68.63% of the variation of the dependent variable can be explained by the selected IVs. The Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) shows that the p-value of the F-test of overall significance is almost zero. Since this value is smaller than the selected significance level of 0.05, it can be concluded that the regression model is statistically significant. In other words, the chosen IVs are better at explaining the variability of the DV than no IVs at all.

When it comes to the significance of the individual variables (i.e. their P-values), only four passed the selected significance level of 0.05. These were: libertarian-authoritarian ideology, faith in institutions, greater sympathies towards the 'East' vs the 'West', and party affiliation in the 2020 election.

However, it should be noted that regression analysis only tests the significance of *linear* relationships. Therefore, some of the variables that came up as 'insignificant' in this model, might still be good predictors of conspiracy belief, just not in a linear way. This was already demonstrated in Chapter 6.2, which showed a *curvilinear* relationship between the DV and the left-right ideology, and interest in political affairs, in this population sample (in Graphs 7 and 10, respectively). Despite this fact, when the regression analysis was run again, only with the four IVs that met the chosen significance level, the combined relationship of the IVs to the DV came out weaker and less significant.

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[26] Adjusted R^2 has been chosen as the preferred coefficient of determination in this interpretation, as it factors in not only the number of IVs in the model, but also their significance, in contrast with 'simple' R^2.

Regression Statistics	
Multiple R	**0,838711234**
R Square	0,703436535
Adjusted R Square	**0,686327104**
Standard Error	0,639830108
Observations	166

ANOVA

	df	SS	MS	F	Significance F
Regression	9	151,4820651	16,83134	41,11397	**7,91424E-37**
Residual	156	63,86368056	0,409383		
Total	165	215,3457456			

	Coefficients	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value	Lower 95%	Upper 95%	Lower 95,0%	Upper 95,0%
Intercept	4,872318966	0,520053374	9,368883	**7,95E-17**	3,845064033	5,899573898	3,845064033	5,899573898
Left-right ideology	-0,032849094	0,056033625	-0,58624	0,558562	-0,143531613	0,077833425	-0,143531613	0,077833425
Perceived political efficacy	-0,049461662	0,069586504	-0,71079	0,478273	-0,186915015	0,087991691	-0,186915015	0,087991691
Satisfaction with democracy	0,056179544	0,05326197	1,054778	0,293158	-0,04902816	0,161387248	-0,04902816	0,161387248
Libertarian-authoritarian ideology	0,125077954	0,067369047	1,856609	**0,065253**	-0,007995283	0,258151192	-0,007995283	0,258151192
Interest in politics	-0,117886605	0,087423405	-1,34846	0,179466	-0,290572964	0,054799754	-0,290572964	0,054799754
Faith in institutions	-0,54341443	0,078336565	-6,93692	**1,01E-10**	-0,698151669	-0,388677192	-0,698151669	-0,388677192
East-west closeness	-0,554770793	0,078977786	-7,02439	**6,26E-11**	-0,710774626	-0,398766959	-0,710774626	-0,398766959
Vote in 2020	0,046870162	0,019056441	2,459544	**0,015003**	0,009228213	0,084512111	0,009228213	0,084512111
Change in vote	-0,051496705	0,051405567	-1,00177	0,318005	-0,153037479	0,05004407	-0,153037479	0,05004407

Table 4: Results of multiple regression analysis with nine independent variables.

As a final test, the residuals of the IVs were plotted. All plots had one outlier data point, which however did not appear to have a profound skewing effect on the data. Otherwise, the residual plots showed no apparent patterns among the data points, which is one of the signs that the IVs were a good fit for the model. The only exception was the residual plot of 'Faith in institutions', which showed a slight concave trendline. This means that a non-linear model might have been better for testing the relationship of this variable to the DV – despite the fact that it still came out as significant in the linear regression model.

7. Summary and discussion of research findings

The principal research question of this thesis was: *How does the belief in conspiracy theories reflect in people's political opinions and preferences?* It was broken up into smaller questions that could be surveyed, using a population sample of adult Slovak citizens. Despite the sample not being perfectly representative of the total population, it still allowed the testing of the selected ideological and political dimensions.

The first concrete dimension that was examined in the questionnaire, was the *left-right leaning* of the respondents. When plotted against their 'total conspiracy scores' (in Graph 7), it showed a loosely U-shaped curvilinear relationship, meaning that those at the extremes of the left-right scale were more conspiratorial than those closer to the center. The multiple regression analysis did not find the left-right variable significant, but that can be attributed to the linearity of the regression model, which was not a good-enough fit for variables with a seemingly curvilinear dependence. No significant relationship was found in the discrepancy between people's perceived left-right leaning and actual preference of leftist or rightist policies (shown in Graph 8).

Next, the questionnaire inquired about the respondents' preference of *libertarian or authoritarian* policies. Graph 9 clearly showed a relationship between higher conspiracy scores and preference for more authoritarian policies, as was suggested by previous research. This variable was also proven significant in the regression analysis, confirming a linear relationship between stronger conspiracy beliefs and authoritarian leanings.

The *perceived internal efficacy of Slovakia's political system* had only a very weak connection to conspiracy beliefs; Graph 10 showed a slight positive linear relationship

between stronger conspiracy beliefs and a perceived greater inefficiency of the system. The regression analysis corroborated the relative insignificance of this relationship.

In contrast, the trendline on Graph 11 displayed a solid-looking linear relationship between higher conspiracy scores and greater *dissatisfaction with the functioning of Slovakia's democracy*, but the relationship was not identified as strong / significant enough by the regression model. However, an additional unexpected finding was that the voters of all political parties from the population sample were, on average, more dissatisfied with Slovakia's democracy than satisfied (as shown in Graph 12). This could be a reflection of the turbulent political situation in Slovakia and of the dwindling faith in authorities, caused by a combination of the COVID-19 pandemic, corruption scandals and conflicts in the coalition government.

Interest in political affairs, local and global, turned out quite insignificant for conspiracy beliefs, as shown in Graph 13, as well as the regression analysis. Even though the expectations were for a more pronounced curvilinear relationship, this finding supports the claim that supporters of conspiracy theories are not generally more uninformed or uninterested in politics than people with less conspiratorial views.

On the other hand, a variable that turned out very significant, both graphically and statistically, was people's *preference of Slovakia's political and ideological closeness to either the 'East' or the 'West'*. Graph 5 shows a clear linear relationship between greater preference of the politics and ideologies of the 'East' (or more concretely the Russian federation) and higher proclivity for conspiracy theories. In the multiple regression model, this variable came out as the most significant one in predicting a person's conspiracist ideation. As was discussed previously, this might be attributed to the way the Russian federation utilizes conspiracy theories for self-promotion or defamation of its ideological adversaries, as well as to the country's regime being less libertarian than most 'Western' democracies.

The second most significant variable for predicting respondents' conspiracy score, per the multiple regression analysis, was their *voting behavior* in the 2020 parliamentary election. Graph 4 showed that those who voted for the more liberal and libertarian political parties had the weakest conspiracy beliefs, while supporters of the more

traditionalist and conservative parties had higher average conspiracy scores. The most conspiratorial respondents had voted for ĽSNS (People's Party Our Slovakia), a far-right, ultra-conservative party that advocates for Slovakia's departure from the EU and NATO and calls for stronger ties with Russia. This finding is in line with past research, which found connections between conspiracy thinking and right-wing authoritarianism.

Contrary to voting behavior, a *change in party affiliation* in ca. 14 months since the election does not seem to be a good predictor of conspiracy beliefs. Graph 6 shows just a marginal difference of a couple decimals between the average conspiracy scores of those who *would* and those who *would not* vote differently in retrospect. Slightly higher conspiracy scores were reported by those who had *not voted at all* in the 2020 election. That is in line with the past discoveries of stronger conspiracy beliefs among people who choose not to vote, or not to participate in normative political activity in general, (although the difference was quite small in this population sample).

Finally, *faith in authorities* was also tested as a relevant variable influencing one's conspiracy beliefs. Graph 14 showed an imperfectly linear relationship between higher trust in national and international institutions and lower conspiracy scores. However, this relationship was not confirmed as significant enough in the multiple regression model.

While these findings were illuminating, there is still more to learn about conspiracy theories and their relationship to people's political and ideological views. For instance, the strength of the 'East-West' variable for predicting one's conspiracy score was surprisingly high; hence, more research into the perceived likeability of certain countries or regimes with regard to conspiracy beliefs might be interesting for uncovering new connections. Tracking people's beliefs in conspiracy theories across larger time periods could also yield interesting results, as it could identify causal relationships between certain events happening and a person's conspiracist mindset changing in response to them. Finally, examining conspiracy theories from a combined perspective of sociolinguistics and politics could be very fruitful for learning more about the narrative attractiveness of conspiracy theories, when used by people in power.

On another note, the impact of (formal) education on the formation of conspiracy beliefs also remains relatively understudied, yet crucially important. The curvilinear relationship

described by Renard (2015), who identified a stronger proclivity for conspiracist thinking among the most and the least educated, warrants further research. So does uncovering the concrete mechanisms of schooling that might foster or prevent the formation of conspiracy beliefs. Similarly, the process of creation of new conspiracy theories and their spread, particularly in the context of the Internet and social media algorithms, are highly relevant and attractive areas of study.

8. Conclusion

Conspiracy theories are ubiquitous. Everyone has likely heard some, or even believed in some. That is precisely why it is worthwhile to study them and understand how they influence the way we perceive and construct our reality.

The goal of this thesis was not just to present new empirical research, but also to examine conspiracy theories in more general terms. That is why it began by looking at conspiracy theories as a term and a concept, studied across many fields and having many definitions, each of which provides a slightly different understanding of what they are.

Conspiracy theories were then introduced as a phenomenon, existing as a natural and integral part of human history. Chapter 3 explained how they were used by both commoners and rulers in Ancient Rome or Greece, how closely they were intertwined with the religious animosities of the Middle Ages, and how widespread and common they became during Modernity. The Chapter also touched upon the legacy of the historical experiences of Slovakia, elucidating the roots of the lingering grievances and mindset of the nation.

Chapter 4 ventured deeper into 'practical' territory, presenting the known traits of people more prone to believe in conspiracy theories. Even though it asserted that no one is immune to them just by belonging to a certain group or having certain beliefs, it identified some of the known predictors of conspiracy beliefs. Among these were psychological and personality traits like increased stress, anxiety, narcissism, or weaker critical thinking; social and demographic traits like the perception of one's marginalization or lower social status; and political and ideological traits like distrust in authorities, lower willingness to engage in normative political activities, or extremist ideological preferences. We also

learned that belief in conspiracy theories rises at times of change and uncertainty - when people seek to reduce their confusion, regain a sense of control, or protect their threatened preconceptions.

After this general introduction into the known history and past studies of conspiracy theories, the thesis moved on to the presentation of its original research. Chapter 5 described the research goals, the design of the questionnaire, and the current political situation in Slovakia, where the study was ultimately carried out. The following chapter presented the limitations and findings of the research, using scatter plots to display the relationships between conspiracy beliefs and various political / ideological variables. It also featured a multiple regression analysis to test the significance of these variables for explaining changes in conspiracy beliefs.

Ultimately, the variable that came up as the most significant for predicting people's degree of conspiracy belief, was their preference of the politics and ideology of 'the West' or 'the East'. Those who wished for Slovakia to be closer to 'the East' had higher average conspiracy scores. The second most significant variable was the respondents' voting behavior in parliamentary elections. The more authoritarian and conservative their preferred political party was, the more likely they were to have stronger beliefs in conspiracy theories. On a similar note, people's preference of libertarian or authoritarian approaches to policy was also identified as significant for predicting their conspiracist ideation. Lower faith in national and international institutions correlated with higher conspiracy scores too. Finally, respondents from both extremes of the left-right ideological scale were found more prone to believe in conspiracy theories than those with more moderate / centrist views. All of these results were in line with previous research, supporting existing findings even in the context of Slovakia, during particularly turbulent times, influenced by a global pandemic and political turmoil.

Aside from the results of this new study, there are a few general takeaways I would like to leave the readers with. The first one is that *definitions matter*. The way in which we define our study subjects can make all the difference in what we see and find. Concretely, conspiracy theories, despite their negative connotations and potential adverse effects, are best studied as neutral phenomena, without prejudice. Labeling them as a priori irrational

or foolish prevents us from seeing their relevance and social significance, which should not be overlooked. Second, *conspiracy theories are not a novel invention*; they are likely as old as mankind itself. For centuries, they have existed as legitimate ways of explaining reality, as well as dubious methods of scapegoating and blame-shifting. They are organic to human nature, which remains unchanged across time and space. Hence, instead of vilifying or exalting them as products of the new, liberal, technocentric era, we should accept them as common and study them without bias. The third and final takeaway is that *no one is immune to conspiracy theories*. Nonetheless, there are certain conditions that make us more susceptible to their charms. Hence, if policymakers want to combat the spread of harmful conspiracy theories, they ought to focus on mitigating the negative conditions that popularize them, rather than trying to punish or 'fix' the people who believe in them.

There is a reason for conspiracy theories' existence and persistence in our lives. While they can be harmful and do a lot of damage, they are also quite natural. It is foolish to believe they could, or should, be completely eradicated. All we can do is create conditions where the need for conspiracy theories is less plentiful. For example, foster public communication that is transparent, fair and accessible to all; reform formal education so that it teaches critical thinking; and create effective policies that allow punishment for those who spread falsehoods with malicious intent, but without making people feel like their freedom of speech is being curtailed. These recommendations are not easy to fulfill. Nonetheless, they are likely the only way in which we can curb the negative effects of conspiracy theories, while being respectful of their role in society.

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Master's thesis summary

This thesis had two goals. The first one was to provide a solid understanding of the term and phenomenon of 'conspiracy theories'. Therefore, the work discussed what conspiracy theories are and how they are studied by different social sciences; how they evolved and impacted humans throughout history; and what factors make people more prone to believe in them. The second goal was to research conspiracy theories in relation to politics in Slovakia and answer the main research question: 'How does the belief in conspiracy theories reflect in people's political opinions and preferences?'. This question was broken down into smaller variables, which were surveyed via a questionnaire, distributed among adult inhabitants of Slovakia. Despite the population sample not being perfectly representative of the whole nation, the research yielded satisfactory results, corroborating some existing findings, and contributing new ones. Namely, as was expected, the study revealed a relationship between stronger conspiracy beliefs and extremist thinking, preference of authoritarian policies, and low faith in authorities. The unique variables that were also found relevant for conspiracist ideation, were the respondents' preference of Slovakia's political and ideological closeness to 'the West' vs. 'the East', and favored political party. The thesis ended with recommendations for further research and takeaways for policymakers, seeking to combat the potential negative impacts of conspiracy theories.